

RUSSIAN NAVAL BASE TARTUS

The Syrian port of Tartus is the only naval base outside of the former Soviet Union still held by the Russian military, and the Russian government has asserted its strategic significance. The port of Tartus holds particular significance to Russia as a defensible position through which to accomplish a political goal. Russian President Vladimir Putin has articulated this goal as a principled determination to prevent a Syrian civil war by upholding the country's sovereignty.¹ More directly, one may understand this position to support Russian interests to maintain a strategic partnership with a former Soviet client state in the Arab world. Russia's ongoing use of the port of Tartus provides some insight into her real interests and capabilities to affect the current crisis. This backgrounder will describe the technical capabilities of the Russian base at Tartus and its literal significance to the Russian Navy. It will also consider the political opportunities it affords to Russia in the context of the Syrian civil war.

CAPABILITIES OF THE RUSSIAN FACILITY AT TARTUS

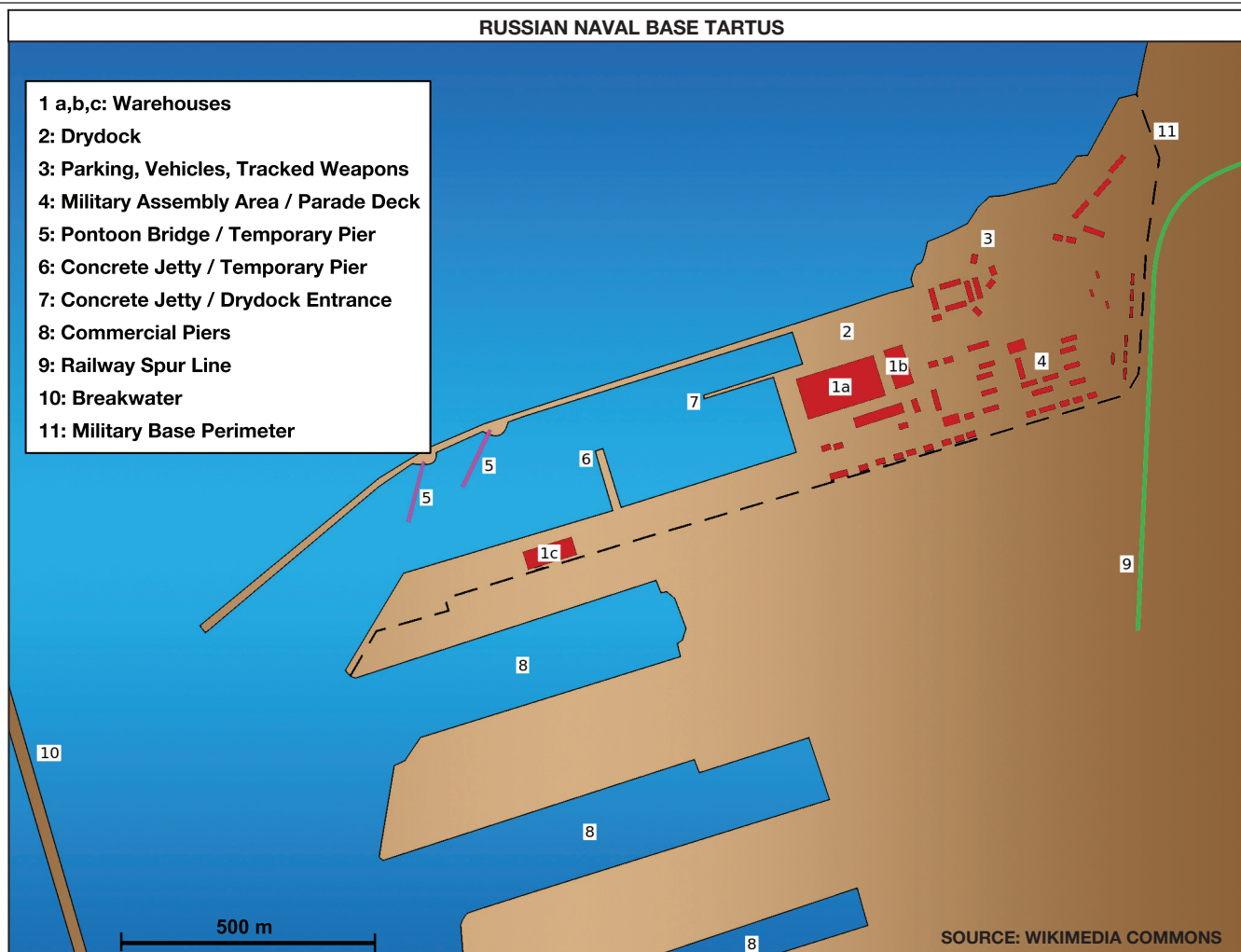
Tartus is located on the Mediterranean Sea, approximately twenty five kilometers north of the border between Syria and Lebanon. Tartus is classified as a full service, deep water commercial port that can load and unload every type of commercial cargo, including rolling stock, bulk cargo, sea-land containers, and liquid products to and from oil tankers up to 120,000 tons.² Although Tartus is a dual-use port, servicing both commercial and military vessels, merchant vessels comprise the clear majority of its traffic. In 2008, the Port of Tartus processed 2,776 merchant vessels carrying 12.9 million tons of cargo, or approximately eight commercial ships a day.³

The Russian port facility at Tartus, while sparse, can provide some critical functions to support Russian warships pulling into port there. It is officially designated a "Navy Sustainment Center."⁴ The pier facilities are robust enough to support all the ships of the Russian fleet except the Admiral Kuznetsov, Russia's only aircraft carrier.⁵ The support available includes pierside resupply of water, food, and fuel.⁶ While there are no large-scale repair facilities similar to what the US Navy maintains at its overseas bases in Yokosuka, Japan or Manama, Bahrain, Tartus does have some warehouses that store spare parts.⁷ Basic repair capabilities are provided through the regular presence of the Russian repair ship PM-138.⁸ Finally, Tartus provides the basic security necessary to offload Russian military cargo.⁹

However, these are only basic support functions. There is no command and control facility, which means the Russian Navy cannot direct operations from Tartus.¹⁰ The harbor depth and pier clearance cannot support the Admiral Kuznetsov, the Russian Navy's only aircraft carrier; when it pulls into Tartus, it anchors offshore. The aforementioned repair ship PM-138 is actually home-ported in Sevastopol, and it is not permanently available at Tartus.¹¹ Furthermore, crew support facilities are limited; commercial imagery indicates that there are no military hospital facilities or barracks, which suggests that base facilities will not support an extended port call at Tartus. The city of Tartus itself, with a population of over 100,000, does have adequate public services available, such as medical facilities, transportation, and hotels, to support Russian Sailors on an extended stay if they are allowed to stay in the city, rather than on the small base at Tartus itself.¹²

PLANNED IMPROVEMENTS AT TARTUS

The Russian Navy has repeatedly stated that it means to invest in continued use of Tartus; on July 25, 2012, Russian Navy Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Viktor Chirkova confirmed in an interview that Russia "needs that base.... it will continue to operate as it has until now."¹³ Two days later, Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, President of the Russian Academy of Geopolitical Problems, stated that, "modernization will be needed (at Tartus)."¹⁴ The upgrades include plans to dredge the harbor and expand piers to support aircraft carrier port visits.¹⁵ Command and control facilities may be built up so that operations



can be planned and controlled from those facilities.¹⁶ Finally, warehouse facilities may be expanded and repair and maintenance capabilities upgraded.

Whether or not the Russian Navy will actually complete this modernization at Tartus is uncertain; in February of 2010, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, then Commander in Chief of the Russian Navy, stated that with respect to Tartus, “the first stage of development and modernization will be completed in 2012.”¹⁷ In the thirty months since that announcement, the only verifiable modernization activity at Tartus has been the dredging of the harbor, which most ports do simply as a matter of routine maintenance.¹⁸

If Russia completes significant upgrades to Tartus, it will enable the Russian Navy to put a greater number and variety of ships into Tartus at the same time; it will allow for greater command and control functions from ashore; and the modernization of Tartus into a full naval base will support longer deployments. Nevertheless, the Russian facility at Tartus is functionally no better today than it was thirty years ago. Until those planned modernizations actually occur, the rhetoric is left unsupported, and the

recent resurgence of its mention should be viewed in the immediate context.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

During the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Soviet Union substantially increased the depth and intensity of its strategic relationship with numerous Arab and North African client states. Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Syria received significant military and economic aid from the Soviet Union. As these relationships progressed, the Soviet Union identified a need for a permanent military base in the Mediterranean to support naval training and exercises. In 1971, an agreement was reached that allowed Soviet surface combatants, submarines, and cargo ships to use port facilities at Tartus.¹⁹ During the Cold War, Soviet ships regularly pulled into Tartus for supplies and maintenance. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Navy suffered a steep decline in readiness and expeditionary capability.²⁰ As a result, the Russian base at Tartus fell into a state of disrepair, and Russia simultaneously lost its core partnerships with its remaining Arab, North African, and Mediterranean client states other than Syria.²¹



RUSSIAN NAVY RESURGENCE

The decline of the Russian Navy manifested broadly, not only in the maintenance of port facilities, but also in the maintenance of the fleet. Within several years after the end of the Cold War, the Russian Navy was operationally defunct. In 1984, the Russian Navy conducted 230 nuclear submarine patrols; by 2002, at the nadir of post-Cold War readiness, the Russian fleet reported no nuclear submarine patrols other than short term training periods lasting a few days.²² In the last five years, however, as the Russian political-economic landscape has shifted, President Putin has signaled his desire to re-establish Russia as an active superpower, which requires a deployable navy.²³ Accordingly, since 2006, the Russian Navy has seen a measurable increase in the tempo and quality of their deployments, along with an increase in shipbuilding and maintenance budgets. As an example of the new commitment to worldwide deployments, in 2008 the Admiral Chabanenko, an Udaloy Class Destroyer, transited the Panama Canal, the first time a Russian ship had gone through the Panama Canal since WWII.²⁴ The numerous anti-piracy patrols the Russian Navy has undertaken in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Somali Basin demonstrate a revived Russian deployable naval presence in the Gulf region specifically. While such patrols are routine for the US Navy, the first persistent Russian naval patrols in this area only began in 2008.²⁵

Russia has now conducted seven long-term anti-piracy deployments.²⁶

THE RUSSIAN MILITARY CASE FOR TARTUS

Russian political and military leaders are making the case that Russia's re-emergence as a superpower requires it to have a worldwide deployable navy, and that Tartus plays a key role. The commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy, Vice-Admiral Viktor Chirkov, was quoted by the Russian news agency *RIA Novosti* as saying, "This base is essential to us; it has been operating and will continue to operate."²⁷ This desire for a worldwide deployable navy in turn ostensibly drives the requirement for maintaining and expanding the Russian presence at Tartus. While the actual capabilities of the Russian facility at Tartus appear to be limited, Russia's official position has held Tartus as critical to Russian national security interests, and one must wonder why, given Russia's access to other comparable ports in the Mediterranean Sea.

RUSSIAN ACCESS TO OTHER MEDITERRANEAN PORTS

While Tartus is the only Russian military port outside of the former Soviet Republics, Russian Navy vessels enjoy access to former NATO ports in the Mediterranean. They regularly pull into port in Piraeus, Greece, for example, which like Tartus is in the Eastern Mediterranean and

RUSSIAN SHIPS THAT HAVE MADE PORT CALLS AT TARTUS IN THE RECENT PAST

ADMIRAL CHABANENKO, UDALOY CLASS DESTROYER, JANUARY 2012. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



LADNY, KRIVAK CLASS FRIGATE, JANUARY 2012. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



SEVEROMORSK, UDALOY CLASS DESTROYER, SEPTEMBER 2011. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



PETER THE GREAT, KIROV CLASS BATTLECRUISER, APRIL 2010. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



ADMIRAL KUZNETZOV, RUSSIAN AIRCRAFT CARRIER (ANCHORED OFFSHORE, JANUARY 2012.) SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

provides similar capabilities to Tartus.²⁸ At the same time, Russia is significantly increasing its industrial cooperation with former European foes. In 2010, the Russian Navy announced plans to buy Mistral class amphibious assault ships built by STX, a Korean owned shipbuilding company located in St. Nazaire, an Atlantic port in France.²⁹ On July 12, 2012, initial designs were completed, with construction scheduled to begin in September of 2012. STX will build the first two ships in St Nazaire, and at the same time will build a new, modern shipbuilding facility in St. Petersburg, Russia, where the next two ships will be built.³⁰ This level of industrial cooperation between France and Russia indicates that Russian Navy vessels may, in this sense, be allowed regular access to French ports in the near future. Russia does not necessarily need a proprietary port in the Mediterranean in order to conduct deployments in the Mediterranean.

More broadly, in terms of Russia – NATO interaction and in the context of the NATO anti-piracy mission, NATO recently announced a detailed, tactical level program of cooperation with Russian ships to facilitate passage from the Baltic, North Atlantic, and Mediterranean en route to the anti-piracy patrol area in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.³¹ Furthermore, an editorial published in Russian Defense newspaper *Red Star* entices prospective recruits with reports of port calls to “France, Italy, Tunisia, and Portugal.”³² It is clear that there are no barriers to Russian Navy ships making port calls in numerous Mediterranean ports that are far better equipped to support them than is Tartus. As further indication of the measured requirement for port facilities, Russian ships in the Pacific Fleet transit from their homeport of Vladivostok to the Gulf of Aden some 6600 nautical miles away without making a port call.³³ By comparison, Russian ships transiting from the Black Sea fleet of Sevastopol past Tartus to the Gulf of Aden have to transit just 2400 nautical miles. If Russian ships from Vladivostok can make it to the anti-piracy patrol area without a Russian Navy base to support them while en route, Russian ships transiting a shorter distance from Sevastopol can surely make the journey without stopping at Tartus, particularly as it matures its capability into a worldwide deployable navy.

RUSSIAN ACCESS TO GLOBAL PORTS

At the same time that other Mediterranean ports are allowing access to the Russian Navy, Russia is cultivating additional options worldwide. On July 27, 2012, Vice Admiral Viktor Chirkov told the state *RIA Novosti* news agency that Russia is talking to Cuba, Vietnam and the Indian Ocean island country of Seychelles about hosting Russian Naval vessels.³⁴ Given that the Cold War Soviet

Navy maintained bases in Cuba and Vietnam, and that Russian ships regularly make port calls in the Seychelles where Russian Sailors and Marines march in carnival parades and participate in military exhibitions, this proposal seems plausible.³⁵ If Russia does indeed regain access to its former ports in Cuba and Vietnam, and expand its operations in the Seychelles from regular port calls to an actual base, this will further diminish the importance of the Russian facility at Tartus.

CORE RUSSIAN INTEREST IN TARTUS IS POLITICAL

Together these observations indicate that the literal military value of Tartus does not match the rhetoric of senior Russian leadership who emphatically describe Tartus as critical. Particularly when viewed in the context of Russia's position on the Syrian crisis, the rhetoric justifying Russian Naval activity at Tartus appears fundamentally political. One dimension of the political interpretation is historical. At the same time, NATO has built ongoing security and economic partnerships with several former client states of the Soviet Union through its Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) program. NATO's MD members include Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, and all of these states enjoy privileged access to NATO exercises and planning conferences.³⁶ While not formal NATO members, MD partners can observe and contribute to ongoing NATO operations such as Operation Active Endeavor, the NATO maritime counter - terrorism operation in the Mediterranean that was established shortly after 9/11.³⁷ Given that the NATO has an active, ongoing formal program of cooperation with former client states of the Soviet Union, and given that modern Russia has just one Arab client state remaining, it seems plausible that the core interest of the Putin regime is to maintain some level of direct influence in both the Mediterranean Sea and in the Arab world, and Tartus is a foothold.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES AT TARTUS

This theory of Russian political interest should be evaluated against current activities at Tartus. Aside from serving as a port of call for Russian Navy vessels transiting the Eastern Mediterranean, Tartus is likely being used as a delivery point for weapons and ammunition bound for the Assad regime. Most notably, the Merchant Vessel *Alaed* demonstrated that function as the verified delivery point for Russian MI-24 attack helicopters that were shipped from Kaliningrad to Tartus.³⁸ There have been other similar reports of Russian cargo vessels carrying arms to Tartus, enough to appreciate that Russia is also using Tartus as a logistical hub to provide materiel support the Assad regime.³⁹ Furthermore, it is the reported point of debarkation for Russian Marines,

who are ostensibly headed to Syria to secure the facility and protect Russian citizens and equipment there.⁴⁰ It is also possible that these Marines could be tasked to secure another major point of entry, like an airport, and to support noncombatant evacuation operations, among other possibilities.⁴¹ According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, there are approximately 100,000 Russian passport holders living in Syria, and if Russia were to attempt a large-scale evacuation, Tartus would be one alternative point of exit.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Current Russian activities deviate from the depiction of Tartus as a critical sustainment port supporting the expansion of Russian Naval capability. Instead, they suggest that Russia is using Tartus as a political lever, both to affect the outcome of the Syrian civil war and to maintain legitimate access to a strategically located facility nested in the Arab world. Given this assessment, it is unclear how Russia will describe her strategic interests anew if the prospect of a unified Syrian government becomes disassociated with Russian access to the port of Tartus.⁴³ For example, if conditions in Damascus and Aleppo were to rise to a point at which Assad fell back to a more defensible position, such as the Alawite coastal basin that runs from Latakia to Tartus, Russia would still maintain access to Tartus; whereas if the Assad regime were to collapse and be replaced by a unified Sunni Arab majority government, Russia would be forced to re-invest in order to maintain the port.⁴⁴ Curiously, and despite Russian support to the Assad regime thus far, it does not appear that a unified Syrian government is critical to Russia's interests, nor is Assad personally. If Russia is primarily focused upon maintaining a client state relationship, Russia faces a choice if the outcome of the Syrian civil war tips in favor of the opposition. Russia can apply more direct military support to the Assad Regime through the port of Tartus and other points of entry; Russia can abandon Assad and attempt to support the current government without him; or Russia can promote a partition solution that preserves an Alawite state. After the support it has provided to the Assad regime thus far, it would be difficult for Russia to establish a relationship with a new Sunni majority government in Damascus.

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