

Russia's Intended Naval Base in Ochamchire: Implications for Georgian and Black Sea Security

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 884
March 2024

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Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and occupation of its sovereign territories since 2014 are reshaping the geopolitical map of Europe and sending ripples of apprehension across the wider Black Sea region. For Georgia, a country that has historically navigated complex regional dynamics, the situation in Ukraine holds special significance. The country is also particularly vulnerable to Russia's aggressive posture. With the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive having forced Russia to withdraw much of its Black Sea fleet from the Crimean Peninsula and look for safer options, Russia plans to establish a permanent naval base at the Russian-occupied Abkhazian port of Ochamchire.

This plan poses an imminent threat to Georgian national security: not only would it cement Moscow's control of the 20 percent of Georgia's internationally recognized territories that Russia has long occupied, but it would also put Russian forces within striking distance of the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi—an especially pressing issue considering that Georgia has no navy of its own with which to counter such a threat. Politically, Moscow could use its military presence as a tool of coercion to deter Tbilisi from its Euro-Atlantic ambitions, while the fact that Kyiv would consider the base a legitimate military target in the ongoing war means that Georgia would likely be drawn directly into the conflict, shattering its current official neutrality. More broadly, the Russian base has a potential to destabilize the Black Sea region as a whole, including the burgeoning Middle Corridor trade route from China to Europe that bypasses Russia, of which Georgia is a major component.

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Russia's Maritime Expansion in the Black Sea Region

In October 2023, Aslan Bzhania, de-facto leader of Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, [announced](#) an agreement to establish a new Russian naval base at the port of Ochamchire, some 50 kilometers from the Abkhazian capital city of Sokhumi. The move, he said, "aimed at increasing the defense capability of both Russia and Abkhazia." Accordingly, the base will be not a temporary hub for forces actively [engaged](#) in conflict on the Black Sea, but a permanent installation.

Having been forced to withdraw from the occupied Crimean Peninsula due to the Ukrainian counteroffensive, the Russian fleet has retreated down to the Russian city of Novorossiysk. At least 17 vessels have been [relocated](#) there from the port of Sevastopol. The new base at Ochamchire would be 500 kilometers further southeast, putting the Russian fleet much further from Ukrainian shores and thus making it less vulnerable to attack. Ukraine's recent securement of F-16 fighter jets from its Western allies might have added further impetus to this decision: whenever they arrive, these aircraft may [pose](#) a serious threat to the fleet in its current location.

The port of Ochamchire is already being [used](#) as a base for Russian coast guard ships under a 2009 agreement between the Kremlin and Sokhumi authorities. Some development has been carried out since then, including repairing the railway platform and connecting the port with Sokhumi. In 2017, with the Russian government's lease on the port of Sevastopol expiring, Ochamchire was [mooted](#) as a new base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, but these discussions faded when the Yanukovich government extended that lease until 2042.

At present, the port of Ochamchire—at only 9 meters deep—cannot receive large ships. Significant technical and infrastructural work would be [required](#) to address this. However, Russia can still moor smaller vessels at the port, [facilitating](#) supply and logistics operations. In addition, satellite images obtained by the BBC [show](#) that dredging and construction have been under way at the site since 2022. These works should allow the port to accept smaller vessels of the kind that have been actively used by Russia to [strike](#) targets in Ukraine and [reload](#) its Kalibr cruise missiles onto vessels.

Russia Cementing Occupation of Georgian Territories

Russia is already present militarily in Georgia's two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A naval presence in the port of Ochamchire would add another component to the Russian occupation, further strengthening Russian-backed separatism in Abkhazia and limiting the prospects of Georgia's international borders being restored. This development serves as a yet another manifestation of Moscow's persistent imperialist efforts to [undermine](#), destabilize, and exert enduring influence over Georgia with a view to altering its sovereign choices.

Russia has used the Ochamchire port for naval operations in the past. During the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Russian vessels were deployed to the port and [used](#) it as a launching pad for advances into the territory controlled by Tbilisi. Since then, the aforementioned 2009 agreement with the de-facto Abkhaz leadership has granted Russia indirect control of the port.

Georgia has been facing challenges to its naval security for years. The elimination of the Georgian Navy after the 2008 Russian invasion and its subsequent transformation into a coastal patrol force have left the country with limited maritime defense capabilities. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent reinforcement of its Black Sea military presence have only intensified the threat. But a permanent Russian naval presence within striking distance of the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi would pose a more imminent national security challenge for Georgia.

Furthermore, Moscow might use this expanded military presence as a tool of political coercion vis-à-vis Tbilisi. Already, the Georgian government, despite its declared pursuit of NATO and EU membership, has been following an ambiguous path in its relations with Russia. Clearly anti-Russian politics has been ruled out, leading some to [dub](#) the approach "balancing" or "appeasement." Gaining this additional leverage might enable Russia to further shift the pendulum of Georgian politics away from Tbilisi's formally expressed Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

Spillover of the Russian-Ukrainian War into Georgia

If Russia does relocate its Black Sea Fleet to the port of Ochamchire, it has the potential to transform Georgia into a versatile strategic asset for Russia's endeavors against Ukraine – or even an additional theater of conflict. The acquisition of the Ochamchire base not only empowers Russia to launch assaults from Georgia's shores, but also [heightens](#) Georgia's susceptibility to retaliatory actions by Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has already [announced](#) that any new Russian base, including in Abkhazia, would be considered a legitimate target of the Ukrainian military. This reality threatens to bring the war to Georgian territory, posing an acute security challenge.

The new base also has the potential to jeopardize Georgia's official neutrality. While the absolute majority of Georgians [support](#) a pro-Ukraine stance – 96 percent of those polled stated that the war concerns Georgians as well and 87 percent think it is their war, too – and [perceive](#) Ukraine as a key political ally (behind only the United States and the European Union), Georgian officials have been reluctant to take a clear-cut position. Indeed, Tbilisi has avoided both joining the international sanctions on Russia and resumed direct flights with the latter. In an attempt to maintain this neutrality, officials have [downplayed](#) the Russian plans as not posing an imminent threat to Tbilisi, since the required construction works at the port of Ochamchire are expected to take several years. Only the opposition parties have [decried](#) the Russian move as a threat to Georgian sovereignty and officially called on NATO and EU states to take a unified stance against

Russia's plan. If the war widens up to Georgian territory, however, the government's naïve expectation that it can maintain its official neutrality will be shattered as well as it will damage Tbilisi's "pragmatic" foreign policy towards Russia.

Georgia's Role as a Connectivity Hub for the Middle Corridor Threatened

Russia's increased naval presence in Black Sea could also threaten Georgia's status as a global East-West connectivity hub. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgia has found itself at the center of the main transit route that connects the East with the West while bypassing Russia. Moscow's isolation has made overland trade routes traversing Russia less attractive for international shippers. As a result, some of this cargo has been [redirected](#) to the "Middle Corridor," which connects China to Europe via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Black Sea. The Mega project, currently supported by the EU, China and international finance institutions, aims to strengthen these sea and land freight links, enabling goods from China, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus to access lucrative markets in Europe and beyond.

Georgia's strategic location on the eastern edge of the Black Sea makes it the linchpin of the Middle Corridor. Georgia has enthusiastically embraced its newfound transit role and has openly tried to take advantage of it, including by [initiating](#) new infrastructure projects and a "strategic partnership" with China, which considers the Middle Corridor to be part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Between Georgia's strategic location and the fact that as of this writing it is the only country in the region with free trade agreements with both China and the EU, it is an attractive alternative to transit routes through Russia. Accordingly, in the first 5 months of 2023, the transit of goods from China to Europe along the Middle Corridor [increased](#) by 77 percent compared to the same period in 2022. Along similar lines, in 2023, a Poti-Constanta ferry service connecting Georgia and Romania was [launched](#) to replace the Poti-Chornomorsk ferry service between Georgia and Ukraine that had been interrupted by the war. This is the first ferry service to carry both passengers and cargo between the EU and Georgia.

The key component of the Middle Corridor is a deep-sea port project in Anaklia, Georgia, which is meant to boost commerce along the Corridor, the fastest route for [delivering](#) cargo between Asia and Europe. The idea for the port gained momentum after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, when the West began [looking](#) for alternatives to overland transit via Russia. The corridor is expected to significantly reduce travel times and, according to World Bank optimistic calculations, may [triple](#) trade volumes by 2030.

The militarization of Ochamchire, located just 35 kilometers from Anaklia, would be highly damaging to the already delayed Anaklia port plans. Construction, which began in 2017, was cancelled in 2020 by the Georgian Dream government, which accused Western-funded consortia of having failed to meet their obligations. Critics, however, attributed the decision to the GD politics of appeasing Russia: Moscow [opposed](#) the project, which it saw as a U.S. effort to dock its submarines on the Black Sea. With the

government's increasing interest in cooperation with China, the project was revived in 2022, and in September 2023 the Ministry of Economy [revealed](#) two finalists for the private-public partnership that would build the port: Chinese-Singaporean and Swiss-Luxembourgian consortia.

Russia's naval expansion in nearby waters would give it leverage over trade and transportation links in Black Sea that could jeopardize Georgia's ambition to cement its commercial position in the Black Sea. After all, a Russian military presence might deter potential investors in the Anaklia project and sink the port plans once again. That being said, the degree of risk might be determined by the bidding outcome. While Russia might be relatively tolerant of a Chinese presence in Georgia, Ochamchire would likely become a source of destabilization of a Western-backed project.

Destabilization of the Wider Black Sea Region

Russia's expansion in the Black Sea region not only undermines Georgia's territorial integrity, but also signals its ambitions toward other post-Soviet states and poses security threats to the countries of the Black Sea basin, including NATO members and the EU. Moscow is once again displaying a willingness to cement its hegemony in the region, including by military means. The new base may serve as a launching pad for regional aggression: forces on the Black Sea could easily be deployed throughout the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin, posing a threat to the entire region. Therefore, the move further conveys the Kremlin's commitment to projecting power over its periphery, especially those countries striving for NATO membership.

Since the Black Sea borders NATO members, Russia's determination to preserve its dominance on the Black Sea represents a challenge to Western security. Besides military threats, Russia can disrupt trade and commercial movements, whether through the Middle Corridor or otherwise, as [evidenced](#) already by its weaponization of food and grain exports destined for the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. If Russia relocates its fleet to Ochamchire, this enhanced Russian naval capability will threaten not only Georgia's security and its status as a global East-West connectivity hub, but also the security of the broader Black Sea region.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war has decreased Georgia's resilience and increased its military and security vulnerability to Russian threats. Russia's further pursuit of dominance in the Black Sea region by expanding its naval presence not only has troubling implications for Ukraine, but would provide Russia with leverage against Georgia and the rest of the countries in the Caucasus and Black Sea region, as well as affecting trade and transport routes between Asia and Europe. This reality reinforces the need for increased cooperation and coordination between the EU, NATO, the US, and the countries of the Black Sea region to address common security challenges. Such joint efforts will hinge

significantly on how the new balance of power in the broader Black Sea region is reshaped as a result of the Ukraine war.

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