

# Why Are Warm-Water Ports Important to Russian Security?

## The Cases of Sevastopol and Tartus Compared

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### Abstract

This article aims to examine why Russia's warm-water ports are so important to Russian security. First, the article defines what *security* encompasses in relation to ports. Second, the article presents two case studies: the Crimean port of Sevastopol and the Syrian port of Tartus. This article proves that warm-water ports are important to Russian security because they enable Russia to control the sea, project power, maintain good order, and observe a maritime consensus. Each of these categorical reasons are then analyzed in the Crimean and Syrian context. The results are compared in regional perspective, followed by concluding remarks on what the findings suggest about Russian foreign policy in retrospect, as well as Russian security in the future.

### Introduction

General discourse attribute ports with a binary character: commercial or naval. However, the importance of ports is not limited to those areas alone. *Security* in the twenty-first century has come to constitute multidimensional relationships, so this article will approach the importance of warm-water ports for security by using the broad concept of *maritime security*, rather than *naval security* alone. Previously, the maritime context covered naval confrontations and absolute sea control, but today, scholars have elaborated the maritime environment to include security missions spanning from war and diplomacy to maritime resource preservation, safe cargo transit, border protection from external threats, engagement in security operations, and preventing misuse of global maritime commons.<sup>1</sup> Thus, maritime security has crucial links to political, economic, military, and social elements. It is therefore imperative that all such dimensions are considered for an overall and overarching security picture.

### *Methodology and Research Background*

To determine *why* warm-water ports are important to Russian security, the reasons for why any port is generally important come under consideration first.

Any naval port enables states to execute maritime security functions, and as discussed previously, maritime security is wide-ranging. Pioneers in naval studies, like strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, emphasized significance of naval supremacy, while Julian Corbett stressed the necessity of joint warfare (navy and army).<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Till built on these ideas and described maritime security in today's globalizing world.<sup>3</sup> Till presents two competing models of maritime security—modern and postmodern navies—where the former's missions reflect ideological supremacy and competitive military power, while the latter's are sea control, good order, power projection, and maritime consensus. Till concludes that postmodern navies embrace the globalized maritime order, while modern navies, whose governments reject or despise globalism, have a narrow concept of maritime power projection, focusing less on maritime consensus and more on deterrence.<sup>4</sup> Another scholar, Sam J. Tangredi, also maintains that globalization is the defining characteristic of global order. However, states hardly fit into any two models perfectly, so a port's importance in acting out maritime security functions cannot be divided strictly in terms of modern or post-modern missions.<sup>5</sup> Skeptics, like Colin S. Gray, discuss how power dynamics—including rivalries, conflicts, international organization memberships, and so forth—form the milieu in which maritime security policies take place in the post-Cold War era much more than globalization.<sup>6</sup> So, the two thoughts (globalization vs. presiding international power dynamics order) are needed to evaluate why a warm-water port is important to a state's security.

This article aims to blend explanations that fit both the globalized maritime world and the traditional realist one, so that the reader can get a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. I use Till's maritime functions as the categorical reasons for *why* warm-water ports are important to Russian security, analyzing each one per the chosen case.<sup>7</sup> The reasons are listed below followed by descriptions and indicators of each reason:

1. sea control;
2. power projection;
3. good order at sea; and
4. maritime consensus.

First, *sea control* means that the controlling power can use the sea to serve its interests,<sup>8</sup> but in today's world, sea control also means securing it for everyone except the enemies of the system.<sup>9</sup> Second, maritime *power projection* is the "ability of a state to influence or coerce others at, or from, the sea."<sup>10</sup> This definition is very wide, allowing maritime power to translate into social, political, and/or military projections. As Till suggests, power projection not only means "what they can do at sea, but what they can do from it."<sup>11</sup> This means that ports may permit states to

project power for historic or cultural reasons, meet geopolitical ends, and even militaristic expeditionary operations away from their shorelines. Third, *good order at sea* means using the port to protect anything that threatens the set beneficial order. *Order* is understood differently by different states: good order involves dealing with traditional threats (alliances, balancing, unipolarity, etc.), as well as new-age globalization threats (weapons of mass destruction (WMD), illegal immigration, nonstate actors' aggression, radicalism, environmental degradation, and so on). Lastly, *maritime consensus* entails cooperation and integration of as many countries' maritime agencies as can be persuaded to cooperate to deal with common threats.<sup>12</sup> A naval port is required in order to command and share the global commons peacefully and effectively.

### ***Case Selection***

This article focuses on Russia's warm-water ports from two different regions where it has a naval fleet stationed: the Black Sea (Sevastopol in Crimea) and the Mediterranean Sea (Tartus in Syria). There are three reasons for selecting these ports. First, because one is a home base and the other is an away one: to fully assess the importance of a Russian port to its security, a home and abroad comparison is imperative. Second, because both give access to multiple regions of influence: the Black Sea gives access into the Mediterranean Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea pours into the Arabian, so an expansive maritime security policy can be realized, both from a globalization perspective as also the traditional realist one. Lastly, because of Russia's geographical limitations, the research de facto chooses two of its only naturally occurring warm-water ports. Novorossiysk in the Black Sea was excluded from the analysis because it is primarily an economic port housing only *part* of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), while Vladivostok in the Far East is kept open using ice-breakers and is not a naturally occurring warm-water port.

I utilize Arend Lijphart's interpretative-comparative case study method, whereby the research uses a theoretical foundation to examine or interpret a case; however, the focus is still mainly on the case.<sup>13</sup> This method is not only useful in interpreting the cases involved, but the interpretations themselves lend better understanding of posited theory, i.e., whether theory is appropriate to explain a case or if another one is better, or there is need to create one. In our situation, by comparing the two regions for their port importance, newer insights or explanations that confirm or debunk Russian actions in those places can be found. The two ports share the similarity of being warm-water ports. So, by utilizing the "most similar systems design" for my cases, this article attempts to examine the reasons (independent variables) for why Russian warm-water ports in two different regions are important for Russian maritime security (dependent variable).

## Case Analysis: Sevastopol (Black Sea)

This section will analyze why the warm-water port of Sevastopol is important to Russian security using the categorical reasons as stated and explained in the methodology: sea control, power projection, good order at sea, and maritime consensus.

### *Sea Control*

Sevastopol is important because it gives Russia the ability to control its open and littoral waters. As previously mentioned, the vast definition of *sea control* entails using the sea to serve a state's political, economic, and military interests. First, Russia values Sevastopol because it can use the port to accomplish political ends. Before Moscow's annexation of Crimea, Sevastopol's port facilities were shared by Ukraine and Russia—this joint basing “provided practical limitations on Ukraine's maritime power [while] the presence of Russian BSF in Sevastopol hampered Ukraine's ability to control effectively its main port and its infrastructure.”<sup>14</sup> So it was in Russian political interests to have a pro-Moscow government or ruler in Kiev who would continue the longstanding lease on Sevastopol because the port limited Ukraine's freedoms as much as it did Russia's, especially given Ukraine's inclination to integrate with the international organizations of the West. Now, after the annexation, although maritime governance was, and remains, fraught with divergent views regarding Crimea, the absolute control over a strategic port like Sevastopol provides Russia with the lead in any new geopolitical maneuvers it chooses to make—whether they be power projections, expeditionary operations, participation in sea commerce, or new multilateral arrangements, to name a few. In Tillian logic, *military sea control* refers to preventing adversaries from effectively controlling the same region. By controlling Sevastopol, Moscow obviously denies Ukraine the same space and simultaneously ensures that Russian forces are no longer constrained by Ukraine. Before the annexation, the BSF was only permitted to replace old naval craft with similar ones, so Russia could not advance the port with modern naval technology; however, post annexation, such constraints were removed.<sup>15</sup> From Sevastopol, therefore, the BSF can reconnoiter the sea and also dominate the aerial space, creating a formidable antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) situation for its enemies (including NATO). We see examples of this during the Crimean annexation when BSF control of the sea executed a blockade on the Ukrainian army and fleet. Roy Allison informs that Russian efforts to control the sea go further to include reactivating its submarine base at Sevastopol, upgrading naval weapons testing, and advancing early warning radar stations that cover the Black Sea and Middle East.<sup>16</sup> Thus, such physical modernization elevates the Sevastopol port as a platform from which Russia can control the sea for offensive reasons.

But let us not forget defensive sea control. BSF admiral Viktor Kravchenko notes that “Russia’s military superiority in the Black Sea has to rely on its stationing arrangements in Crimea [because] the Black Sea has two components: Group West based in Sevastopol, and Group East—on the Caucasian Coast.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, security of one main port affects another. Through Sevastopol, Russia can monitor conflictual zones like Moldova-Transnistria (Giurgiulești port) or effortlessly access newly sieged bases like Abkhazia (Sukhumi).

Although Sevastopol is primarily a naval base housing the BSF, it also indirectly affects and reinforces Russian economic security. If the Sevastopol lease had not been ratified, then Russia would be left with only one warm-water port in the Black Sea—Novorossiysk—chiefly an economic port, which houses only part of the BSF because its main purpose is to support the local economy with its ship repairing, fishing, cement manufacturing, food processing, machinery, and textile industries and its export facilities of timber, coal, grains, and cement. In fact, Russia’s key Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline also passes through this commercial port. Since a good portion of Russia’s wealth depends on Novorossiysk, an unfriendly or uncontrollable Sevastopol directly compromises Novorossiysk, so the latter’s protection depends upon the former’s ability to control the maritime space. This in no way suggests that Russia controls the entire Black Sea economy, because according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), all littoral Black Sea states have responsibilities and rights to their exclusive economic zones (EEZ). Thus, Sevastopol does not afford any state (let alone Russia) full economic control in the sea outside of their legal EEZ.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Sevastopol does enable Russia to control littoral waters in general and problematic littoral states, in particular. This section analysis confirms that Sevastopol is indeed important to Russian security because it allows Russia to control the sea *in* and *for* various political, economic, and military reasons.

### ***Power Projection***

As noted earlier, maritime power can be translated to achieve social, political, and military effects, so it is worth understanding Sevastopol’s importance to Russian security in terms of the port being Russia’s gateway for regional and international power projection. First, let us examine the use of maritime power projection to achieve social effects. In a 2014 address to both houses of the Russian legislature, Pres. Vladimir Putin claimed that Crimea has always been an “inseparable part of Russia” and that “there was no single armed confrontation in Crimea and no casualties.”<sup>19</sup> The decision to annex Crimea and unilaterally control Sevastopol must then be understood from a nuanced social power projection lens. The port is the emblematic representation of Russia’s soft-power victory against the West.

Russia frames its soft power in geopolitical terms as a “counterforce to the West” in an effort to defend Russian interests.<sup>20</sup> Although *soft power* has far-reaching applications and definitions, Joseph Nye’s original idea translates for Russians, like Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as the “ability to influence the world with the attraction of one’s civilization and culture.”<sup>21</sup> So, when the pro-Russian leader Sergei Tsekov appealed to Russia for help in Crimea, this presented a cultural obligation for the Russian Federation to extend the notion of *Russkyi Mir*—the conceptualization of a greater Russian world beyond the current borders of the federation—and an opportunity to reinstitute power based on the premise that areas like Crimea were home to Russian culture and ethnicities. For why would Russia risk huge economic losses and international derision when the BSF was legally guaranteed Sevastopol port facilities until 2042? Annexing the peninsula with a strategic and historic port meant that Russia got a symbolic trophy of having protected and defended the Russian world from the *Other*. For as Anna Matveeva puts it, had Russia not attended to Crimea or Donbas, the very society moved by Russia’s soft power (Russian identity and ideology) would have felt betrayed.<sup>22</sup> So, the port’s importance is not simply geographical as most scholars believe; it stands as the symbolic triumph of soft power and the physical manifestation of placated social surges.

Next, Sevastopol is obviously important to Russian security because it is the outlet that Russia uses to reach certain geopolitical and military effects—both domestic and international. Till states that offensive naval missions are dealing with a disorder on land (normally political); so, what happens at sea is treating the symptom, not the cause.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, Sevastopol’s importance to Russia goes beyond the hackneyed imperialistic and re-Sovietizing theories abounding in general discourse. Let us consider the port’s naval importance to home base first. Once Sevastopol was under Russia’s possession, there was no fear of an anti-Moscow government in Kiev reverting the lease, so instead of using the port to militarily project dominion over Ukraine, Moscow used the annexation of the peninsula, and with it the port, as a medium of political warfare. By restricting how much maritime power Ukraine could project, Russia added another pressure point that it hoped would force Ukraine to adopt a federalizing scheme favorable to the Russian polity.<sup>24</sup>

Ukraine was not the only sore spot. Looking at the Black Sea map, the onlooker notices at once how Russia is encircled by adversarial or fickle states: Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria are NATO members, while Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are aspirants to membership in that organization. In this milieu, Russia’s possession of an important port means that it can wield political sway over its adversaries using the maritime domain as one of its key pressure points, among other

things. For example, Russia threatened to stop energy exports to Moldova as Chișinău vacillated between a European and Russian alliance, as well as Latvia and Lithuania in 2006, but rewarded Ukraine with a price cut when a pro-Russian candidate won the presidency.<sup>25</sup>

Now, let us discuss the port's naval importance for expeditionary operations. Sevastopol renders Russia uninterrupted ability to conduct naval missions within the Black Sea of course, but the readiness and tactical convenience of this facility means that Russia can also extend its power beyond the Black Sea, for example, through the Mediterranean Sea and into Syria. Sevastopol was valuable in allowing Russia to conduct its first "military intervention outside of Europe since the Soviet collapse."<sup>26</sup> From Sevastopol Russia can therefore send reinforcements and supplies for its power projects outside of the Black Sea. So, this section analysis also confirms that Sevastopol is undeniably important to Russian security because it allows Russia to not only project power socially, militarily, and politically but also maintain that same power in subtle ways.

### ***Good Order at Sea***

Sevastopol is important to Russian security because from this port, year-round, Moscow can protect its region from any threat that upsets the established stability or order—from social threats on culture and radicalism to economic and military threats that tip regional stability off. Michael O. Slobodchikoff maintains that Russia created a regional order that was compatible with the global one, but increasingly, Western actions have isolated Russia, destroying the regional order nested within the global one.<sup>27</sup> So, a dissatisfied Russia now looks to challenge the Western hegemonic order.<sup>28</sup> Hence, *good order at sea* does not necessarily involve protecting the region only from globalization threats as Till would have it<sup>29</sup> but also protecting one's state and companions from the presiding *global order* threats that is West-favoring and anti-Russian. However, this does not mean Russia has completely turned away from battling globalization threats; Moscow can, from its strategic port, allow itself to treat threats in a way Russia wants and in the priority that they appear—using or not using the nested global order framework. Take terrorism for instance: Sevastopol's year-long access means that when terrorists use the sea to influence social and political agendas, a strategic port can help with policing and protection against that threat. Although this is crucial for any littoral state's security in the Black Sea, it is especially important for Russia, which has been threatened with the instability and spillover effects of terrorism in Central Asia and by Islamist separatism within the federation, i.e., Chechnya.

But larger than these threats are those that Russia faces from the West, which wishes to challenge and interfere in Russia's regional order. The *West* is an aggre-

gate term, so here we must separate it from the immediate west (Europe/EU), to the combined west (NATO), and the hegemonic west (United States). Russia attempted to nest regional treaties into global lodestone agreements, indicating Russia's inclination to pluralism in foreign policy,<sup>30</sup> but the EU's "domestic pluralism is balanced by foreign policy monism."<sup>31</sup> This means that the Russia–Europe order is truly separate and divisive. Europe magnetizes those states, like Ukraine and Georgia, that fall under Russia's perceived order to join the EU's monistic vision, forbidding Russia from both participating in a comprehensive continental order and sustaining her own regional order. This also explains Russia's aversion to NATO. President Putin had expressed strong opposition to NATO, stating that "we are against having a military alliance making itself home right in our backyard or in our historic territory [and] I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors."<sup>32</sup>

Russian security is not limited to maritime security obviously, but a force landing at or around Sevastopol translates into a threat that tips security off in a plethora of other areas. For Moscow, Eurasia is obviously a sphere of influence, but more so, a region that it bears the responsibility to stabilize. Most of the former Soviet states heavily rely on Russia in terms of debt, energy dependency, security guarantees, political support, labor migrations, and remissions.<sup>33</sup> The Sevastopol port assists Russia by upholding this good regional order, but the Russia-averse Western global order threatens this stability. For instance, the United States even resisted Russia's efforts to utilize the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—a regional intergovernmental organization of nine post-Soviet republics in Eurasia—as a way of integrating the region.<sup>34</sup> Under such circumstances, Russia's good regional maritime order is perpetually threatened, and although the port at Sevastopol does not by and in itself protect Russia's orchestrated regional order in any unconditional way, it does, however, serve as one bulwark against any gross aggressive action taken by the West.

Of course, combating shared threats like WMD and terrorism will translate as maintaining good order no matter which littoral state or Western power one asks, but Russia's actions are not limited to combating these threats alone. Since Russia uses Sevastopol as a buffer against any imminent threat from the Western system along with dealing with other threats, the port's importance for Russian security order is quite particularistic. Whether this classifies as good order or not depends on perspective, but objectively speaking, Russia has used Sevastopol more for its own interests than it has in solely combating globalization threats. This very well may be because Russia is incessantly consumed with trying to protect its own regional order from collapsing before it can wholly focus on altruistic global endeavors. In this respect, Sevastopol is important to Russian security because it



allows Moscow to preserve its own good order more than that of the globe, even as it plays a small part in combatting globalization threats.

### ***Maritime Consensus***

Sevastopol is important to Russian security because it allows the Russian state to effectively maintain cooperation with its region on trade, military support, non-traditional threats, and so forth. Ports, therefore, enable maritime commitments to actually be practiced and realized. Bilateral and multilateral consensus come into consideration here. Take Moldova, for instance. Sevastopol allows Russia to uphold its maritime consensus with Moldova in transporting Russian forces, conducting joint military operations, exchanging military hardware, and codirecting border security operations in Transnistria.<sup>35</sup> The port also comes handy for Russia's multilateral commitments. The CIS and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, depend on Russian hegemony and control in guarding the maritime space.

Moscow also values Sevastopol because Russia can use it to advance joint maritime security operations with other countries into a fully standing multinational maritime task force. This includes Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEA-FOR), a multinational security force established by Turkey that deals with maritime threats to and from the Black Sea with port visits to Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey.<sup>36</sup> Another example is Operation Black Sea Harmony, a Turkish-led maritime operation that aims to prevent risks and deter threats at sea. One more consensual organization is the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC); founded in 1992, BSEC fosters good relations and cooperation among all the littoral states. In the case of BSEC, because it is a structured intergovernmental organization, rather than an interventionist one, it only facilitates cooperation instead of constraining member behavior,<sup>37</sup> so it is difficult to say that the warm-water port is advancing Russia's security simply because Russia is proactive about joint maritime agreements. Nevertheless, Russia's voluntary participation in multinational maritime security operations (even with adversary states) implies both the importance of the port for that end and Russia's willingness to espouse maritime consensus.

### **Case Analysis: Tartus (Mediterranean Sea)**

This section will analyze why the warm-water Syrian port of Tartus is important to Russian security, using the categorical reasons as explained in the methodology: sea control, power projection, good order at sea, and maritime consensus.



(Photo courtesy of the Office of the President of Russia)

**Figure 1. Russia in Syria.** Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (second from left), Russian president Vladimir Putin (center), Russian minister of defense Sergei Shoigu (second from right), and chief of the general staff of the Russian Federation armed forces Valery Gerasimov (right) meet 21 November 2017 in Sochi, Russia, to discuss Russian support for operations in Syria.

### *Sea Control*

For a geographically locked or restrained country like Russia whose access to the Mediterranean is controlled by Turkey and other littoral Black Sea states, a sole Russian port in the Mediterranean enables Russia to control a portion of the sea away from home to further its military, geopolitical, and economic interests. Tartus is first and foremost important to Russian military interests in the world beyond the Black Sea. If military maritime control means preventing an adversary from effectively using the same region, then to some extent Russia was successful in doing so during the 2015–2018 period; however, it has been unable to form a complete A2/AD environment around Syria. Nonetheless, starting with and from Tartus, Russia has been able to control half of Syria in its fight against the Islamic States (ISIS) and to protect the Assad administration from collapse. Although it has not stopped the United States and its allies from inserting themselves in the Syrian Civil War, Russia's presence in Syria (afforded by Tartus) has diluted NATO's unchallenged and/or America's unilateral control in the Middle East. This military presence at the port, therefore, serves Russia's geopolitical interest too, since it forces NATO and the West to include Russia in the decision-making process. By controlling Syria's littoral waters, Russia is inserting itself in a region that is either strongly allied to the United States (Israel and Saudi Arabia) or highly opposed to it (Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon). Russia has demonstrated that by being able to work with both sides, it can certainly influence decisions,

directly challenging the US monopoly in the region. So, by controlling the littoral Mediterranean shores from Tartus, Russia uses its naval presence to leverage its own political interests on the West's favorite regional playground. Doing so, Russia hopes to leverage matters back home into the Black Sea and Eurasia.

Tartus also allows Moscow to control the sea for Russia's economic interests. In 1971, when Hafez al-Assad permitted Moscow to use Tartus in return for Soviet arms, the port was chiefly used for materiel and technical maintenance of smaller ships in Russia's BSF.<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that Russia wrote off Syria's massive arms sales debt in 2005 in return for free access to Tartus, because Russia was aware of the approaching end of its lease on Sevastopol. At that time, Moscow had not yet acquired its port in Abkhazia either, as the Russian invasion of Georgia did not occur until 2008. So, purely as a way to control the sea for economic pursuits, Tartus was and remains very valuable to Russian economic security abroad. Syria would immediately turn down any contract that bypassed Russian economic interest, like Qatar's LNG natural gas pipeline that would run from Iran through Turkey and Syria, because of the debts written off and the Tartus port deal.<sup>39</sup> This also means that Tartus will allow Russia to build more of its own pipelines in the future, helping the Russian economy. Rosatom, for example, opened a regional headquarters in 2017, constructing reactors in Iran, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey.

This section analysis shows Tartus's importance to Russian security in that it allows Russia to control the littoral Mediterranean waters around Syria to realize foreign policy interests with the military and the economy, as well as geopolitical interests that benefit domestic policies. However, this *control* must be contextualized. Russia does not want to control the Mediterranean Sea like it would like to the Black Sea. Russia is by no means desiring full command of it, because to do that, Moscow has to face another naval power—Turkey. Under the 1936 Montreux Convention, Turkey has rights to close off Turkish straits that connect the Black and Mediterranean Seas, which would thereby lock Russia to its shorelines, effectively bottling the BSF up in Sevastopol.<sup>40</sup> Russia also has to face NATO and US regional allies who are jockeying for control of the Mediterranean as well. So, Russia's littoral control is simply to establish a small foothold in the region, so in no way is it attempting to use Tartus to institute a complete command of the Levant shorelines.

### ***Power Projection***

Earlier we ascertained that maritime power can be translated to achieve social, political, and military effects, so the port at Tartus, very much like Sevastopol, forms Russia's gateway in regional and international power projection. First, let us

examine the use of maritime power projection to achieve social effects. The famous 2007 Munich charge-sheet, wherein Putin claims the West humiliated Russia after the Soviet collapse, is vital in understanding the underlying reasons why an away base in a crucial region like the Middle East is important for Russia. Stripped off its superpower status, Russia has been confined as a regional power who, as Pres. Barack Obama once claimed, acts “not out of strength, but out of weakness.”<sup>41</sup> Hence, gaining Tartus empowered Putin to use it as symbolic rebuke of the label Russia was given internationally and domestically. A spot in the Mediterranean Sea (Tartus) boosts ethnic Russian sentiments against the perceived mistreatments of the West. The Middle East presence allows Russia to challenge the unipolar worldview synonymous with anti-Americanism. Even Anna Borshchevskaya states that, thanks to the foreign facility, Russia reached a global prestige that served to distract from domestic problems and invoke patriotic feelings necessary to maintain Russian cultural security back at home.<sup>42</sup> Further, Tartus was not annexed or conquered—it was a deal made by the Alawite Syrians who have had historical connections to the Russians. Thus, the port enables Russia to maintain a powerful relationship on a social level because Syrians feel a “connection with Russians” and “do not look down on them as they did on other nations in the region.”<sup>43</sup> An interesting extension of such social power projection includes the establishment of an Arabic RT news station to resonate symbolic presence in the Middle East through the physical presence at the port. Next, Tartus is important to Russian security since it is Russia’s gateway for projecting actual military power with geopolitical interests at heart. As with the social power projection, one can call Syria Russia’s testing ground for military efficiency. The Russian military understood after its 2008 Georgian war how antiquated its weapons were, so Syria became what some say the Gulf War was to America—a military litmus test.<sup>44</sup> Russian ships in Tartus played a major role in supporting Moscow’s aerial bombing campaign.<sup>45</sup> Projecting such maritime power from this port prompted Middle Eastern powers like Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to sign “agreements to purchase arms from Russia” in the second half of 2015.<sup>46</sup> Russian influence to permeate into the Middle East through a permanent port presence at Tartus has also added geopolitical Russian interest to assert itself where the United States has pulled back, thereby walking a step closer to restoring the former’s superpower status. US Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder reports that Moscow has deployed 30 combat ships and submarines to the port, effectively “ending NATO’s uncontested control of the Eastern Mediterranean.”<sup>47</sup> So, Tartus is not simply a display-case ornament; it is a real medium of aggressive power projection for Russia—a key factor that in turn safeguards Russia’s own security. In as far as expeditionary operations go, we do not

(yet) see Russia using Tartus to project power beyond the Mediterranean into the Red or Arabian seas. However, there is the possibility of an intervention into Libya from Tartus. Even if Tartus is not used for expeditionary operations around the Middle East and North Africa, there seems to be no doubt about the port's value in projecting power back into the Black Sea. That is, by means of Tartus, Sevastopol's existence and position is strengthened in the Black Sea, and vice-versa. For instance, Tartus can become the device Russia uses to encircle its encirclers, e.g. a double presence in the Black and Mediterranean Sea weakens Turkey's fronts. Thus, analysis of this section also confirms Sevastopol's importance to Russian security because it allows Russia to project power socially, militarily, and politically and provides impacts that are felt back home.

### ***Good Order at Sea***

As in the previous analysis with Sevastopol, Tartus's importance is twofold in maintaining good order at sea: first, in combating globalization threats like terrorism; and second, in countering threats emanating from the established Western order system to Russian security. *Good order* depends entirely on one's perspective, especially when the Middle East is concerned. Firstly, Tartus is key to dealing with the globalized threat of terrorism, since the port aids in policing and precluding spill-over effects into the Eurasian neighborhood. Scholars who state that Tartus is only important to Russia because it is a warm-water port valuable for Russia's economic and naval security miss the fact that Russia has lost thousands of citizens to terrorist attacks and has more than 5,000 nationals fighting in Syria.<sup>48</sup> If Russia justified its Syrian involvement using the pretext of combating terrorism simply to keep its warm-water port, then that was a precarious gamble.

Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta posit that over the long run ISIS could percolate into Afghanistan and directly affect Russia's Central Asian allies, even encouraging North Caucasians to fight in Russia.<sup>49</sup> The Beslan town attack in the North Caucasus was Russia's wake-up call for terrorism long before Moscow ventured into Syria. Therefore, Tartus gives Russia the ability to deal with the terrorist threat right in its hotbed, so that good order can be maintained both in the region and back at home.

Through Tartus, Russia can also tackle Western unipolar-order threats. That is, by maintaining a maritime presence and policing the shorelines, Russia has challenged Western foreign policy actions and criteria, enacting a rather contrary, alternate version in dealing with regional issues. Take for instance Moscow's support for the Western-condemned Assad government. Supporting that government was Putin's rationale for good order in Syria, whether maritime or whatever else, because Russia wanted to prevent Syria from the same fate as Iraq after the demise

of Saddam Hussein and Libya after Muammar Gaddafi. In Russia's view, the Arab Spring was not a region-wide success, so it was necessary to cultivate stability by assessing the impact of the grassroots rebellion in each country. The decision to support Assad rested on that very premise. Scholars like Borshchevskaya, who claim Russia's priority was protecting Assad instead of fighting terrorism, miss the crucial point that without a political framework, nonstate threats like terrorism cannot be effectively eliminated. One can presume that keeping Assad in power meant the port stayed in Russia's possession because the port is necessary for Russia's power projection schemes, but if that was all Russia aimed for, Moscow would not worry about negotiating peace between rival groups and regional powers.

Tartus is obviously important because it is the physical proclamation of Russian presence in the Middle East, but more than that, it is Russia's *demonstration* of good order. In Russia's 2017 naval doctrine, Moscow objected to "the US and its allies of dominance of the world's oceans" and proclaimed it would combat such unipolarity by "crushing the superiority of their naval forces."<sup>50</sup> Russia is driven by an alternate worldview that despises Western democratization-crusading and distrusts grassroots rebellions,<sup>51</sup> so through Tartus, Russia demonstrates to NATO a different way of conducting interventions against global threats like terrorism, as also meeting the objective of maintaining good order in a region—maritime order being only one such aspect. Now, one can argue that Russia is using Tartus to in fact collapse the good order because of Syria's ties to Hezbollah and Iran, who are deemed as direct threats to the West and its allies in the Middle East. However under Russian intervention through Tartus, states like Israel have felt more secure because of Russia's ability to cajole Assad, as well as to preoccupy Hezbollah's attention.<sup>52</sup> Israel's downing of a Russian fighter jet still does not change how crucial Russian presence at Tartus is to containing Israel's enemies. Russia's ability to operate within reach of the Golan Heights—a contested territory in the ongoing Arab–Israeli conflict—suggests that the port presence allows for Russia to achieve friendship that conditioned good order in the region as the Syrian Civil War raged and, in lieu of an Israel–Syria peace treaty, presented hope for future peace around Golan.

Tartus has endowed Russia with a prestigious role not only in Israeli issues but also in fostered renewed maritime accord with Turkey. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was quoted as saying that "without Russia, it is impossible to find a solution to the problems in Syria."<sup>53</sup> The two countries partnered in formulating a political settlement in Syria that some may call a rapprochement of sorts.<sup>54</sup> Although it very well may be Turkey's way to bandwagon for profit, Russia's influence in the Mediterranean order is not so lightweight. Whatever one's perspective of good order, the warm-water port at Tartus is crucial to Russian security because

it is Russia's mechanism for enacting its own version of good order in a region that is also the epicenter to the gravest global threat this decade—terrorism.

### ***Maritime Consensus***

If maritime consensus is to be analyzed in the Middle East, it is crucial to factor in NATO. Despite their antagonisms and supporting opposite factions, both sides have not used this region as a way to turn their new “cold war” into a proxy hot one. Therefore, Tartus is helpful to Russian security because it gives Russia the leverage and the sensitivity to make judicious decisions by factoring in NATO, which is using the same sea to tackle the common terrorist threat. Other than NATO, Tartus's basing allows Russia to be proactive about its commitments in and to the Mediterranean region. There are countless examples of this—whether it is legally responding to the summoning of its ally Syria for help through the UN mandate, or the once active Iran Nuclear Deal, or even the Syrian peace process. Under this legal consensus, Tartus facilitates Russian foreign policy dealings.

Take Iran–Russia consensus for instance: Moscow could engage in a cooperative relationship with Tehran like pipeline projects and arms deal and utilize the latter's Hamadan Airbase, all the while containing Iran from mischievous behavior in the locality in the early years through the nuclear deal. Getting an estranged state to commit to cooperative arrangements shows how the local presence afforded by Tartus allowed Russia to understand the region from the ground up and produce consensual relationships.

Another example is the Syrian peace process, which brought key regional players like Russia, Turkey, and Iran to negotiations in Astana and Geneva IV. Just a simple basing in Tartus meant Moscow played a role in regional consensus, which in turn affected domestic Russian relations and policies. For instance, working closely with Turkey, a littoral Black Sea state, means the furtherance of the two nations' relationship beyond the Mediterranean, while working with Iran means direct economic relationships and extended influence on Hezbollah in Lebanon. This in turn also impacts the Russo–Israeli relationship, given the huge Russian Jewish diaspora resident in Israel. With the Syrian peace talks in 2017, de-escalation zones were established to initiate a political process on the ground. Consensus was achieved, albeit with problems, but it was achieved without the Western giants. As Dmitri Trenin confirms, Moscow was able to build common ground between the region's contending factions.<sup>55</sup>

Russia has used its presence in Syria through Tartus to work with other connected navies and armies in dealing with day-to-day issues, rather than simply shielding Assad. So, it is clear, at least from this analysis, that Russia values its Middle Eastern asset to foster consensual agreements with key regional players

who have a lasting impact on Russian security in other areas. Therefore, the port is more than a physical placement of navies. It is the gateway, literally, for Russia's insertion into the Middle East power-consensus and security system.

### Results in Comparative Perspective

As the analysis indicated, there was stronger support for some reasons versus others in explaining the importance of the respective ports to Russian security. The table below categorizes the overall intensity and validation of each reason when analyzed in their separate contexts:

Strong = overwhelming supporting evidence or action  
 Weak = nonexistent, limited, and/or ambiguous evidence or action

Reason for Importance	Sevastopol	Tartus
Sea Control	Strong	Weak
Power Projection	Strong	Strong
Good Order at Sea	Weak	Strong
Maritime Consensus	Strong	Strong

The results above illustrate Sevastopol's importance to Russian security for various reasons—letting Russia control the Black Sea, project power, and generate maritime consensus. Sevastopol is not as important to Russian security in dealing with globalized threats like terrorism as much as it is in dealing with threats emanating from the Western-style order (e.g., NATO expansion). On the other hand, the analysis also shows Tartus's striking importance to Russian security even though it is an away base. Tartus enables Russia to continue power projection beyond its regional waters and actually contain globalized threats by attaining a regional maritime consensus, including with adversaries like NATO. At present, being stationed on the Syrian shorelines, controlling the Mediterranean Sea is not as important to Russian security as much as all the other maritime functions are. Since both ports only differ in one reason of importance to Russian security, we can conclude they are equally important to Russian security. The main difference lies in prioritizing any of the different maritime functions in the context of those regions.

### Discussion

Russia's ports in the Far East, Caspian, and Baltic freeze for some time during the year, thereby obstructing, compromising, and/or limiting Russia's maritime security. This article has incessantly stressed that maritime security guarantees and reinforces security in other areas, so Russia's warm-water ports at home and away are constantly working toward this end—protecting and furthering Russian interests at home and abroad. It is not redundant to state the obvious fact that Russia's



warm-water ports are important to Russian security because they are, indeed, warm. They are naturally available, replete with strategic advantages, and operational year-round. However, these ports in and by themselves do not unconditionally guarantee Russian security in any way. To quote Nicholas Spykman, “geography does not argue, it simply is.”<sup>56</sup> So in addition to, and outside of, a geographic reason, this study aimed to find out *why* and to what extent warm-water ports are important to Russian security when distinct regions are compared. From this analysis, it is clear that Russian warm-water ports are important to Russian security because they genuinely enable Russia to control the waters, project power, maintain good order at sea, and observe maritime consensus. By comparing a home base (Sevastopol) to an away base (Tartus), the aim was to juxtapose two warm-water Russian ports in separate regions to assess why each one is important to Russian security when contrasted using the *same* reasons. This gives us perspective about Russia’s regional as well as foreign maritime policy conduct. Future studies can apply the same analysis to other Russian ports as well. For instance, a home base like Sevastopol can be compared to an away one like Cam Ranh Bay (Vietnam) to check if the reasons discussed herein still resonate equally in another region like the Indo-Pacific.

In as far as this research, it is not surprising from the results to see how important a home warm-water port is as compared to an away one because of its obvious proximity and influence to the immediate region. Sevastopol gives Russia a monopolizing sea control second only to Turkey, a clear domain to project regional power of varying social and military dimensions, a medium of deterring threats from the Western order, and a vestibule that further leads to consensual bilateral and multilateral relationships, for example the CIS, EEU, and so forth. So, the port’s importance goes beyond being the site where the BSF is located. Once we understand that, Russian actions in Crimea, Abkhazia, and Syria can be comprehended in their entirety, thus debunking the much in vogue imperialistic-only and militaristic-only theories about Russian behavior. Even with Tartus, its importance lies not only as a show of Russian power abroad but also as a genuine effort to reshape the region with Russia’s version of order and to attain harmony with regional players.

## **Conclusion**

So, what does the future hold? Russia has no outlets to influence a world beyond its region. In the North, it is impeded by harsh winters; in the East by a dominant China; in the Black Sea by uncooperative actors; and in the Mediterranean by unreliable participants. Given the antagonistic Russia–West tensions, the maritime domain will effectively remain an important contest medium be-

tween the two sides. However, from its warm-water ports, the BSF is guaranteed to take on additional missions beyond the Black Sea at any time in the year, especially sealift operations and amphibious landings in the Mediterranean. Even the Libyan intervention from Tartus appears to be a likely possibility. The strategic warm-water ports will remain instrumental in Russia's ability to ward off NATO threats, challenge Western maritime dominion, and compel the United States to rethink geopolitical maritime strategy in those regions. Further, Russian economic interests and security appear to profit from these ports; so, more pipeline projects are likely to be implemented. In a subtle yet critical way, the strong Russian presence year-long in home and foreign waters also means that Russian cultural values (soft power) will continue to impact communities disillusioned by globalization and the Western system, affording such communities the opportunity to perchance appreciate the alternate stability proposed by Russia. Though this analysis is nowhere suggesting that the ports are part of the new cold war between Russia and the West, they are definitely strategic tools—weapons or shields, depending on one's perspective—in this poisoned bilateral relationship.

This simple study to identify reasons why warm-water ports are important to Russian security has actually revealed the need for scholars to transcend superficial naval philosophies and plunge into underlying political, economic, and social importance of such facilities for a comprehensive maritime security understanding. Only then can we make any meaningful conclusions and predictions about overall state security in the case of Russia.

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