

13/2015

March 3, 2015

*Pedro Sánchez Herráez*

## CRIMEA: ¿A NEW RUSSIAN “FORWARD POSITION”?

[Visit WEB](#)

[Receive Newsletter](#)

*This document has been translated by a Translation and Interpreting Degree student doing work experience, CRISTINA ARIZA, under the auspices of the Collaboration Agreement between the Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, and the Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies.*

## CRIMEA: ¿A NEW RUSSIAN “FORWARD POSITION”?

### Abstract:

*The search for borders anchored to naturally strong features has been a recurrent imperative throughout Russian history. The number of invasions that its lands have suffered from different directions and different entry routes has made Russia firmly believe that it needs to secure borders. Thus, by conquering territories or using satellite states, the Soviet Union reached its maximum territorial expansions and secured a set of borders that guaranteed, to a large extent, the safety of Russia's heart. But after the fall of the USSR and the consequent loss of space under control, it appears that "forward positions" territories (Kaliningrad, Transdnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea...) under different legal status have been established to allow the creation of a security ring around Russia's "continuous border".*

### Key Words:

*“Forward positions”, border, Kaliningrad, Transdnistria, Nagorno-Karabaj, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea.*

## RUSSIAN PERCEPTION OF THREAT: THE ABSENCE OF A NATURALLY SECURED TERRITORY

Given the size of Russia's landmass, new geopolitical concepts such as the «heartland theory» have been created. Russia is the largest country in the world: it includes one ninth of all emerged land areas. The facts are impressive: 9000 kilometres long, a width between 25000 and 4000 kilometres, 9 time zones<sup>1</sup> and more than 37000 kilometres of coastline.

Plains make up the greatest portion of Russian surface. From north to south, we find tundra, taiga, dedicious forests, steppes or deserts and lands through which many rivers and lakes cross—which in fact make Russia a leading country in water resources. Ranges and mountain systems, especially around Russia's borders, generally surround these lands. The eastern part is much more mountainous than the western part. The Urals are significantly important because they mark, define and separate the European part of the country from Asia.

Except for the size of the lands, along with watercourses<sup>2</sup> and thick forests, large plains are not a hindrance to travelling the country. The proximity of the country to the North Pole rather than the Ecuador creates a kind of weather that, even if hostile for life and economic development, helps to defend the territory because advancing through the soil becomes a difficult task, especially during the so-called Russian Winter.

The plain of Eastern Europe, the large lowland west of the Urals, also shares these characteristics. On the other hand, it is the founding core and the seed of Russia's birth and development, since it is the most populated area: nowadays about three-quarters of its 143 million of inhabitants live in the European <sup>3</sup>part of the country. Thus, despite Russia's

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2010 the President Dimitry Medvedev decided, in order to improve the economy and management of the country, to eliminate 2 time zones because he considered that 11 were too much Economía@21, *Rusia elimina husos horarios para potenciar la economía del país*, 28 March 2010. <http://www.economia21.es/2010/03/rusia-elimina-husos-horarios-para-potenciar-la-economia-del-pais/>.

Every online reference is active at the date of publication of this document.

<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that Russian armed forces, following an ancient tradition, devote particular attention to procedures, techniques and materials to pass through watercourses, to a greater extent than other Armed Forces.

<sup>3</sup> An interesting computer graphic that shows the distribution of population in 2010, when the last census was carried out, and a comparison with the data from 2002 can be found at Sputniknews, *Russian census 2010 final results*, 22 December 2011. <http://sputniknews.com/infographics/20111222/170405728.html>; more data about the population is available at Russian Federation, Federal State Statistic Service, *Russia in figures*,

location between two continents, the main focus practically has always been on Europe, west of the Urals.

The proof of this can be traced back to the Second World War, specifically to the Operation Barbarossa, which was the name for the Nazi invasion of the USSR—back then an enlarged Russia that combined several states and regions. From the Russian point of view, it was the Great Patriotic War. The goal of this operation was to reach the Arkhangelsk-Astrakhan line to then carry out airstrikes on all resistance units and groups located west of the Urals. The USSR would be defeated at this point, since units east of the Urals did not have the strength or the capacity to mount organised resistance. Once this line was reached, once the Urals were reached, the USSR would probably disappear and thus Russia almost certainly would have never existed. The initial advance of Nazi forces through the large plains was cut short when they got to the cities, which were the only significant obstacles.

The main entry routes that give access to the heartlands of Russia are located mainly in the south, in the large steppes through which Asian people have arrived over many centuries, such as the Mongols on horseback that disintegrated the Kievan Rus' in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Another entry route starts in the Central European plain, from where throughout history several groups have attempted to conquer the Eastern plain. Tautens and Napoleonic troops, as well as German troops during both World Wars, especially during the Second World War, emerged from Europe's heart and advanced rapidly through Russia's large plains. Other entry, which the Swedish Empire used to advance in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is located in the north of Europe. It posed a risk not only to the access to the Baltic, but also to its defence stronghold: the large forest area between the north coast and Moscow, which was the same place where Russians clustered after the Kievan Rus' disappearance because ground troops had a tactical advantage in those cold and covered places over the horsemen from warm

---

[http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat\\_main/rosstat/en/figures/population/](http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/en/figures/population/)

<sup>4</sup> Between 1701 and 1721 the Great Northern War took place, a series of conflicts that confronted the north of Europe with the East in order to gain supremacy on said area, with the objective of controlling the access to the Baltic Sea. Several nations and monarch were involved, and it confronted Peter I of Russia with Charles XII of Sweden. During the war, reeling the effects of a Cossack revolt, Ukraine ended up affected and Sweden made significant military progress to Moscow. In 1709, the battle of Poltava, located 300 km southeast of Kiev, was a defining moment for Swedish military power. The Great Northern War ended in 1721 by the Treaty of Nystad with the Swedish defeat and the Russian victory. Angus Konstam, *Poltava 1709*, Ejércitos y Batallas nº 69, Osprey Military, Ediciones del Prado, Madrid, 1996.

steppes that they were fighting.

## HOW DOES THE PERCEPTION OF THREAT INFLUENCE DEFENCE: THE SEARCH FOR SAFE BORDERS

Given these main entry routes, Russia has tried to defend and secure a strong territory, or at least has tried to deepen to a great extent from its main heartlands, with the aim of using this distance to buy time, get space to manoeuvre and exhaust enemies in the case of a potential invasion. In fact, one of Russia's most classic tactics is to withdraw and apply the scorched earth policy to the adversary. This additional space comes either from the integration of new territories or from buffer states, or at least countries under the aegis of Russia.

Thus, the search for secure borders and/or a safer space is the logic behind its periods of expansion. For instance, at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Russia, leaded by Ivan III—also known as Ivan the Great—secured an enclave in the north of Moscow, which was sheltered to the east by the Urals and to the north by the Artic. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ivan IV ‘the Terrible’ started expanding the Russian space mainly to the southern flank, and in subsequent campaigns over most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Caucasus, Siberia and parts of Ukraine would also be reached. There were also some successful attempts to secure the steppes in the south<sup>5</sup>.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Peter<sup>6</sup> and Catherine (both referred to as the ‘Great’) would initially lead the conquering of the western route of entry, as well as, to a great extent, the western part of the northern entry. They were thus enlarging and setting the rest of the borders of what it was already known as the ‘Russian Empire’. Therefore, and in order to secure borders and strong territories, the Baltic was reached and secured, some progress was made

---

<sup>5</sup> The name that was given to Ivan IV (the ‘Tsar of all the Russias’) instead of the pre-existing title of ‘the Moscow Prince’ has a lot to do with this large territorial expansion.

<sup>6</sup> Among other issues, the foundation of St. Petersburg in a marshland in 1703 and the fact that it was appointed the capital of Russia before Moscow has to be interpreted as an exhibition of strength, since the capital was closer to old enemies. Other arguments point that that he intended to ‘westernise’ the country. However, a symbol as big as this Tsar— big not only in the sense of tall, because he was more than 2 metres high— can be interpreted in many ways. Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland, 2003; and also Lindsey Hughes, *Peter the Great. A biography*, Yale University Press, 2004.

into the Central European plain and the Caucasus—the Carpathians being increasingly closer— Ukraine was conquered, some territories in Asia were occupied and Siberia was secured. At the same time, other than the search for safer borders, this expansion was aimed at achieving another geopolitical goal of Russia: an outlet to warm sea and open waters, which, despite its vastness and thousand kilometres long coastline, was complicated due to its location and weather.

As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the tsars Alexander (I, II and III) and Nicholas I would annex new territories to the Empire, thus enlarging the safe space while also continuously searching an outlet to the sea, in the context of an almost global dispute, which came to be known as the ‘Great Game’: the Russian struggle with the naval power par excellence, Great Britain<sup>7</sup>, regarding the issues aforementioned.

Thus, the combination of all territories annexed to the Empire, the creation of buffer states—Finland, for instance, emerges as an independent state in order to partially close the northern entry route—and the use and application of Pan-Slavism as a means of expanding its sphere of control (the Balkans) and safe space contributed to a better security framework.

The eagerness to expand borders continued when the Russian Empire became the USSR (Union of Soviets Socialist Republics) after the First World War. After the Second World War, a conflagration that the USSR paid a high price for, the combination of its own vast territory with that of its satellite or allied states gave the USSR the biggest safety cushion in its entire history. All entry routes to Russia’s heart were closed and the borders were set to mountains, large deserts and vast and cold moorlands. In other cases, such as in the Central European plain, at least the space was secured by strong military presence and by countries under the Soviet orbit.

After centuries of struggle and war, Russia finally had safe frontiers, at least from a Russian point of view. In spite of all the considerations and safeguards during the Cold War, Russia,

---

<sup>7</sup> More information can be found at Peter Hopkirk’s, *The Great Game: the struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, Kodansha América, New York, 1994.

was secured, unless it wanted to start a global full-scale war.

### ¿A RETURN TO THE PAST? ¿THE LOSS OF A ‘SAFE SPACE’?

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the USSR<sup>8</sup> immediately provoked a setback of these ‘borders’ at the same rate as countries gained independence or abandoned the Soviet-Russian sphere.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 meant not only the loss of potential allies in defending the ‘furthest borders’ but also the departure of Soviet troops from these nations’ soil. Always from a Russian point of view, the approach of Eastern European countries towards the West was gradually creating holes in the large western entry route.

Moreover, the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1999, of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia in 2004—as well as some other nations that were not clearly aligned with the USSR in the past, such as Slovenia, born out of the fragmentation of Yugoslavia— and Georgia and Ukraine’s attempts, and also on the part of certain NATO countries, to join the Alliance, could have been interpreted as the lost of these ‘safe borders’. Also from this point of view, some initiatives such as the Partnership for Peace, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Individual Partnership Action Plans could have been understood as a means of getting the former enemy closer to the Russian mainland, despite the NATO-Russia Council framework of cooperation and some attempts to counter this narrative<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, again from a Russian perspective, the ultimate goal of all these initiatives was to isolate Russia, to ‘trap’ it again, just as the so-called ‘strategy of containment’<sup>10</sup> that in many

---

<sup>8</sup> It is always valuable in terms of analysis to review the decision to dissolve the USSR, which was taken on 8 December 1989 exclusively by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the Belavezha Accords, without including the rest of the republics of the USSR. A few days later, on December 21, the Alma-Ata Declaration was signed, this time with the rest of the Soviet republics, except for the three Baltic republics and Georgia, and they agreed to the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the ‘successor’ organisation of the USSR. The Soviet Union was thus formally dissolved.

<sup>9</sup> A very interesting analysis on how NATO is perceived in Russia was carried out by the director of NATO’s Information Office in 2011 in Moscow and can be found at Robert Pszczel, *Como ven a la OTAN en Rusia (Una lección de optimismo)*, Revista de la OTAN 2011. Relaciones OTAN-Rusia: 20 años después de la URSS. [http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/NATO\\_Russia/lessons-optimism/ES/index.htm](http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/NATO_Russia/lessons-optimism/ES/index.htm)

<sup>10</sup> This strategy comes from George Kennan’s “Long Telegram”,

ways defined the geopolitical patterns during the Cold War<sup>11</sup>.

Taking this perception into account, Russia wants to get that space back and recover the influential position that it believes it should have in the world, in the context of a new world order that is probably substituting the order in place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ‘setback’ is, in Putin’s own words before his ambassadors and permanent representatives in July 2014, that “this would mean giving up practically everything that Russia had fought for since the times of Peter the Great”<sup>12</sup>.

Russians have always been very concerned about geopolitics. The search for safe frontiers and an outlet to open and warm seas has been a constant in Russian history, not only in ‘ancient’ history but also until very recently, and one could say that it is still very relevant today.

### ¿A NEW ‘DEFENCE STRATEGY’? “FORWARD POSITIONS”

The fall of the USSR and the independence of its former nations directly implied that the set of safe borders that was nourished for centuries had to be modified. However, despite the weakness of the former superpower in the early stages of its fragmentation, the attempt to maintain and create partnership and cooperation mechanisms answered to the need, among others, to protect the Russian safe space.

This strategy produced mixed results, so it all came down to a strategic option: if the whole space cannot be secured, at least some key areas will be. Thus a Russian overextended presence is guaranteed, so that a defence strategy with a wider array of response options can be created—without ruling out these areas’ potential to be an offensive mechanism. Therefore, it would create a front row of territories acting as ‘forward positions’, both

---

he sent on February, 22, 1946 from Moscow. The content of this telegram is available at <http://www.ntanet.net/KENNAN.html>

<sup>11</sup> An analysis on this issue, in the context of the Ukraine conflict, can be found at Miguel Ángel Ballesteros Martín, *Ucrania y el nuevo liderazgo geopolítico ruso*, Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2014, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Putin, *Conferencia de Embajadores y Representantes Permanentes de Rusia*, Embajada de la Federación de Rusia en el Reino de España, 01 July 2014, available at [http://spain.mid.ru/es/noticias/-/asset\\_publisher/VQoWUGohJ7ON/content/conferencia-de-embajadores-y-representantes-permanentes-de-rusia](http://spain.mid.ru/es/noticias/-/asset_publisher/VQoWUGohJ7ON/content/conferencia-de-embajadores-y-representantes-permanentes-de-rusia)



Russian (in Russian soil) and under the aegis, auspices and protection of Russia.

This progressive strategy, which perhaps started at the end of the Second World War, seems to continue nowadays.

### **Kaliningrad 1945.**

Kaliningrad, Königsberg, founded in 1255 from an old Teutonic settlement and set on the side of the Pregel River, from which the Baltic can be reached, has constituted over the centuries a support basis for the penetration and progress to the east and the control of the Baltics. This is exactly what the Teutonic knights did during the local ‘crusades’ until the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Its importance is illustrated by the fact that it has been the capital of the Duchy of Prussia since 1525, and it retained this status in different territorial administrative bodies while the German unification process was taking place right until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when as the capital of the East Prussia it finally fell to the Soviet advance<sup>13</sup>. It became part of Russia after the division of East Prussia between Poland (south) and the USSR (north).

In 1946, after falling into USSR hands, Königsberg—where Kant, the Prussian philosopher, lived his whole life— changed its name to Kaliningrad<sup>14</sup>, and thus started a process of Russification of the new-born “Kaliningrad Oblast”, which involved the deployment of an expanded military apparatus and a large part of the Baltic Fleet in the Baltisk base<sup>15</sup>, due to the absence of ice in this port in the winter.

While the USSR existed, Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave that was however surrounded by

---

<sup>13</sup> The importance of this city for Germany and for the then Soviet Union can be seen in the extraordinary fortification system that was built to defend the city, as well as in the effort by the Red Army to conquer it. An excellent review of the facts can be read at Akram Sharipov, *Cherniakovski, El General T-34*, Inédita Editores, Barcelona, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> To honour Mijail Ivanovich Kalinin, deceased on June 3, 1946, who was a Bolshevik when the USSR was created and also a contributor to its foundation, in representation of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. A brief biography can be found at [http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Mija%C3%ADI\\_iv%C3%A1novich\\_Kalinin](http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Mija%C3%ADI_iv%C3%A1novich_Kalinin)

<sup>15</sup> The rest of the Soviet Baltic Fleet’s bases were located in Kronstadt (near Leningrad, today known as St Petersburg) and Riga, the capital of Latvia. Nowadays, the Russian Baltic Fleet keeps the two aforementioned bases except obviously Riga. Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, *Baltic Fleet*. <http://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/forces/navy/associations/structure/forces/type/navy/baltic/about.htm>.



republics and territories under the Soviet orbit, was not annexed to any of those territories nor it was constituted as a ‘new republic’, but it became part of Russian national territory under the category of ‘Oblast’—which could be translated as province. During this period, a powerful garrison—close to 100000 military personnel, although some sources estimated that it could be up to 200.000— constituted a key safety element for the USSR, in the context of the Cold War.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, this Russian ‘Oblast’, with a size similar to Albacete<sup>16</sup> and with a population of one million people, started to feel the economical and transit consequences of being an exclave position, especially after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, when Poland and the Baltic Republics became members. To address this situation, some special measures were taken, such as the designation of Kaliningrad as a ‘Special Economic Zone’, so that the so-called ‘fourth Baltic Republic’ was meant to become the ‘Hong Kong of Russia’, in an attempt to prevent a failure of the socioeconomic situation of the exclave<sup>17</sup>.

A significant part of the Baltic Fleet and some ground troops, whose number according to some sources is around 9000, are still established in this key space due to its prime location, although its importance seems to have diminished as a means of securing territory: in 1997 the “Kaliningrad Special Defence District disappeared”<sup>18</sup> and also did the 11<sup>th</sup> Army.

However, Russian frequent<sup>19</sup> statements about increasing presence in this area, some other ‘forward positions’ and the Arctic, which brings to mind the need to ‘close’ the Northern invasion route, illustrate the importance of Kaliningrad. In this respect, it is important to recall the Russian statements regarding whether Iskander missiles (SS-26 Stone) were going

<sup>16</sup> Albacete is an Spanish province located in the Autonomous Community of Castile- La Mancha that has an approximate size of 14 926 km<sup>2</sup> (5762.961 square miles).

<sup>17</sup> To counter this situation, a summit between the European Union and Russia was held in November 2002 to discuss transit arrangements. *EU-Russia Summit: Joint statement on transit between the Kaliningrad region and the rest of the Russian Federation.*  
[http://www.foreignpolicy.org.tr/documents/eu\\_russia\\_summit2\\_111102\\_p.htm](http://www.foreignpolicy.org.tr/documents/eu_russia_summit2_111102_p.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Global Security.Org, *Kaliningrad Special Defence District*,  
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/kor-kaliningrad.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Ria Novosti, *Russia to boost military capabilities in Crimea, Kaliningrad, Artic*, 14 January 2015,  
<http://rt.com/news/222371-russian-defense-plan-2015/>

to be deployed in the “Oblast” in response to the deployment of the missile shield in European soil, which from the Russian point of view, justified the need for keeping advanced positions<sup>20</sup>.

### **Transdnistria, 1992.**

Moldavia, the second smallest Soviet republic<sup>21</sup> declared its independence on August 27, 1991 in the framework of the disintegration process of the Soviet Union.

This area, which has been greatly influenced by Romanians, is located in the region of Bessarabia. Its location, on the side of the Dniester River, is privileged because the space between this river and the river Prut has sometimes acted as a buffer or frontier between the West and the East, between Latins and slaves. On the other hand, the south area not only provides access to the Black Sea but it is also a getaway—or an exit door depending on the point of view<sup>22</sup>—to the Roman plain and the Balkans, which is one of the access roads to the southern flank of Russia from the east.

Therefore, the geopolitical strategy of the USSR consisted of changing borders and displacing people to secure that area. The imposition of a strip to the east of the river Dniester in Moldavia and the cession of the north and south areas of this territory to Ukraine, thus closing the access to the sea to the new-born country Moldavia, were part of this strategy. Another aspect of this re-ordering meant encouraging strong Slavic population flows to the east shore of the Dniester (Transdnistria) as well as putting in place a great majority of the country’s industry and Soviet stockpiles. This region was one of the rear points to potential combat zones during the Cold War.

The river represents thus two absolute different realities in the same country, so much that when the link that united them—or forced them together— disappeared with the fall of the

---

<sup>20</sup> BBC News Europe, *Kalinigrad: European fears over Russian missiles*, 16 December 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25407284>

<sup>21</sup> Moldavia has a size of 33.843 Km<sup>2</sup>, a little bit more than the sum of the areas of Valencia and Murcia, two Spanish Autonomous Communities.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, the Romanian troops that during the Second World War fought on the Axis’ side initially advanced from this area, crossed the river Prut and kept advancing to the East, occupying Bessarabia and Bukowina, and then continued to Odessa, Sevastopol, Stalingrad and the Caucasus.

Soviet Union, it lead to a civil war, right after Moldavia was recognised as an independent state by the international community in March 02, 1992. However, since 1990 all factions or ethnic groups have declared independence and have been fighting each other in a smaller scale<sup>23</sup>.

After the civil war, the river Dniester acted as a “frontier” between Moldovans and the Transdnistrian people, although this division was not clear, since the city of Bendery fell to the separatists but was located in the western part of the river. On July 21, 1992, the Moscow Agreement, under the supervision of a Peacekeeping Force made up by Russian battalions, Moldavians and “Transnistrians”<sup>24</sup>, divided both parts along the river lines.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army, which was operating in the area since 1956, had a great share of participation in the conflict by giving tacit and direct support to the “Transdnistrian people” and it also massively bombed the positions of the Moldavian army when the conflict was about to end. In 1995 it became the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova in order to safeguard the Russian arsenals in Colbasna<sup>25</sup>. Nowadays, this group is made up of 12000 troops as well as the personnel that fall under the Joint Control Commission, which is currently a battalion.

The self-declared Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, also known as Pridnestrovia, is only recognised by the separatist territories of the Caucasus. No other country, not even Russia, recognises it. In 2006 a referendum that showed that 97’2% of the population wanted to be part of Russia was held, and after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 Transdnistria formally requested the annexation to Russia<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> A thorough analysis on this issue can be found at Francisco J. Ruiz González, *Moldavia y el Transdniéster: conflicto congelado en el corazón de Europa*, Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2014, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 2014; for a military analysis on the conflict please visit Luis Andrés Bárcenas Medina y José Ángel López Jiménez, *Los conflictos congelados de la antigua Unión Soviética*, Conflictos Internacionales Contemporáneos, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> More information about the current contribution and tasks of the Russian forces can be found at Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *Peacekeeping operation in Transnistria*, [http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/peacekeeping\\_operations/more.htm?id=10336232@cmsArticle](http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/peacekeeping_operations/more.htm?id=10336232@cmsArticle)

<sup>25</sup> Sometimes it has been suggested that stockpiles are being kept to justify the presence of Russian troops, beyond the high cost of withdrawing them. Global Survey 2003-2004, *Explosive remnants of war and mines other than anti-personnel mines*, Landmine Action, London, 2005, page 115. <http://www.article36.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/global-impact-survey.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> BBC news Europe, *Moldova’s Trans-Dniester region pleads to join Russia*, 18 March 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26627236>; Manu Gil, *La región Moldava de Transnistria se perfila*

In any case, and despite if Russia ends up annexing Transdnistria or not, the past and the actual presence of Russian forces in this key strip show the importance that this territory holds for Russia.

### **Caucasus, (1994) 2008.**

The Caucasus, which is usually perceived by Moscow as a “dagger pointed towards the heart of Russia”<sup>27</sup>, was also part of the geopolitical strategy of the emerging USSR regarding changing borders and displacing population, so that the resulting administrative structures would have less feasibility as autonomous entities. Also, a degree of internal disputes was necessary in order for these structures to require the permanent “guardianship” of a supreme body (the USSR) as a means of ensuring stability. Therefore, the collapse of the Soviet Union gave carte blanche to these disputes to become conflicts. The Caucasus region is nowadays deeply affected by conflicts of different intensities, as many other areas in the world.

Thus, from 1991 to 1994, a bloody conflict took place in the Armenian enclave of **Nagorno-Karabakh**, which attempted to become part of Armenia and fought Azerbaijan for its split. The conflict was gaining momentum and ended up directly and military involving Armenian and Azeri forces, as well as a Soviet military unit that was deployed in the area, in a reminiscent way of the role that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army played in Transdnistria, although in a lesser extent. Russian military aid contributed to the Armenian and the separatists’ victory but the enclave would not be recognised by any country, not even Armenia. Thus, this territory became a support region for Russia, strategically located in the eastern half of the corridor that connects the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea.

Apart from this region (Nagosno-Karabakh), the fact that Armenia is considered a “buffer zone”, because of the positions that it occupied after the war around this enclave—thus

---

como la próxima anexión de Rusia, 24 March 2014. [http://noticias.lainformacion.com/mundo/la-region-moldava-de-transnistria-se-perfila-como-la-proxima-anexion-de-rusia\\_36apOQqIST5V31cxSqzRMP6/](http://noticias.lainformacion.com/mundo/la-region-moldava-de-transnistria-se-perfila-como-la-proxima-anexion-de-rusia_36apOQqIST5V31cxSqzRMP6/)

<sup>27</sup> Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph Noguee, Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interest*, M.E. Sharpe, 2014. New York, page 201.

reducing Azerbaijan’s control over about a tenth of its territory—, as well as the strong relationship between Russia and Armenia, exemplified in the fact that Russia keeps military bases in Armenian territory and the role that Moscow wants to play in the region, ended up rendering the enclave as the closest thing to a “forward position”.

However, the collapse of the USSR not only provoked a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan but it also affected Georgia, the other Caucasian nation, which burst into a civil war in 1991.

Two Georgian territories, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which as other regions also have prominent minorities living among a Georgian majority, were very affected by violence and ethnic cleansing, prompting the dispatch of a peacekeeping force after a number of agreements. Russia contributed with forces and also did the rest of the parties involved, in a reminiscent way of Transdnistria. These missions from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1992 and from the United Nations<sup>28</sup> in 1993 are not currently active.

While a tense calm with sporadic incidents and occasional disputes continues to prevail, it is important to bear in mind that between 1994 and 1996 Russia fought a very hard war in Chechnya where it needed to prevent the South Caucasus from supporting to the Chechen rebels. However, on August 8, 2008, Georgia attacked the city of Tskhinvali, in South Ossetia, and the Russian response was demolishing. Although not in a full-scale way, the war broke out between both nations, and the result is already known. On 13 July 2008 the armed conflict comes to an end and the independent enclaves of **South Ossetia and Abkhazia** were strengthened and recognised as such by Moscow<sup>29</sup>.

This way, Russia guaranteed then and now a presence in the east half of the Caucasus corridor, dominates many of the North-South routes in the mountains (the route Sukhumi-Sochi, in the coast of the Black Sea in Abkhazia and the Roki tunnel in South Ossetia) and a

---

<sup>28</sup> United Nations, UNOMIG, *Misión de Observación de las Naciones Unidas en Georgia*, <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/missions/past/unomig/>

<sup>29</sup> Not only Russia, but Venezuela, Nicaragua y Nauru also recognise these enclaves, and for a period of time they were also recognised by Vanuatu y Tuvalu.

coastal area in the Black Sea. At this point, the Sebastopol base in Crimea was “part” of Ukraine (although Moscow was “renting” it) and the Tartous base was located in Syria, which was progressively becoming a new space for struggle<sup>30</sup>. In this case, given that Russia keeps a military presence under different modalities in both territories, the “forward positions” contribute both to a greater degree of safety in the frontier and to a new access to the Black Sea, which enables a greater capacity of action in the Caucasian corridor through which run the oil and gas pipelines that bring hydrocarbons to the markets.

### Crimea, 2014.

Given the proximity in time with the events that took place between February and March 2014, this analysis will not address the importance of Crimea for Russia<sup>31</sup> and a detailed account of the events will not be provided. In short, about twenty days after the so-called Euromaiden and the change of government in Ukraine, armed forces took control of the peninsula of Crimea. A referendum, which was rendered invalid by the international community<sup>32</sup>, was organised and held and thus Crimea and Sebastopol were integrally annexed to Russia.

In the same way, but more progressively, the conflict in the Ukrainian region of Donbass

<sup>30</sup> To illustrate the instability in this area, whose key outcome is the current war, one should note that in response to the attack committed on February 12, 2008, in which the leader of Hezbollah, Imad Moughniyad, died, more attacks took place on 6 August and 27 September. The latter was the biggest attack in the country in the last decades. Meanwhile, Syria deployed 10000 forces in the border with Lebanon. The Guardian, Damascus cars bomb kill 17, 28 September 2008.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/28/syria.lebanon.bombing>

<sup>31</sup> More information at Luis Fernando Furlán, *Crimea y la herencia del Almirante Gorshkov*, Documento marco Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos 10/2014, 10 July 2014. [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_marco/2014/DIEEEM10-2014\\_Crimea\\_HerenciaAlmteGorshkov\\_Furlan.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2014/DIEEEM10-2014_Crimea_HerenciaAlmteGorshkov_Furlan.pdf); Pilar Requena, *Crimea, la encrucijada de su historia*, Documento de opinión Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos 85bis/2014, 02 August 2014. [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2014/DIEEEO85bis-2014\\_Crimea\\_PilarRequena.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2014/DIEEEO85bis-2014_Crimea_PilarRequena.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Resolution 68/262 Territorial Integrity of Ukraine* 27 March 2014; in the fifth paragraph points out that: “. Underscores that the referendum held in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on 16 March 2014, having no validity, cannot form the basis for any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea or of the city of Sevastopol; “. Regarding this issue, a significant analysis can be found at Ángel Acosta Sánchez, *La secesión en el derecho internacional: el caso de Crimea*, Documento de Opinión Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos 142/2014, 11 December 2014. [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2014/DIEEEO142-2014\\_Secesion\\_DchoInternacional\\_Crimea\\_MA.Acosta.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2014/DIEEEO142-2014_Secesion_DchoInternacional_Crimea_MA.Acosta.pdf)

started growing and intensifying. A portion of the territory attempted a split through arms, in order to replicate the so-called Novorossiia: the whole southern flank of Ukraine and its coastal area in the Black Sea.

The conflict is currently very much alive and open in the Donbass, while Crimea is a closed case. The peninsula, which is a natural fortress, acts as a new “forward position” that ensures Russian presence and influence over the Black Sea and at the same time closes the access to its southern flank.<sup>33</sup>

The flow of energy, water or telephone networks reaches the peninsula from the mainland, the rest of Ukraine, and also from the isthmus. The access is limited to a maritime connection through the Kerch Strait, although there are some discussions about building a tunnel or a bridge<sup>34</sup>. These factors make life difficult for Crimea and also compromise its future, as it is the case for most “forward positions”, especially if they are far from the “continuous border”.

## CONCLUSION

The perception that borders needed to be anchored to naturally strong territory as well as the aspiration to get an outlet to the sea have been constant elements in Russian geopolitics.

Even during the Cold War, when Russia through the USSR reached its maximum territorial expansion (it included Russia and its satellites/allies), Kaliningrad was established as an enclave. As the “satellite” states and allies were abandoning the Russian orbit, Russia started perceiving that borders were not safe enough, since they were very far from the heartland. Moreover, the fact that those states were gradually transforming—and not always in an organised way— from buffers to key regions with different legal status under Russian control

---

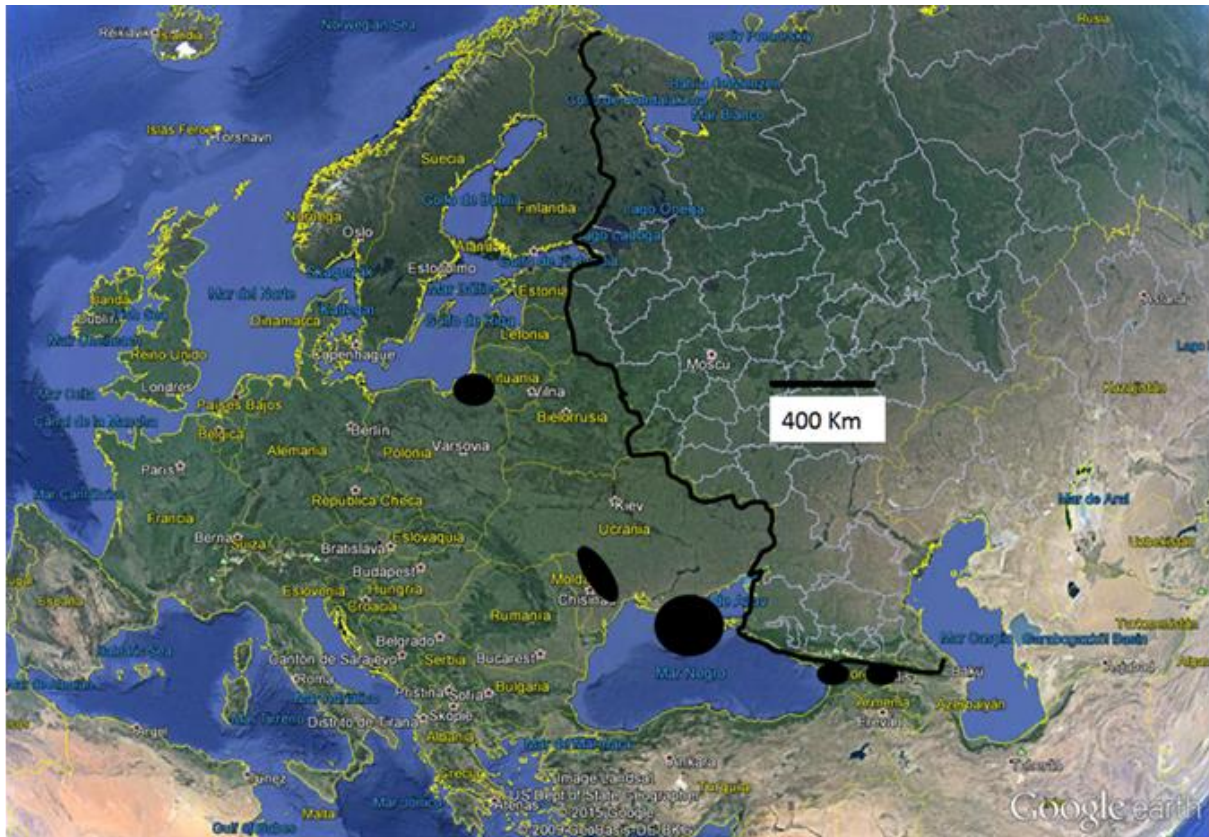
<sup>33</sup> The Moscow Times, *Russia Black Sea Fleet will get 80 new Warships to repel NATO*, 23 September 2014. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russia-s-black-sea-fleet-will-get-80-new-warships-to-repel-nato/507682.html>;

<sup>34</sup> Tass Russians News Agency, *Russian tycoon ready to build Kerch Strait tunnel for \$1 billion*, 04 August 2014. <http://tass.ru/en/russia/743430>; Kyivpost, *Crimea to be linked to Russia with bridge across Kerch Strait, not tunnel-railways chief*, 20 November 2014. <https://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/crimea-to-be-linked-to-russia-with-bridge-across-kerch-strait-not-tunnel-railways-chief-372472.html>



and influence, contributed to the creation of the closest thing to a forward security ring.

From a strategic point of view, these key regions are pure “forward positions”, due to their location and significance. Although the utility of these positions may vary over time, they



Frontera “continua” de Rusia y “posiciones avanzadas”.

Fuente: [Google Maps](#) y elaboración propia

always act as closing devices and compel enemies to put in place forces and resources. Moreover, they can be benchmarks and baselines from which power and influence might be projected.

On the other hand, although “buffer states” are usually the response to a dispute between two rivals, these “forward positions” might also involve a powerful response if they are attacked, even if they might not legally be part of a country. Public opinion usually backs this strong response, especially given the potential casualties within the “garrison” of these “forward positions”.

The “achievement” and maintenance of these positions of course has a diplomatic, economic and military cost, which depends on the legal status of the “forward position”, so

one must be willing to pay for it. However, it is also true that said “forward positions” increase the range of options available for the development of any kind of strategy, thus allowing a wider array of possibilities than if these positions did not exist. Apparently, this is the option that Russia has chosen.

*Pedro Sánchez Herráez  
TCOL.ET.INF.DEM  
PhD in International Peace and Security  
Analyst del IEEE*