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# Black Sea Fleet : a factor of stability or instability?

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Tensions over Sevastopol in the Crimea have flared time and again since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The latest occasion has been provided by the recent conflict in South Ossetia

The Ukrainian president aligned himself with his Georgian counterpart during the confrontation, and now wants to control Russia's Black Sea Fleet, which could render it useless as a military force. The rule is that a host country exerts ultimate control over foreign military bases on its territory. Such is global practice. In 2003, Turkey banned the United States from using Incirlik Air Base in the invasion of Iraq. Accordingly, if Ukraine does not allow Russia to use Sevastopol, Russia will not be able to use it.

The Black Sea Fleet's only aim in the foreseeable future could be to protect the short Russian coastline in the North Caucasus and Russia's Black Sea economic zone. More ambitious tasks look out of place. The fleet's Soviet-built ships are only getting older, and, as more vessels are being retired than come into service, its strength is slowly waning. From a military point of view, Sevastopol is becoming unnecessary and even a burden.

In the future, the fleet could consist of three to five diesel submarines and two or three dozen patrol ships and minesweepers to protect the economic zone in peacetime and fight the enemy in wartime. And it must be based in Russia.

In 1997, when the Sevastopol lease agreement was signed, Russia could not give up Sevastopol because its own Black Sea port at Novorossiisk was unable to receive all the fleet's ships and men. Now that problem is going away by itself, with ship numbers dwindling and missions curtailed. But although Novorossiisk currently hosts most of the fleet's light forces, it is not well suited to be a naval base, if only because of the strong northerly winds blowing in wintertime. Perhaps a new base should be built. It would be an expensive undertaking, of course, but no more so than leasing Sevastopol, which actually fuels Kiev's anti-Russian ambitions (which were already apparent before Yushchenko came into office).

So militarily the issue of Sevastopol is largely an illusory one for Russia; it does not match with present-day realities.

But there are also strong emotional factors involved. Sevastopol is called "a city of Russian military glory" and is known for its defenders' heroism during the Crimean and Great Patriotic wars. These emotions are backed with politics.

Before 1954, the Crimea was part of the Russian Federation, and its handover to Ukraine was legally dubious even by the standards of Soviet law. Most of the Slav population of the Crimea and Sevastopol have a Russian (even a Soviet) identity, rather than a Ukrainian one, while the Crimea's Tatars look mostly to Turkey.

In general, the Soviet-era borders of Ukraine do not meet the historical, ethnic and political realities of today. The Ukrainian state is largely an artificial product. Since 1992, it has been denying any fraternal feelings for Russia and a political, especially a military, union with Russia is out of the question for the foreseeable future. By hanging on to the Sevastopol base, Moscow has made itself hostage to Kiev.

On the other hand, the presence of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol is a strong political and emotional irritant to the Ukrainian authorities and a bolster to the Russian-Soviet identity of most of the Crimea's population.

Moscow also believes its fleet in Sevastopol is preventing Ukraine from joining NATO (a strategy that seems to be a Russian reincarnation of the Anglo-Saxon doctrine of a "fleet in being").

A host of factors will determine the future of the fleet, Sevastopol and the Crimea. It is unlikely that the fleet will stay in Sevastopol after the lease expires in 2017. Logic suggests that either it will move base to Russia (before the final date) or the Crimea and Ukraine will see major political changes.

Owing to its artificial origins, Ukraine is at constant risk of splitting up into western-central and south-eastern parts. Any swing by Ukraine's central authorities toward either Russia or the West only makes this risk more likely.

Kiev's stirrings about the Black Sea Fleet could deal no less devastating a blow to its domestic stability than to Russia's defense capabilities in the south.

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