

NATO'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING SECURITY THREATS AND CHALLENGES IN THE BLACK SEA:

TIME FOR A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC APPROACH FOR THE REGION?

Introduction

Traditionally, the Black Sea region has been defined as a region of great importance due to its substantial political, economic and commercial potential, as a link between continents, peoples and cultures. This potential is threatened nowadays. The Black Sea is currently the region with the highest potential for risk.

Without any doubts the major security problem is Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which poses risks not only for the region and regional states, but also for the European and global security. The war that Russia is waging is a test for Ukraine and its people, but this conflict can spill over into other countries including NATO Member States.

The region is facing an extremely complex and complicated (in)security environment. Along with military risks, we are also witnessing environmental risks; unprecedented migration of Ukrainian citizens; threats to the freedom of navigation and the economic activities and global food security; risks of proliferation of weapons including to criminal and terrorist groups, etc. All these risks and threats are the direct consequence of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine. The region is facing unresolved frozen conflicts, which could also escalate, further contributing to instability.

This complex uncertainty environment determines the necessity of a complex and coordinated approach of all stakeholders, NATO included, to guarantee the European security, that every inch of NATO territory is defended, that all risks are adequately tackled.

Three leading think-tanks from Bulgaria (Sofia Security Forum), Romania (The New Strategy Centre) and Türkiye (EDAM) joined their efforts to analyze the security environment in the Black Sea region and prepare policy recommendations. To fulfil this task, between February and September 2023, meetings with the participation of representatives of the respective Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, intelligence communities, diplomats, analysts and scientists were conducted in each of the three countries. Public events were also organized with a wide participation of experts and journalists.

The main conclusion of the common work of the three think-tanks is that, on the basis of the decisions taken at the Vilnius Summit to implement the Strategic Concept, NATO should accurately reflect the complexity of the risks and threats in the Black Sea with a view to taking the necessary measures for the defence and security of regional Allies, in a comprehensive way. That would define the positions and outline the activities of the Alliance in the region.

We are by no means calling for regionalization of NATO's approaches, much less regionalization of defence, but rather stressing the need to consider the full complexity of the situation and take appropriate measures.

An important message we are sending is that Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye, as NATO littoral member countries, should work more actively together in analyzing the situation and looking for common approaches to increase regional security.

In the present document, SSF, NSC and EDAM are analyzing the geostrategic situation in the region, assessing NATO's defence capabilities and looking at all aspects of NATO's interest, taking into account the specifics of the Black Sea region.

SSF, NSC and EDAM express gratitude to NATO PDD for the assistance and financial support for the implementation of the project. We also express our gratitude to the representatives of NATO and the officials and experts from the respective countries who participated in different activities during the implementation of the project. We hope this document will be of added value to the Alliance's approach to the Black Sea.

General assessments

1. The Black Sea has been for centuries one of the key markers of the geopolitical competition between major powers and blocks vying for control of the Eurasian space. With its multiple connections to the lifelines of the European exchanges from the Eurasian landmass to the European "peninsula", and through the natural passage of the Turkish Straits.

To the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and the major maritime lanes, the Black Sea is both inevitable and, as it happens today, as often in the past, difficult to access. One may wonder thus why the bolts holding the gates to this unique hub between regions, civilizations and nations were locked for such a long time, in an area which has never been spared by wars, conflicts and tensions. It is precisely because of its huge economic potential, connectivity and strategic value.

2. „Actually, war is again in Europe and the Black Sea region has come anew to the forefront". The increased tensions building up therein over the past years, culminating in Russia's outright aggression on Ukraine, confirm and reinforce the vital strategic role of the Black Sea. The acknowledgement of this reality has been impacting unavoidably the reappraisal of Western geopolitical thinking which was marked by the decades-long Cold War perception of the East-West divide focused at that time on the division of Germany and Central and Northern Europe.

3. One can only underline the strides made in the strategic thinking of the North Atlantic Alliance from the response to the tectonic events happening three decades ago to those of the present day, starting from the "Declaration on a transformed North Atlantic Alliance" adopted in London on 9 July 1990¹ and abutting to the new NATO

¹ "The London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance," accessed August 1, 2023, www.cvce.eu/en/obj/the_london_declaration_on_a_transformed_north_atlantic_alliance_6_july1990-en-9c5fa86b-12a0-4f59-ad90-e69503ef6036.html

Strategic Concept adopted on 29 June 2022 in Madrid and the Vilnius Summit Final declaration (11 July 2023), enhancing among others “the strategic importance of the Black Sea region”, Russia in the Baltic, Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea regions and maintaining significant military capabilities in the Arctic and reaffirming the decisions taken in the Madrid Summit to put in place combat ready forces on NATO’s east².

4. The Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation (Brussels, 10 January 2023) underlines the current “key juncture for Euro-Atlantic security and stability, more than ever demonstrating the importance of the transatlantic bond, calling for closer EU-NATO cooperation”. It mentions the NATO Strategic Concept and also the EU Strategic Compass where we can read: “Stability and security in the wider Black Sea region are severely impacted by the aggression of Russia against Ukraine, with far-reaching implications in terms of security, resilience, freedom of navigation and economic development”³.

5. Who would have imagined thirty years ago the extent of NATO enlargement, not to speak of the European Union? Or the strength of the Allied military presence in the Eastern flank countries to be further strengthened after the Vilnius Summit?

6. Whereas Ukraine and the Ukrainian people bear the brunt of Russian military aggression with all the scourges entailed by war in terms of human suffering and material losses, Russia has crossed a new redline after suspending unilaterally the Black Sea Grain Initiative (“grain deal”) concluded with the commitment of Türkiye and the UN and affecting the major sea route through the Turkish Straits. By striking the Ukrainian port facilities on the Danube at a stones’ throw from Romania, a NATO member, or carrying out naval exercises in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of another NATO member, Bulgaria, Russia is raising the ante, testing and provoking thus the Alliance and threatening the alternative routes for Ukrainian grain.

7. Lawfare accompanying hybrid war in all its dimensions has become the playground in the Black Sea Basin affecting directly the stability and security of the countries in the Wider Region and beyond.

8. Whereas the foundation of the rules-based international order is challenged on a world scale, the consequences of Russia’s aggression on Ukraine indicate again that as long as there is no durable settlement for the balance of power in the Black Sea addressing the root causes of lasting conflicts and based on the fundamental tenets of international law, this region will be once and again the source of violent shocks on a

² “NATO 2022 Strategic Concept”, accessed August 1, 2023, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm; “Vilnius Summit Communiqué”, accessed August 1, 2023, www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_217320.htm

³ “Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation”, accessed August 1, 2023, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_210549.htm;

“A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade”, accessed August 1, 2023, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/

wider or limited scale. This has been proved once and again in 2008 after the Bucharest NATO Summit when Russia aggressed Georgia and in 2014 when it illegally annexed Crimea and occupied the Donbas.

9. It is against this background that three think-tanks from NATO littoral countries to the Black Sea: Sofia Security Forum (SSF), New Strategy Center (NSC) and EDAM, from Bulgaria, Romania and respectively Türkiye, have decided, with the support of the Public Diplomacy Division of NATO, to embark on a common reflection on the security challenges in the Black Sea aiming to contribute to the further crystallization of a common strategic approach of the Alliance, based on their particular experience as longtime actors directly and existentially involved in the developments affecting this part of Europe.

10. These three countries have all been confronted for centuries with the growing or ebbing tides of Russian power, they share a common and rich history and they are not only in the immediate proximity of the current war but also represent the NATO frontline on the Black Sea.

11. Another common feature for the three countries involved is their protean geopolitical identity covering both the Black Sea but also the Balkans. All three are riparian states to the Black Sea and part of the geopolitical complex involving Russia, together with Ukraine, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova or Armenia and Azerbaijan. But they are also deeply involved in their relations of proximity with the Western Balkan countries. In both cases one is faced with the tensions generated by the major integrating magnet represented by EU and NATO on one side and the countercurrents represented by Russia (blatantly in the Black Sea) or as in the Balkans, alongside the implication of other actors, be it China (a global player on all theatres) or from the Middle East. Liminality from the Euro Atlantic perspective may be considered one of their defining features just as on the other side of the divide the same feature may be attributed to Ukraine striving to fulfill its fundamental strategic goal of acceding to NATO and the EU.

12. Considering common challenges, bringing together expertise from three countries with distinct strategic cultures in the process of formulating an integrated framework on security in the Black Sea has become a necessary exercise also in practical terms. The advantage for think-tanks being that they can delve with the endeavor of integrating the nuances, particularities and overall intimidating complexity of the wider region into an integrated, holistic approach without avoiding tough questions and difficulties.

13. Our joint effort has been driven by the conviction that this would be not only timely but urgent. It is based on the volatility of the current situation on ground and the need to enlarge the intellectual compass on the region contributing to integrating visions in the Alliance and partner members with added value from the riparian NATO members. We do not perceive our effort as singular but part of the ongoing reflection in the Alliance and in some major non-littoral members actively involved in the security of the Eastern flank.

14. Last but not least we hope to offer the decision makers in our own countries' food for thought and possible venues for stepping up immediate cooperation and promoting long term common strategic interests when confronted with fundamental threats to national security, be it in terms of political dialogue and cooperation, strengthening military capabilities or the protection of critical infrastructure in our respective EEZ, for instance.

15. The current introductory Chapter I to this paper offers a general overview on the basic features of the Black Sea region including the security environment affecting the three riparian NATO member states. The initial presentation sets the stage for Chapter II, the military-focused radiography defining the state of play, the three states' specific potential, concerns and expectations in view of the realities of armed power in the Black Sea, both maritime and terrestrial, and taking into account the framework of NATO's enhanced presence in the Eastern flank countries, as resulting from the decisions of the Vilnius Summit. The third section, Chapter III, presents the overall risk assessment and threat inventory applicable to the wider Black Sea region from a NATO perspective including resilience, hybrid, cyber, ETDs, etc. as well as the impact of EU enlargement and neighborhood policies in the area, while the last section will present the conclusions and recommendations resulting from our joint effort.

The Black Sea as a Regional Security Complex

16. The increased relevance of the Black Sea and its transformation into a region characterized by competition and conflict, turned it into a regional security complex⁴. The current patterns and security practices determine a geopolitical space worth of thorough examination in its own right.

17. Although the maritime character of the Russia-Ukraine war is undeniable, one of the key components of the current conflict, constructing the Black Sea as a region in merely maritime terms and treating it only as a naval theatre is reductive. A holistic perspective is required, taking into consideration the larger basin of the Black Sea, as the threats and challenges we are faced with in this region are profoundly political in their nature.

Geographical features and implications

18. The unique geographical features of the Black Sea, as well as their strategic implications, contribute to the complexity of the region. The Black Sea is a closed sea, and due to its size, there are no international waters, consisting only in the exclusive

⁴ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

economic zones of riparian states. The sea has two entrances that determine trade flows. The Turkish Straits – the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, turning the Black Sea into a bridge between Asia and Europe to the Mediterranean Sea; their legal status is governed by the 1936 Montreux Convention. The other entrance is the Danube, which connects the Black Sea with Western Europe and the North Sea. It is also the geographical coordinates that determine an intricate connection between the Black Sea and the Balkans. Not only because three of the riparian states, namely the NATO members in the region, are also present in the Balkans, but also because power dynamics in the Black Sea often translate into influence distribution in the Balkans. All these connections, while conferring to the Black Sea's status the character of a continuum, do not affect but enhance its individuality.

19. Since before World War II the Montreux Convention has been a powerful legal instrument to maintain peace and stability in the Black Sea. This fact has been recognised first and foremost by the littoral countries as well as the Allies. Türkiye has been the custodian of the Montreux Convention and implemented its provisions meticulously even at the height of the Cold War, thereby not allowing any escalation neither in the Black Sea nor its wider neighbouring basin. Türkiye's adamant attitude was demonstrated in the near past when Russia started to invade Ukraine for the second time after 2014. The Turkish Straits were closed to the warships of littoral and non-littoral countries when the war broke out. It has been a fundamental decision within the Alliance taken upon the occupation and annexation of Crimea by Russia to strictly conform to international law and not mimic Russia in violating the rules based international order. In that vein, it is undeniable that the Montreux Convention is an inextricable part of international law that must be fully respected by all Allies. It should not be seen as an impediment in enhancing deterrence and defence of Allies in the region, but a security and stability multiplier just like during the Cold War. It is incumbent upon the Allies to respect the Montreux Convention like any other international law instruments and uphold its provisions to help strengthen the rules based international order.

Historical coordinates

20. The relevance of the Black Sea as a strategic region is a norm, rather than an exception, with recent memory of relative peace obscuring the overall picture. After the seizure of the Sea's northern coast by the Ottoman Empire, a Pax Ottomana has dominated the region for three centuries, but its disruption in the 18th century started a long series of conflicts between the Sublime Porte and the rising Russian Empire. It was due to the Crimean War of 1853-1856 that the strategic relevance of the Black Sea came to the fore in Western chanceries, resulting in the direct intervention of the British and French empires and the Kingdom of Sardinia on the side of the Ottoman Empire. Competition between the two Eastern empires of Europe over the basin continued until the First World War, when it was halted by their dissolution. During the Cold War the

Soviet Union pursued the traditional imperial goal to impose its hegemony in the Black Sea the full completion of this goal being thwarted by Türkiye's accession to NATO and the imposition of relative but armed peace. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unipolar phase witnessed the simmering but localized tensions of the 1990s'.

21. NATO eastern enlargement and open-door policies have changed that paradigm as well as the parallel EU enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the dominant features of the first post-Cold War decade. Russia's reaction will be dealt with forthwith.

22. Another feature of the early post-Cold War era following the implosion of the USSR and the wars in former Yugoslavia, was the drive taken by the states in the Black Sea and South-East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) to promote regional co-operation. Initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) taken by Türkiye and the South-East European Process, by Bulgaria, or the South East European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) hosted by Romania aimed at confidence building, constructive initiatives and stabilization efforts addressing the common concerns of participants. Most of the participants have opted for membership or closer ties with the Euro-Atlantic institutions, with the notable exception of Russia impacting the processes initiated in the Black Sea. Without however being a panacea in front of the major geopolitical trends the potential of this concept is durable. The challenges regional co-operation has faced in the aftermath of the Cold war as well as the impact of the ongoing Russian aggression will be dealt with more thoroughly further in this paper.

Russia as the main threat

23. Forebodings of the major swerve in Russia's security policy and relations with the West were signalled by Mr. Putin's infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the cyber-attacks against Estonia the same year and the energy crisis impacting mainly South Eastern Europe as a consequence of the intensifying Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute.

24. An inconclusive NATO Summit in April 2008 in Bucharest on the question of Ukraine's and Georgia's bid to join the Alliance encouraged Moscow to return to an aggressive stance and more assertive foreign policy, culminating in the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the 2014 seizure of Crimea. Meanwhile, a military buildup, consisting in significant military modernization efforts and the development of A2/AD capabilities in Crimea have enhanced Russia's power. This behaviour is, in fact, a re-emerging historical constant, as confirmed by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Hence Russia resumed its role posturing as the main threat to the Euro-Atlantic community, and inherently to Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye, who happen to be the NATO frontline states in the only region where Russian aggression took a kinetic shape.

25. While Russia's immediate goals of annihilating Ukraine have been thwarted, we are now apparently confronted with the perspective of a war of attrition with unforeseen consequences both within and outside Russia stretching its resources in a multi-directional confrontation with what it calls the Global West on an unprecedented scale since the Cold War.

26. Last but not least, one must recognize the internal dynamics of the country: there is little chance of change in Russian society, and any change of power is highly unlikely to result in a less aggressive behaviour from Moscow, at least in the foreseeable future.

27. The ongoing war in Ukraine dynamises the strategic calculus in the Black Sea, and forces us to reconsider the nature of the Russian threat. The war continues to inform us on the failure of some technologies that Russia has and the effectiveness of others, which eases the identification of certain gaps in our own capabilities. While the conclusion of this conflict is remarkably hard to predict, the current situation suggests that no side could gain a decisive victory any time soon, and thus, we may witness a prolonged, "permanent"⁵ conflict. Even the idea of an armistice will lead to permanent insecurity in the region, and it is not a sustainable solution either for Ukraine or for all those subject to the durable Russian aggressive behaviour.

28. As the outlines and timelines of the post-conflict scenario are yet to be discerned, it is clear that the enormous reconstruction effort will also have to consider the impact of the war on the most affected country and population (Ukraine) not only in material terms starting with infrastructure, but also as to the resilience of the society, its institutions and people alike. Their capacity to withstand and overcome the challenges and the outcome of this process will inevitably have a regional and European impact, not to speak on Russia itself. Ukraine's NATO and EU neighbours will be on the frontline also from this perspective.

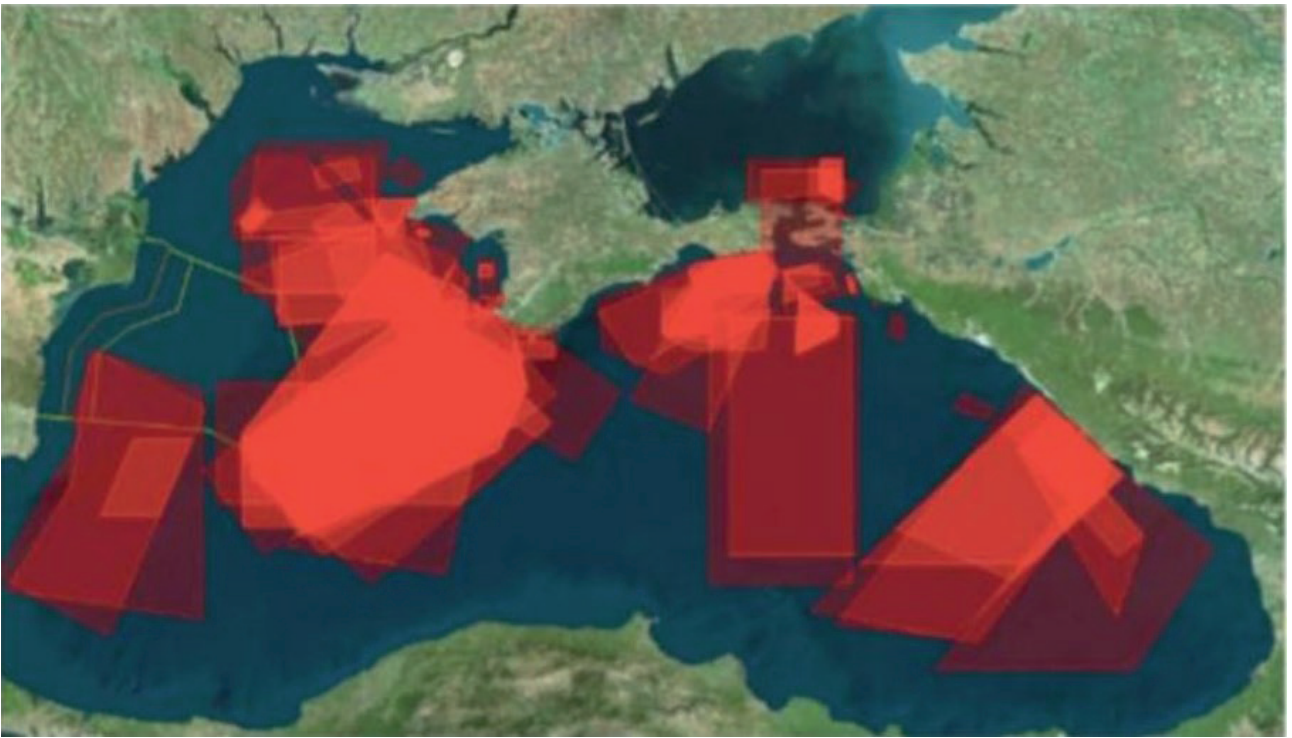
29. The threat of nuclear escalation must not be underestimated. For a long time, Russia developed one of the biggest non-strategic nuclear arsenal employing very diverse delivery systems (land, air and naval), which have been practiced/exercised on a regular basis. Russian nuclear doctrine indicates that, if necessary, all methods may be employed to protect Russia's vital interests and territorial integrity. Such a decision heavily depends on how the Russian leadership perceives the need to send a signal to its adversaries, meaning that escalation management becomes a paramount aspect in our efforts. The concept of "de-escalate through escalation" is present in the rhetoric of Russian officials and experts, precisely to show us that the possibility of a tactical nuclear attack remains an option⁶.

⁵ "Russia's Medvedev Says Standoff with West to Last Decades, Ukraine Conflict 'Permanent,'" www.euractiv.com, July 4, 2023, www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russias-medvedev-says-standoff-with-west-to-last-decades-ukraine-conflict-permanent/

⁶ George Scutaru, Marcu Solomon, Ecaterina Dadiverina, Diana Baroian, "Russian hybrid war in the Republic of Moldova" (Bucharest: New Strategy Center, 2023), <https://newstrategycenter.ro/project/russian-hybrid-war-in-the-republic-of-moldova/8>

30. The Russian missile and drone salvos showcase a growing reliance on Iran-manufactured solutions, particularly loitering munitions targeting Ukraine's critical infrastructure. Worse, the two aggressor nations are to establish a drone plant in the coming months manifesting a dangerous military paradigm exceeding off-the-shelf procurement. At present, the Black Sea security landscape is intertwined with the emerging Russia - Iran axis along the Caspian Sea. Thus, we recommend developing a thorough geopolitical understanding to adjust our security priorities in the broader Caspian - Black Sea axis.

31. The Russian Federation effectively employs a diverse array of non-military strategies to complement its military capabilities. These tactics encompass a wide range of hybrid tools, including disinformation campaigns, cyber warfare, the utilization of secret services, dissemination of fake news, energy manipulation, lawfare, and more. Russian disinformation campaigns adeptly exploit societal vulnerabilities and leverage questions related to cultural and identity aspects of targeted states, often appealing to historical, Slavic, or Russian Orthodox Church connections, thus adding new fuel to a complicated heritage affecting communities with a complex religious or ethnic background. The deployment of secret services, information warfare, and assassinations is deeply embedded in Russia's political DNA, evident in previous operations and the orchestrating of the February 2022 invasion, where the FSB played a prominent role. Notably, Russia capitalizes on its position as the primary gas supplier to Europe, significantly impacting countries in the Black Sea region and the Balkans, except for Romania, which are heavily reliant on Russian gas. A telling example of this energy manipulation can be seen in Russia's actions towards the Republic of Moldova, where Moscow provides the breakaway region of Transnistria with free gas, offering an economic lifeline to Tiraspol. However, this seemingly beneficial arrangement comes at the steep price of becoming the hostage of Russia. Through lawfare, Russia has designated zones dangerous for navigation during its naval exercises, actions that have affected the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea with a major economic impact, especially in terms of food security at the global level, threatening also critical infrastructure.



Blocked perimeters by Russia in 2019, Source: New strategy Center



Perimeters blocked by Russia in July-August 2019, when Russia blocked a quarter of the surface of the Black Sea, Source: Black Sea News - <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/153503>

32. In enhancing its influence in the region, Russia has made full use of the protracted conflicts, through its ability to escalate or de-escalate the situation according to its interests. In all such instances: Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia is directly involved and has a military presence in all these sham “statelets”. Russian actions in the context of these conflicts reveal the primacy of military considerations in Russian strategic thinking. Transnistria, since Soviet times, was seen as a “southern Kaliningrad” serving (as in the Tsarist Bessarabia, today the Republic of Moldova), as a launchpad for a future Balkan incursion or nowadays as a thorn in Ukraine’s and Romania’s back.

Meanwhile Abkhazia is still fulfilling its role as a natural extension of Russia’s Black Sea coastline, and South Ossetia serves as a buffer for the critical Roki Tunnel, that allows Russian power projection to penetrate the Great Caucasus Ridge. Russia’s assumed role as a peace mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan while also being their main arms supplier may seem contradictory, but it is not: It guarantees Russian military presence as a peacekeeping force and political control over Yerevan and Baku. The consequences of the last stage in the longstanding Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for Russian strategy in the Caucasus and the overall impact in the region are too early to call, particularly as the aggression against Ukraine is still ongoing.

Regional Co-operation

33. Regional co-operation both in the Black Sea and the Balkans has been a useful acquis in the aftermath of the Cold War continuing an old interbellum tradition between the countries in the region. Its main goal in protecting the participating states from the inevitable consequences leading to WWII proved to be a fallacy in the absence of an enduring alliance with a strong guarantee system from the major powers. Since 1990 it provided for a chamber of dialogue and initiatives at a time when the major trends of European and Euro-Atlantic integration were in their inception and continued their activity thereafter. The major regional initiative in the Black Sea is the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) founded in 1992 at the initiative of Türkiye.

Unfortunately, due to Russian drifting away from its initial rapprochement to the West and its aggressive stance against its own neighbors in the Black Sea such as Ukraine, BSEC had to slow down its activity whereas not altogether freezing it. The potential of this organization whose members from the Black Sea region or South East Europe inherited often complicated bilateral relations is there to remain and to be cultivated as events allow. Likewise, Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye have been active in the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), a Bulgarian initiative launched in 1997 serving as a useful forum after the earthquake of the wars in former Yugoslavia and being a supportive regional empowered structure for both members and aspiring members to EU and NATO. Notably the South-East European Defence Ministerial

(SEDM) where Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye are active has proved to be successful. Other initiatives concerning the military cooperation in the region as the Black Sea Harmony or BLACKSEAFOR have equally been put on hold due to incompatibility with Russia's current stance.

34. Other regional formats tangent to the Black Sea are the B9 representing NATO members on the Eastern flank or the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) involving EU members from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Adriatic whose Economic Forum is open to regional partners. The European Union also encourages cooperation between the countries surrounding the Black Sea through the Black Sea Synergy initiative, a flexible forum for developing practical region-wide solutions to address regional and global challenges. It also reflects on the cooperation with regional and international organisations active in the Black Sea, particularly with the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

35. All these formats can be seen as complements to the relations of NATO and EU with partner countries where the presence of both members and candidate or aspiring members are stimulating. In our view Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye have a particular role to play with the NATO partners in the Black Sea region, be it Ukraine, whose vocation for membership has been confirmed in Vilnius, Georgia or the Republic of Moldova (an EU candidate which in spite of its neutrality status is getting closer and closer to the Euro-Atlantic Community) or Azerbaijan and Armenia. Bearing in mind the EU-NATO declaration of 2022 also to be considered is the potential of the three riparian countries in strengthening the resilience of the partners and notably those undergoing today outmost pressure taking into account the complementarity and convergence of NATO and EU goals in the area.

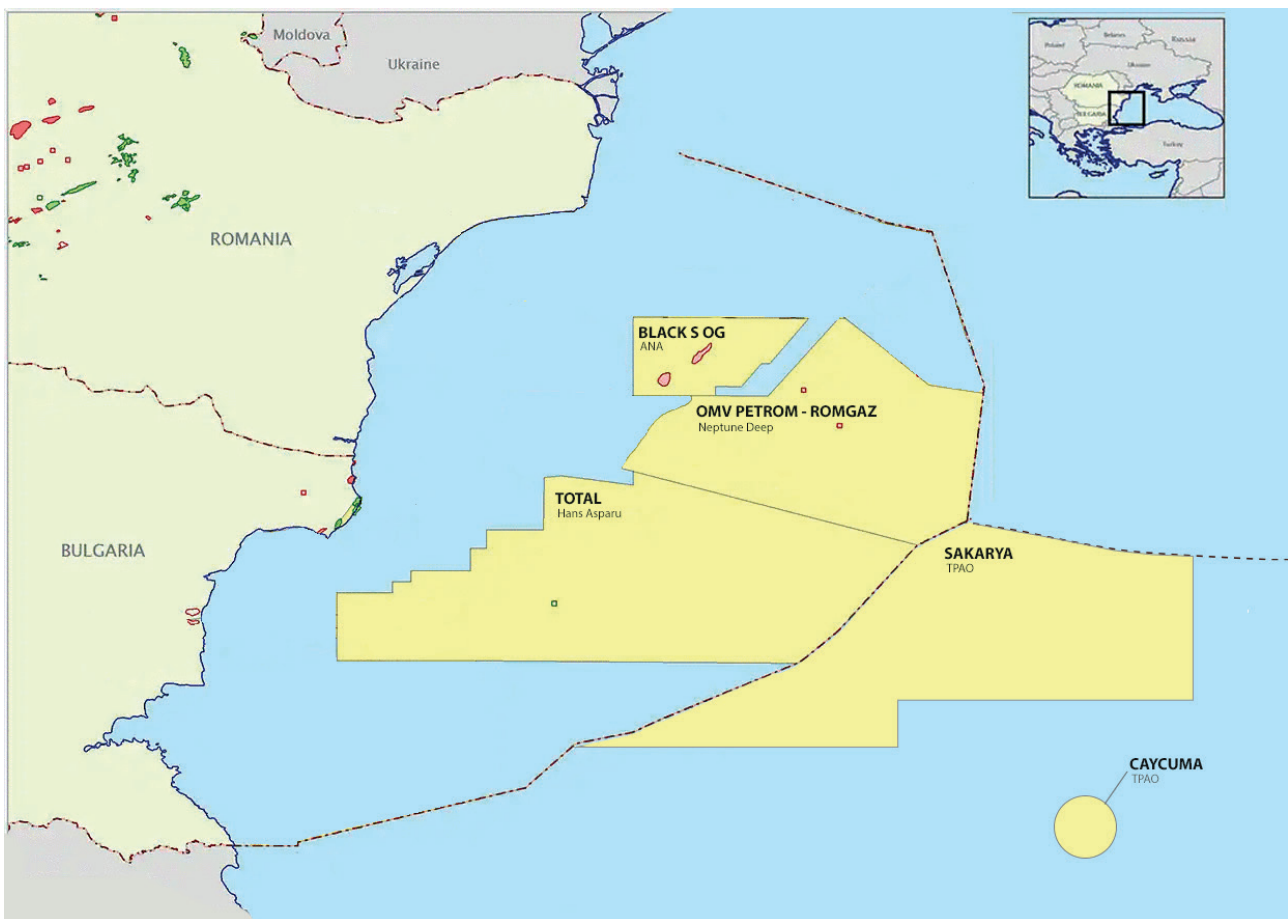
36. Finally, there are the trilateral forms of cooperation, for instance the Polish-Romanian Turkish trilateral between three NATO partners covering strategic positions on the Eastern flank, a format which could be extended for instance to Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye.

Global trade and the Black Sea

37. In a recent study by NSC and the Yorktown Institute the Black Sea maritime space is defined as a “global strategic nexus point, the beating heart of Eurasian trade”⁷. The Black Sea is home to critical trade routes for global food security, for energy and precious metals. Before the war, Ukraine and Russia were producing 30% of all traded wheat. However, Ukrainian exports, after the unilateral withdrawal of Russia from the Turkish

⁷ Seth Cropsey, George Scutaru, Harry Halem, Antonia Colibășanu, „Strategic Nexus: The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War”, (Bucharest: New Strategy Center, 2023), <https://newstrategycenter.ro/project/strategic-nexus-the-black-sea-great-power-competition-and-the-russo-ukrainian-war-2/>

and UNO mediated Black Sea Grain Initiative, have an uncertain future. Hence the Danube and land corridor through Romania becomes a vital lifeline in order to channel Ukrainian exports, testing to the limit the capacity of this route which is currently undergoing urgent infrastructure works. There is also the major energy dimension, as the Sea is home to several critical pipelines, and will soon host new energy projects, such as an underwater electric cable from Azerbaijan to Romania, and the exploitation of offshore gas reserves by Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria. Türkiye has discovered important gas reserves in the Sakarya perimeter, estimated between 500-700 billion cubic meters (bcm), which will considerably reduce its dependence on imports from Russia. Romania will become in 2027 the largest gas producer in the EU for at least a decade when the exploitation of the Neptun Deep perimeter will start, with estimated reserves of at least 100 bcm⁸. It is worth noting that all these projects may be subject to Russian hybrid interference.



Perimeters with gas reserves of Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye, given that the text mentions demining and joint protection of critical infrastructure. - source: New Strategy Center

⁸ Andreea Smerea, “Şeful OMV crede că poate începe producția de gaze la Neptun Deep până în 2027,” Digi24, July 28, 2023, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/seful-omv-crede-ca-poate-incepe-productia-de-gaze-la-neptun-deep-pana-in-2027-2444107>; “Solid Results Obtained on Black Sea Sakarya Well Tests,” Globuc, March 14, 2022, <https://globuc.com/news/solid-results-obtained-on-black-sea-sakarya-well-tests/>

38. Whereas among Russia's goals trying again to turn the Black Sea in a "Russian Lake"⁹ seems to be no longer part of a war-game but a real-life scenario, the necessity for a coherent strategy for this region becomes stringent and Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye as NATO littoral countries to the Black Sea have an existential stake to pull their resources in this effort.

39. To conclude, as the future security architecture which is inevitably to take shape sooner or later is not yet in sight, and the war is going on, we have to brace ourselves and get involved with all available resources for all possible scenarios in the Black Sea.

⁹ Vladimir Socor, "Ukrainian Trade Blockade: Foretaste of Russian Hegemony in Black Sea (Part Three)," Jamestown Foundation, July 31, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/ukrainian-trade-blockade-foretaste-of-russian-hegemony-in-black-sea-part-three/>

BLACK SEA SECURITY – MILITARY AGENDA

The security environment in the Black Sea, including in its broader context, has become more complex and contested. This reality is becoming increasingly evident at a time when global strategic competition is gaining traction among major powers. Hence the need to develop a coherent and holistic strategy for the Black Sea security has become more important than ever.

The Black Sea is a strategically important region for NATO and the Alliance has a special commitment and responsibility for building defence and credible deterrence. As part of the Eastern flank, the general measures to strengthen the defence of the flank-countries by deploying additional forces and assets are implemented. At the same time, the specific features of the region must be taken into account, which require certain collective measures on the part of the Alliance.

Black Sea member states should strengthen their defence capacity as part of NATO's overall efforts to build defence capabilities. As a NATO member, Türkiye has substantial military capabilities in the Black Sea. Bulgaria and Romania are implementing ambitious modernization programs, but building a serious military potential will require time and a lot of resources.

In military terms, NATO should take into account the specificities of the region. First of all, it is the fact that the Black Sea is part of the theatre of war between Russia and Ukraine. After the occupation of Crimea, Russia is concentrating serious military potential and building its A2/AD system, which is a danger to the freedom of navigation, including the movement of military vessels.

Having significantly altered the threat landscape in the Black Sea area, the ongoing war in Ukraine has led to a new geopolitical realm. With the Sea of Azov practically becoming a 'Russian lake', and Iran throwing a lifeline to Russia through the Caspian and Volga Canal, the Kremlin's maximalist push in the neighborhood poses a multi-faceted threat to the stability of the broader Black Sea region.

On the positive side of the coin, by closing the Turkish Straits to the belligerent vessels under the Montreux Convention, Ankara has managed to practically restrict the Russian Navy from further pouring into the basin. Furthermore, Türkiye's Bayraktar TB-2 drones also played a pivotal role in Kyiv's defence at the outset of the Russian campaigns. These campaigns were enabled by the Black Sea Fleet and the occupied Crimea, hosting critical military assets and capabilities, including the naval facilities of Russia.



The Montreux Convention regulates maritime traffic through the Turkish Straits. A view from the Bosphorus. Source: Istanbul. Bosphorus. Large landing ship “Aleksandr Shabalin” (23 November 2013). Photo by Alexxx1979, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

Given Russia's military potential concentrated in the Black Sea region and Russia's aggressive rhetoric against NATO, the Alliance should bolster its defensive posture, by helping member states to build coastal defence, air defence, intelligence and surveillance capabilities, unmanned systems etc.

Considering the possibility that this war will become a protracted war of attrition, the lack of naval capabilities from non-riparian states in the Black Sea will have to be compensated by a stronger presence of the Turkish Navy. This is important, considering that Türkiye boasts much larger and more modern naval capabilities than Romania or Bulgaria.

Ukraine's effective use of coastal defences (in particular the anti-ship cruise missile Neptune), in close collaboration with unmanned aerial systems, proved very effective against the Russian naval activity, as exemplified by sinking the Russian Black Sea Fleet's flagship Moskva Missile Cruiser. It stands telling that although the Russian military has deployed a formidable buildup of naval infantry in the Black Sea, Ukraine's Odessa has been protected from amphibious landing so far.

Nevertheless, the future trajectory of the Russian Federation remains shady, plagued by hostility and expansionist aims. This dilemma is amplified by the fact that even if the Russian Ground Forces suffered big losses in Ukraine, its Strategic Forces still remain strong. Likewise, Russian air, naval and cyber capabilities are still largely unaffected and able to project power, exercise coercion and support hybrid operations.

Complex and Multidimensional: A Holistic View at Black Sea Security

The unfolding war in Ukraine provides important lessons for the future of the region. Black Sea geopolitics has always been complicated. At present, with the Siloviki-architected invasion of Ukraine, the regional dynamics are becoming more pronounced. This is why any comprehensive political-military policy-making effort in the Black Sea should be based on a multi-domain and holistic approach, building particularly on dedicated NATO capabilities and capacities by the three littoral NATO Allies without prejudice to contributions of other Allies having the means to do so.

To begin with, a new Black Sea strategy should assume that Türkiye will continue to uphold the Montreux Convention. Moreover, the present restrictions initiated by Ankara will likely remain in place until the end of the war, something that may last for the rest of 2023, and which will affect NATO's responsibilities in the Black Sea in the maritime domain. In terms of military mobility, the current restrictions turn Bulgaria into a critical transit route between the Aegean ports and Romania. At the same time, the closure of one Black Sea entrance increases the importance of the other: the Danube. As far as the Danube is concerned, without building Danube-centric capabilities opportunities for deterrence against Russia from the Danube will remain limited.

Second, a new strategy should include a reality check by revisiting the timeline of, practically, how we ended up here. The roots of the Kremlin's hostile behaviour should be traced back to the 2008 invasion of Georgia. Then came the 2014 Crimea. More importantly, Russia has positioned itself as a neighbor to NATO's south through its military involvements in Syria and Libya. These campaigns were enabled by the Black Sea Fleet and the occupied Crimea, hosting critical naval facilities of Russia.

Third, and more importantly of them all, a new strategy should start by honestly acknowledging the bitter truth; the Russian aggression in Ukraine does not show signs of ceasing soon. While Kyiv proved resilient and even achieved significant gains in Kharkiv and Kherson, Moscow is not willing to negotiate. The already problematic situation can turn into a protracted conflict on a scale. In other words, the Black Sea as a "sea of peace" may merely remain in the dreams of the past. It is a true war zone, and likely to stay so.

A New Security Architecture: Policy Suggestions for A New Security and Defence Framework in the Black Sea

A new structure in the Black Sea will require significant funding for capacity building. While NATO will inevitably play a central role, the EU also needs to contribute. Romania and Bulgaria should use their EU membership and diplomatic leverage in

Brussels to ensure that Türkiye can also benefit from EU-led initiatives in the region, as well as defence venture funding.

Russia will continue to be a major threat to NATO. From the rise of warlordism to the militarization of Moscow's political agenda, the Alliance will have to deal with a more problematic Russian Federation. Yet, the most important issue to keep in mind is the fact that any sign of weakness provokes the Siloviki elite, not bold policies.

A holistic approach to Black Sea security will need to have three strategic characteristics. Primarily, it should come up with a multi-domain approach that includes full spectrum military trends, not solely focusing on the maritime sphere. In addition, a holistic Black Sea strategy should have a broader outlook with a geographical continuum to the Mediterranean and should also include the surrounding flashpoints, such as the Sea of Azov and the Caspian Sea. Finally, this new strategy should provide a new regional cooperation mechanism that includes NATO Allies and partner countries. Resembling NORDEFCO and NORAD perhaps, Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania need to augment their NATO memberships with a trilateral mechanism. Such a structure would also welcome terms to be tailored to countries in the Black Sea region such as Ukraine, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova. Put briefly, it would provide a security and dialogue umbrella to countries with Euro-Atlantic or European geopolitical outlooks against diverse forms of blatant interference or aggression from the Russian Federation.



“Sea Breeze” Exercise is a land and sea-based exercise in the Black sea with participation of NATO members and Partners, aimed to enhance the capabilities and develop partnerships.

Source: US Navy 110616-N-NW827-227, Black Sea (June 16, 2011): Ships from participating nations are in formation during exercise Sea Breeze 2011. Photo by U.S. Navy (Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Christopher Mann), public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Russia's war against Ukraine generates additional risks, handling of which also requires specific military capabilities, such as countering the threat of free-floating mines, protecting energy interests and critical infrastructure. When considering ways and means to strengthen deterrence and defence it is necessary to take into account the opportunities offered by emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) so that NATO maintains its technological edge and logistical superiority in the region.

NATO should encourage and assist in enhancing the capabilities of Black Sea member states, which would include the development of various joint initiatives, more training and exercises with reinforcement of allied components, improved military mobility and the ability to concentrate forces and assets in different directions where necessary, while being cognizant of the need to act in accordance with international law, including the provisions of the Montreux Convention.

Finally, any strategy to be developed will need to be adaptable to the changed security environment influenced by the dynamics that are contingent on Russia's position and behaviour in the long-term, without affecting NATO's responsibility, credibility, efficiency, deterrence and defence.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Establishing and fostering a regional Black Sea military framework, to enhance the cohesion among the three NATO-member littoral states (Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania). This new cooperation mechanism is not to replace but complement NATO. Depending on future political circumstances, this structure can also be extended to cover two NATO partner states, Georgia and Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. This would lead to the transformation of Türkiye's regional ownership policy to a more NATO-centric security architecture while keeping the status quo Montreux-friendly for the maritime domain.
2. Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania should boost anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities to harness the Russian Black Sea Fleet's aggression potential in the basin. Building on the lessons learned from the ongoing drone warfare revolution, the agenda of the trilateral framework should also extend to comprehensive joint drone warfare initiatives. Although it will be a regional effort, the proposed framework will require the NATO Alliance to help with defence economics, technological know-how, and capacity-building efforts. Also, other NATO countries will be encouraged to contribute to building these A2AD capabilities.
3. Türkiye's advanced military industry represents an opportunity for expanding the cooperation and establishing joint ventures among the three states, for instance in the fields of anti-ship missiles and unmanned vehicles, bolstering NATO coastal defence in the Black Sea.

4. Bolstering the anti-submarine capabilities, including unmanned sub-surface capabilities, of littoral states should be another priority on the agenda, especially at a time of profound Russian submarine activity in the Black Sea.
5. Containing the growing Russian – Iranian partnership which has become especially evident during the war in Ukraine.
6. Preparing for a potential Russian re-occupation of the Snake Island, which would greatly disrupt the freedom of navigation in the Western Black Sea, including the Odessa – Istanbul corridor and navigation around the mouths of the Danube. This would also impact the development of certain sea-based energy projects by Bulgaria and Romania.
7. Strengthening cooperation among Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria regarding the defence of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), critical for their energy independence, which are de-facto bordering Russia’s claimed EEZ. Türkiye has already started to exploit its resources in the Sakarya perimeter, while Romania will begin to do so by 2027. The experience of other NATO states with regards to the protection of critical infrastructure, such as that of Norway, shall be taken into consideration.
8. Encouraging a focus on the Black Sea region within the strategic documents of NATO and Allies which are able and willing to contribute to enhancing security and stability in the wider Black Sea basin in order to achieve a greater recognition of the wider strategic relevance of the Black Sea.

NATO'S ALL DOMAIN COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH IN THE BLACK SEA REGION.

1. NATO is facing complex, volatile and unpredictable security environment in the Black Sea region which combines armed conflict of Russia against Ukraine, frozen conflicts, environmental degradation, aggressive actions by Russia using hybrid tools, violation of the principles of freedom of navigation, attacks on civilian infrastructure and many other that put peace and security at serious and imminent threat.

Russia has clearly demonstrated that it is ready to further escalate the tension in the Black Sea including by direct threat to ships and territories of NATO member states. The threat from Russia transcends the Black Sea itself and is aimed at the entire region of the Middle East and Africa.

The Alliance and the member states shall take due account to this complicated security environment in the region. The war against Ukraine, Russia's aggressive behaviour in the Black Sea region and its hybrid activities against NATO countries sets new imperatives for the Black Sea which requires reassessment of NATO's approach to the Black Sea at strategic level.

2. The main threat to NATO and its members, to the regional and global security, remains Russian aggression against Ukraine. Although the probability of Russian direct deliberate attack with military means on NATO member countries and assets at this stage is low incidents can't be excluded.

Russia is using all hybrid tools against NATO countries and partners to reach its goals. These activities include disinformation, propaganda, cyber-attacks, provocations at sea, coercive use of political, economic, energy, information and other hybrid tactics. There are also suspicions of Russian intelligence operatives carrying out explosions in factories and munitions storages, attempts to poison citizens of NATO member states, and others. The response of member states, as well as the collective response, must be clear and unwavering.

3. Attempts for political influence and internal meddling, including through local proxies, hostile activities by the Russian intelligence services, disinformation campaigns, malign cyber activities, corrupting governments and politicians, economic pressure, weaponizing energy supplies – all these are instruments aimed at destabilizing and undermining democratic societies. The countries of the Black Sea region are extremely vulnerable to such activities.

4. Countering hybrid activities means to enhance individual and collective resilience against all possible threats. To that end NATO shall increase capacity in the Black Sea region to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from malign hybrid activities. **Special attention should be given to building capacity to counter cyber-attacks.**

5. NATO and the member states shall increase their **StratCom capacities** to effectively counter hybrid activities of Russia and other malign actors in the region (propaganda, disinformation, fake news, etc.).

6. **Strengthening the resilience of critical infrastructure**, particularly those related to the military activities, is of key interest not only of the individual countries but for NATO as a whole.

7. NATO is challenged by the fact that Russia has military advantage in the region. It uses militaristic rhetoric against NATO member states, including threats to use nuclear weapons. Nuclear rhetoric of Russia addressed to Ukraine and other countries, including NATO member countries, is a blatant provocation and incompatible with the accepted principles of international law, and in particular with regard to nuclear weapons and their non-proliferation.

8. Türkiye possesses the most advanced military capabilities among the NATO Black Sea littoral countries. Bulgaria and Romania are implementing modernization programmes but to substantially increase capabilities will require time and resources. Deployment of sufficient NATO deterrence and defence potential in the Black Sea region to counter threats of any kind is of key importance.

9. It is imperative to strengthen regional cooperation between the NATO countries, including with partners. Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye together have a common responsibility to consolidate NATO's role in the region. This shall include consultations at all levels, joint exercises, cooperation in building of capabilities and more. The strengthened regional cooperation shall not be a substitute to NATO's role in the region.

10. Key to NATO's activities in the region is the constant analysis of the evolution of the security environment, but at the same time exchange of information, forecasting, development of different scenarios and possible reactions.



The Chair of the NATO Military Committee Admiral Rob Bauer at the Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum organized by the New Strategy Center

11. The Russian war against Ukraine affects negatively not only peace and stability in the region, but has also far-reaching destructive implications in critical areas, such as the freedom of navigation, trade, supply chains, food security (withdrawal from the grain deal), financial stability, etc. All this could result in destabilization of vulnerable countries in neighboring regions, which in turn could cause humanitarian catastrophes and mass migration.

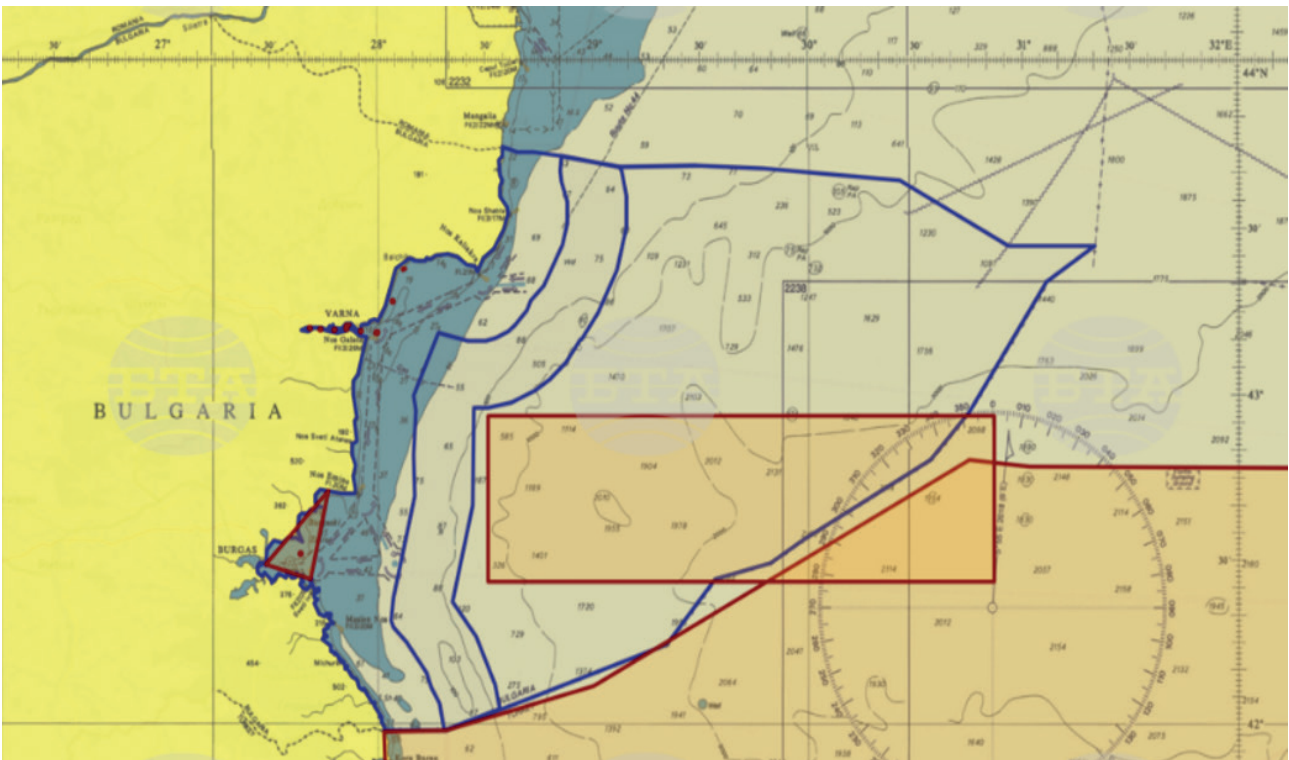
12. Of particular concern is Russia's refusal to fulfill international commitments in the area of arms control and transparency of military activities, which creates an international legal vacuum. (Russia's suspended participation in the New START Treaty and the formal withdrawal from the CFE Treaty continues to shatter security and stability in Europe and beyond.) This puts into question the entire international legal system, especially since the offender is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power. The Russian war on Ukraine has gravely **affected existing regional cooperation mechanisms** infringing their basic principles and turning them ineffective, creating a security vacuum in the region.

13. Russia is blocking Ukrainian ports and stops the export of the Ukrainian grain to the global market. Russia's sea blockade would not affect Ukraine alone. It would affect all Black Sea traffic, since it would raise the cost of shipping insurance in the region. It would also affect oil and gas drilling and production in this rather promising region, since often insurance companies react to such risks by simply refusing to cover drilling work.

14. Of particular concern is Russia imposing restrictions on freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, which is a violation of international maritime law and principles. The effective blockade does not affect only the Ukrainian parts of the Black Sea, but also "a number of maritime areas in the north-western and south-eastern parts of the international waters of the Black Sea", effectively parts of the economic zones of Türkiye, Bulgaria and Romania, which are "declared temporarily dangerous for navigation".

The introduction of vast zones restricted to navigation for an unlimited time, the declaration that all ships heading to Ukrainian ports will be considered a military target, exploitation of sea zones around the occupied Ukrainian territories as the territorial sea of Russia and others are not only a gross violation of the right of navigation, but also create prerequisites for the escalation of the conflict and the involvement of other countries.

Of particular concern is the inclusion of areas in the exclusive economic zones of NATO member states in such prohibited zones. This provocative action by Russia has escalated tensions to an extraordinary extent.



Russia blocked perimeters in Bulgarian EEZ in 2023 - source: Screenshot from the Black Sea Maritime Coordination Element

15. The end of the grain deal on July 17th, raised the prospects of direct NATO-Russia confrontation in the Black Sea. Russia's massive missile attacks on port infrastructure linked to Ukrainian grain exports made it clear that Russia was prepared to destroy not only Ukraine's infrastructure and storage facilities, but any merchant vessel it judged to be destined to a Ukrainian port. This effectively means a complete naval blockade of Ukraine and the transformation of the Black Sea into a Russian internal sea. Russia continues to shell Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea and along the Danube Delta in close proximity to the territory of Romania which presents a real danger from accidental hits on NATO territory and assets.

The suspension of the grain deal hits Ukraine's economy, but at the same time it is a prerequisite for the destabilization of individual regions due to **food insecurity**, which could cause migration waves to head to Europe, contributing to new tensions. The Kremlin's is counting on weaponizing food, in the way it has previously used energy exports, and starvation driven new migration that could flood the EU.

16. **Illegal migration** remains a serious problem for a number of NATO member states. In recent years, it has been seen that Russia is trying to use migration flows as a weapon to further destabilize regions. Many of the member states have been called upon to provide assistance on their territories to the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees from Russian military aggression against their country.

17. The Russian war against Ukraine is a direct source of many other associated risks and

threats in the region. More than 80 drifting mines in the Black Sea have been destroyed so far. Navies of the regional countries are often called to check different objects at sea and destroy identified mines which drastically deplete their resources. The drifting naval mines pose a significant risk for ships and critical infrastructure located in or near the Black Sea. This is a direct and imminent threat to NATO countries and assets in the Black Sea which has to be properly addressed by the Alliance. Consultations among NATO members to cope with this threat are critical.



Drifting mines – new threat in the Black sea.

18. Energy Security. The countries of the Black Sea region are less depended on Russian energy supplies or do not use Russian energy sources at all. This reduces Russia's opportunities to wage a hybrid war against these countries. However, energy security remains tied to Russian activities in the Black Sea given the large gas reserves discovered. Russia, with its actions in the exclusive economic zones of other countries, can seriously threaten the exploration or extraction of gas. This could further complicate the security environment in the region.

19. Enlargement and Partnerships. In view of the continuing Russian aggression, it is of paramount importance to strengthen cooperation between NATO and the likeminded

countries, particularly those aspiring to NATO membership. The open doors policy remains one of the key policies of the Alliance.

Ukraine's future lies at the heart of the European security architecture and within NATO. NATO shall provide all means to help Ukraine to defend itself as a sovereign state and prepare for future accession as stated in the Vilnius declaration. Based on the decisions made in Vilnius, different mechanisms for cooperation shall be established between NATO and Ukraine, including at the highest governmental level, but also at the level of civil society organisations, business, etc.

NATO shall assist in all possible ways the partner countries Moldova and Georgia through tailor-made programmes to strengthen their security and defence capacities. NATO will work with all interested organizations resolve frozen conflicts on the territories of these countries.

20. Building credible defence and deterrence in the region implies development of modern defence industrial base. NATO shall assist as appropriate involvement of the countries from the region in various multinational initiatives to develop capabilities based on EDT, AI, robotics, unmanned systems, etc. Investment in technological innovation shall be a priority.

21. Supporting the development of the technological and production base in the countries of the region and involvement of the scientific and business organizations will contribute to the development of adequate capabilities and solutions for strengthening security in the Black Sea. The Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) provides an adequate platform for further cooperation.

22. Climate change and environmental issues. The Russian attacks against the civilian infrastructure have negative impact on the environment. Ukraine as well as neighbouring countries including NATO member states will face a long term environmental damage caused by the Russian war against Ukraine. Some of the most dire impacts on the environment from the Russian war on Ukraine include but are not limited to: spread of toxic gases and particles as result of explosions; fires in forested areas caused by military activities damage the entire ecosystem; increasing the region's carbon footprint; destroyed industrial facilities, warehouses and factories cause enormous environmental pollution including of hazardous materials; large volume of military waste, including destroyed military vehicles on Ukraine territory, creates a major clean-up challenge; pollution from destroyed buildings - asbestos, metals, and combustion products; land mines placed on Ukrainian territory, etc.

The occupation by Russia of the nuclear power plant in Zaporozhye threatens the region and Europe as a whole with a nuclear apocalypse.

The Russian war on Ukraine causes environmental degradation on Ukrainian territory and in the region which will require long-term measures and resources. Climate change and environmental pollution will be particularly destabilizing for more vulnerable and

exposed NATO countries and partners. NATO will help these countries prevent and prepare for environmental and climate change-related impacts on their security through political consultation and practical cooperation. This is an opportunity for NATO to work on solving these challenges with businesses, academia, NGOs, young people, and to cooperate more closely with the EU and countries from the Black Sea region.

23. In the face of the Russian aggression against Ukraine NATO will work with all relevant international organizations to assist Ukraine and its people in the fight against Russian aggression and strengthen regional security. NATO will cooperate closer **with the European Union** on issues including development of infrastructure which will contribute to the enhanced military mobility, protection of critical infrastructure, countering hybrid threats, democratic development of countries from the region, etc.

The Alliance will work with the UN, OSCE, the International Tribunal in The Hague and other organizations to bring to their attention to all issues related to the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which threaten international order and peace, lead to killing of civilians, violate the rights and dignity of people, destroy civil infrastructure, etc.

24. Long-term peace and stability in the region can only be achieved by Russia ending its aggressive war against Ukraine, liberating the occupied territories and restoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including the liberation of the Crimean Peninsula. This fully applies to the release and restoration of Georgia's sovereignty over the territories occupied by Russia as a result of the 2008 aggression.

NATO's long-standing commitments in the sphere of arms control and disarmament. Conflicts like the Russian war against Ukraine increase the risks of proliferation of weapons outside the conflict zone, including weapons falling into the hands of terrorists or criminal organizations. Once the war ends and Ukraine gains control over internationally recognized borders, NATO will engage in a dialogue to reduce the level of armaments in the Black Sea region and work with all interested actors to reduce the risk of proliferation of weapons.

25. **Women, Peace and Security agenda.** The Alliance should strive for better representation of women in peace and security, while also acknowledging the gender impact of armed conflict. NATO should consider expanding WPS cooperation with partners across a range of activities from education and training to capacity building, interoperability, and reform. It should also expand collaboration with non-state partners and civil society organizations in the region.

Policy Recommendations:

1. NATO should have the necessary capabilities, including sufficient deterrence and defence capacity, as well as other means to be able to counter any escalation of the threat, as well as build the appropriate infrastructure for rapid movement, prepositioning of stockpiles and necessary logistical support. NATO should assist and advise as appropriate countries in the region on development of relevant infrastructure including civilian one which can contribute to the enhanced military mobility and better logistics.
2. The littoral NATO countries should put more efforts to increase their defence capabilities with the view of the new security environment in the Black Sea region and fulfill the commitment of spending not less than 2% of their GDP on defence.
3. While NATO's Maritime Command (MARCOM) currently fulfills the responsibility of the coordination function, Bulgaria's proposal to host a Naval coordination element in Varna is yet another potential arrangement that could be considered by other littoral Allies and NATO as an important contribution to the overall NATO activities in the region.
4. NATO should consider launching initiatives and actions to cope with the various security risks in the Black Sea area, including the proliferation of different types of weapons, arms control, environmental pollution etc.
5. NATO should launch a study with a view to developing policies and measures to assist the region's countries to further develop their defence production bases for the production of weapons and systems according to NATO standards and based on the newest technological developments.
6. Consideration of further measures for increased level of protection of the Romanian Black Sea and Danube harbours as an important route for the export of Ukrainian grain.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPATING THINK-TANKS

The Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) is an Istanbul based independent think-tank. EDAM's main areas of research are: foreign and security policy, Türkiye-EU relations, energy and climate change policies, economics and globalization, arms control and non-proliferation, and cyber policy. EDAM aims to contribute to the policy making process within and outside Türkiye by producing and disseminating research on the policy areas that are shaping Türkiye's position within the emerging global order. In addition to conducting research in these fields, EDAM organizes conferences and roundtable meetings. Additionally, EDAM cooperates with numerous domestic and international establishments to conduct joint-research and publications. EDAM continues to be amongst the best think tanks in Türkiye and has a prominent place in global think tank rankings.

www.edam.org.tr

The New Strategy Center is a Romanian think tank specialized in foreign, defence and security policy, a non-partisan, non-governmental organization. New Strategy Center operates at three main levels: providing analytical inputs and expert advice to decision makers; holding regular debates, both in-house and public, on subjects of topical interest; expanding external outreach through partnerships with similar institutions or organizations in Europe and the US, joint policy papers and international conferences. The Balkans and the Black Sea space are priority areas of interest for New Strategy Center. Our main courses of action are: promoting our region in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, promoting the strategic partnership with the US and its dynamization, the reconstruction of Ukraine and the role of Romania in this process, and also fighting hybrid threats in the context of the current war in Ukraine.

www.newstrategycenter.ro

The Sofia Security Forum is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization, specialized in the fields of national and international security, international relations, defence, political leadership etc. The forum has wide research program and organizes different types of events, including conferences, seminars, trainings, etc. The members of the forum are well known experts and university professors.

The Forum provides a platform for representatives of the Governments, International organizations, think-tanks, academia and businesses from Bulgaria and abroad to hold discussions in order to contribute to the national and international decision-making processes.

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