RUSSIA'S GATEWAY TO GLOBAL WATERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed on July 21, 1774 by the Russian and Ottoman Empires after the 1768-74 war between the two powers was one of the most consequential treaties for the global balance of power in the 18th century — it marked the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the arrival of the Russians, under Catherine the Great, as a major power in the Black Sea region. As part of the treaty, Russia got access to the Black Sea through the Kerch and Azov seaports. More important, Russia gained official status as the protector of the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire, a clear signal of the waning influence of the High Porte, the Ottoman central administration, within imperial territories.

This clause also left the Crimean Khanate, which had declared independence from the Ottomans, dependent on the Russians. In 1783, nine years after the treaty was signed, Prince Grigory Potemkin, a Grand Admiral in the imperial Russian army and a favourite of Empress Catherine, annexed the Crimean Peninsula in the name of protecting its Christians amidst violent clashes between Christians and Crimean Tatars. The annexation gave Russia seamless access to the Black Sea's warm waters, helping its rise as a naval power.

One may find parallels between the 18th century annexation of Crimea by Empress Catherine and the 2014 annexation of the same region by President Vladimir Putin. If Catherine's annexation anchored Russia as a Black Sea power, Mr. Putin's move allowed Russia to retain Sevastopol, which hosts its Black Sea fleet, and turn Crimea into a platform for force projection.

Geo-economic reasons

After the invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, Russia further tightened its hold over the Black Sea. Russia has taken the entire Sea of Azov coast and more port cities in the south and south-east, including Mariupol, Berdyansk and Kherson.

The Black Sea is critical for Russia for geo-economic reasons. Russia's northern ports are in the Arctic Ocean, which restricts its outreach to the world. Its gateway to the global waters is the Black Sea, which opens into the Mediterranean Sea through the Turkey-controlled Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits.

Currently, Russia's only naval base outside the former Soviet territories is based in Syria's Tartus in the Mediterranean Sea. While Russia sees the Mediterranean as NATO-dominated waters, it has sought to enhance its presence in the region in recent years. So, from a geopolitical point of view, it's imperative for Moscow to retain its hold over the Black Sea to remain an influential naval power. The Black Sea is also a vital economic artery for Russia to export its hydrocarbons and grains to Turkey and Asian markets.

During the Soviet period, Russia had dominated the Black Sea, which was then dubbed by many the 'Soviet Lake'. Ukraine and Georgia were Soviet republics. Bulgaria and Romania, two other Black Sea basin states, were part of the Soviet-led Eastern bloc. The only country that was out of the Soviet sphere in the Black Sea region during the Cold War was Turkey, a NATO member. Despite Turkey's control over Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, the 1936 Montreux Convention ensures that Russia and other Black Sea countries get access to the straits so that they can seamlessly move both commercial and military vessels in and out of the waters. (The Convention bans non-Black Sea countries' aircraft carriers and submarines from entering the

waters.)

But the balance of power in the Black Sea would shift in favour of NATO after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Bulgaria and Romania became NATO members in 2004. Ukraine and Georgia were offered membership in 2008. If they had also joined NATO, Russia would have faced an arc of NATO coast in its gateway to the global waters. But in 2008, Russia made a military intervention in Georgia, practically ending the country's NATO dream. And in 2014, by annexing Crimea, Russia did not only derail Ukraine's NATO plans, but also reasserted its hold over its southern waters. Now, with more territories under its control as the invasion grinds on, Russia is seeking to rewrite the balance of power in the Black Sea to its favour through force.

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