

ISSUE BRIEF

A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region

SEPTEMBER 2016 STEVEN HORRELL

The Black Sea region is a crossroads, an intersection between Europe and the Middle East, from the eastern Balkans to the South Caucasus. Like many such points of intersection, it is often a friction point. This is very much the case in the current geopolitical environment of growing confrontation between Russia and the West. Any friction there will almost certainly involve NATO nations and the Alliance's interests, with three NATO states on the Black Sea and several NATO partners on the Black Sea and throughout the region.

Maintaining a dominant role in the Black Sea region forms an important element of Russian strategy; however, Western policymakers have been deficient in giving strategic attention to the Black Sea region in recent years. That may be changing. In addition to emphasizing collective defense and deterrence, the final communiqué of the NATO Warsaw Summit highlighted the importance of the Black Sea region: "We condemn Russia's ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea, and are concerned by Russia's efforts and stated plans for further military build-up in the Black Sea region."¹

NATO has the opportunity and responsibility to move forward from the statements of the Warsaw Summit. The Black Sea region needs NATO as a steadying influence, and NATO needs to address the Alliance's interests in the region. This issue brief offers the framework of a NATO strategy to ensure stability in this critical area; it expands on the communiqué's objectives for security in that region, posits an approach, and recommends actions to improve stability and security in the Black Sea region.

The Geopolitical Environment

The strategic environment has transformed globally in recent years—the challenges to policymakers are as complex and dangerous as at any time in memory. One of the largest factors in these growing challenges has been the re-emergence of an aggressive Russia, increasingly willing

The Brent Scowcroft Center's **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches to key transatlantic security challenges. This issue brief is part of the Transatlantic Security Initiative's focus on NATO's friction zones and what steps the Alliance must take to ensure defense and deterrence in a turbulent twenty-first century.

1 NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," July 9, 2016, article 17, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

to challenge the West in order to achieve President Vladimir Putin's strategic objectives of Russian great power status, with the states of the near abroad returning to Russia's sphere of influence. In the words of the Warsaw Summit communiqué, "Russia's recent activities and policies have reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and changed the security environment."²

The Black Sea region is one of the key areas in which this shifting power balance plays out. NATO nations border the former Soviet states that Russia claims are within its orbit, and the international water and airspace of the Black Sea is a stage on which Russian and Western militaries interact.³ Moreover, these conditions ready-made for friction overlay a region that was already distinguished by numerous frozen conflicts. These separatist disputes, such as Transnistria in eastern Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia have been "frozen" as areas of contested sovereignty. However, Russia has recently demonstrated a willingness to heat them up. For example, in South Ossetia, Russian actions of "borderization"—seizing ground and establishing physical border controls (and labelling them as such) along what is legally only an administrative boundary line—were first noted and protested by the Georgian government and the international community in 2010. After an initial pause, Russia stepped up borderization in 2013, then again in 2015—pushing the boundaries to such an extent that the US government protested it. As recently as March 2016, new borderization actions included moving barbed wire fences thirty-five meters forward thus encroaching on a village, then building a new road in the boundary area. This borderization came at almost the same time that the Geneva International Discussions (talks begun after the 2008 war with participants from Georgia, Russia, the United States, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia) were showing some progress with

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prisoners being exchanged. In the Transnistria and Gagauz regions of Moldova, Russia continues to exert political, informational, and economic leverage, stalling any resolution of the status of these autonomous regions. This exemplifies the utility of frozen conflicts to Russia's geopolitical interests: any pro-European path is shut off to the regions but overt Russian control is minimized (thus blunting criticism), as Moscow maintains de facto control in these areas.

Russia's actions in Ukraine since the Maidan revolution have brought a level of aggression to the region not seen since the 2008 war with Georgia. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, first by deniable but now clear Russian military action, then by referendum and political action in Moscow. The annexation of Crimea was followed by ongoing Russian-led separatist fighting in eastern Ukraine. Again, Moscow has denied the presence of Russian military forces in the conflict, but international reporting overwhelmingly reveals the Russian presence. This blatant aggression is an ongoing challenge to the international rules-based order and even to the Westphalian concept of sovereignty.⁴ The current marginalization of Crimean minorities, in particular the Tatars, is a potential human rights crisis and the continuing destruction in eastern Ukraine sets the conditions for a humanitarian crisis.⁵

In addition to the military challenges and geopolitical disruption, energy is a key factor in describing the strategic environment in the region. The Black Sea is an important transit route for energy resources, especially natural gas. This network involves Russia, producers in the Caucasus like Azerbaijan, and the wider European market for gas and other hydrocarbon resources. The resultant dependencies can be reflected as vulnerabilities or exploited as

2 NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," July 9, 2016, op. cit., article 9.

3 Ibid., article 10.

4 The Treaty (or Peace) of Westphalia, 1648, ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe and enshrined the concept of state sovereignty in the international system.

5 See Andrii Klymenko, "The Militarization of Crimea under Russian Occupation," Atlantic Council, October 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/the-militarization-of-crimea-under-russian-occupation>.



Romania Navy ships NMS Contraamiral Horia Macellariu (F-265) and NMS Lastaunul (F-190) steaming alongside USS Porter in the Black Sea 13 June 2016. *Photo credit: US Navy.*

leverage, as energy becomes a critical economic issue. Energy, as well as the existing and prospective routes for distribution of gas and oil, are probably the most significant transnational issues and impact almost every bilateral relationship in the region.

The Black Sea Region Military Environment

Within the geopolitical security environment in the Black Sea region, and in conjunction with Russia's increasing willingness to challenge the West, Russia has increased its capabilities and operations of air, sea, and land forces in the region. Russia's Black Sea Fleet was based in Sevastopol by treaty arrangement with Ukraine. Following annexation, Russia quickly moved advanced, long-range surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) to the peninsula. These SAMs and ASCMs expand Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability from the eastern half of the Black Sea to nearly its entirety.⁶ NATO leaders

⁶ A2/AD is a concept used to describe a potential adversary's

have specifically said: "We condemn Russia's ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea, and are concerned by Russia's efforts and stated plans for further military build-up in the Black Sea region."⁷

At the same time, the Black Sea Fleet, which was scheduled for modernization before the conflict even began, is now delivering on the new, modernized

deployment of weapons systems, most often with long-range capabilities, in order to deny US and allied forces freedom of maneuver in the battlespace. Land-based surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles, and surface-to-surface ballistic/cruise missiles are frequently cited capabilities. Additional elements of emerging A2/AD systems include aircraft, surface ships, and submarines and their air superiority/sea control capabilities. Enhanced air defense, communications and surveillance systems, and cyber-war systems also contribute to comprehensive A2/AD networks. A2/AD networks will also attempt to impact US and allied use of the electro-magnetic spectrum, cyber, and space. To be sure, the United States and other nations' militaries are working on doctrine, equipment, and operations to counter A2/AD, but the challenge is significant.

⁷ NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," July 9, 2016, op. cit., article 17.

capabilities even as tensions in the region continue to escalate. Since 2012, the Russian naval base at Novorossiysk and Black Sea Fleet amphibious ships have been the basis for shipping military equipment to Tartus, Syria, in order to resupply and support the Bashar al-Assad regime. The Black Sea Fleet has taken on a leadership role in the Russian Federation Navy's continued presence in the Eastern Mediterranean since that time. As early as 2010, the Russian 2020 State Armaments Program prioritized the Black Sea Fleet for significant capability upgrades. In 2015-2016, the Black Sea Fleet took delivery of the first of six planned improved KIL0-class submarines and the first of six planned Admiral Grigorovich class frigates—these surface and sub-surface units add sophisticated long-range anti-ship missiles to the A2/AD network as well as long-range land-attack cruise missiles. The Russian A2/AD network adds operational complexity to what was already a legally challenging environment, given the Montreux Convention, which holds, in part, that states without a Black Sea coast (non-Black Sea powers), and therefore the majority of NATO navies, are constrained in their operation of warships in the Black Sea according to number, overall tonnage, and duration of stay.

Objectives and Priorities

As an organization, NATO is inherently interested in the sovereignty and defense of NATO members in the Black Sea region. This is the foundational *raison d'être* of the Alliance and must be considered in development of a transatlantic strategy for the region.

NATO and the wider transatlantic community have an interest in deterring or quickly resolving sovereignty challenges in the region that impinge on non-NATO countries' sovereign rights and abilities to align themselves with NATO and the West. One recent expression of this NATO interest was the Warsaw Summit communiqué highlighting NATO's commitment to non-ally partners such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.⁸ Additionally, regional economic security, and specifically energy security, will help deliver the stability that encourages the greater development of the whole of Europe. Related to both military challenges in the Black Sea and energy transport, international access to the global commons of the sea lanes and free maritime trade are critical aspects of the international rules-based order,

which the transatlantic community has championed since World War II.

In order to ensure that the Black Sea region contributes to the overall goal of a Europe free, whole, and at peace, the transatlantic community should consider three strategic end states in developing a security strategy for the Black Sea region.

- Effective deterrence and credible collective defense
- Stability and security in non-NATO regional partner nations
- Regional economic security, such that no state has the leverage to use energy economics to coerce other states.

Strategic Approach, Opportunities, and Challenges

The transatlantic strategy for the Black Sea region should center on NATO, especially as the Alliance contributes to security in this troubled region. However, diplomatic and economic efforts must be undertaken in concert with member nations' efforts and with other international entities.

Diplomatically, NATO as an alliance must keep the door open for enlargement. Even if membership is not immediately imminent for a Black Sea region partner nation, the aspirant states' actions will promote stability and security throughout the region. The open door need not be in the region itself—the membership plan for Montenegro, by encouraging other aspirants to continue reforms and capability developments, contributes indirectly to security in the Black Sea region.

At the same time, a strong defense posture and these diplomatic openings do risk playing into Moscow's threat perceptions. Continued dialogue with Russia, at the NATO-Russia Council and other venues, can contribute to “avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, and to increase transparency and predictability.”⁹

As economic and energy security are not specifically within NATO's purview as a defensive alliance, NATO member nations, the European Union (EU), and other

8 Ibid., article 110.

9 NATO, “Warsaw Summit Communiqué,” July 9, 2016, op. cit., article 12.

entities would bear greater responsibility for actions in this arena. However, this comprehensive approach must be fully coordinated. In the wake of the Warsaw Summit, the North Atlantic Council will review proposals for concrete actions between NATO and the EU, with a report due in December 2016.¹⁰ Follow through on this review of the multifaceted approach is absolutely essential. Specifically, in support of a comprehensive approach to energy security in the Black Sea region, NATO can and should focus on an infrastructure protection role in the region.

The most direct NATO contribution to security in the Black Sea region, however, remains a strong defensive posture. The Alliance and its member nations must optimize a persistent military presence with a NATO flag. This includes ground presence and exercises within the three NATO member states on the Black Sea, as well as air and naval operations in the international airspace and water space of the Black Sea.

The enhanced defense and deterrence that the Warsaw Summit directed will not come gratis. The communiqué reaffirmed the defense investment pledge agreed at the Wales Summit, in concert with the continuation of strengthening the Readiness Action Plan. The nations' commitments in defense spending and in force contributions must be maintained, and commitments to the Black Sea region are specifically mentioned in the communiqué.¹¹

Implementation, Resources, and Implications

- **The Alliance must increase its naval presence in the Black Sea.** Months before the Warsaw Summit, Romania proposed the formation of a permanent NATO Black Sea Flotilla with ships provided by the Black Sea NATO allies and others.¹² In June, Bulgaria ruled out participation in this structure,

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citing its provocative nature and a desire to emphasize economic and tourist development in the Black Sea.¹³ Increased naval presence can be accomplished without a new command structure. NATO should establish a framework for Black Sea regional security.¹⁴ This requires the leadership of one or more of the three Black Sea littoral states in the Alliance—in a similar manner as other framework nation constructs. Any increase in naval presence absolutely requires the commitment of ships and aircraft by non-littoral state allies as well, which is complex due to Montreux Convention restrictions. The NATO maritime framework for the Black Sea requires a commitment of forces and resources, but just as importantly scheduling coordination, planning, and deconfliction.

In addition, the NATO Black Sea littoral states should resume Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR) operations. Conceived in 2001 as a cooperative maritime security effort, BLACKSEAFOR originally included all six Black Sea states but has fallen idle with recent tensions. Renewing this initiative would build cooperation between NATO and non-NATO Black Sea states and would also serve as a confidence-building measure with Russia. Recommended initial participation would include Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Georgia, but NATO should explicitly hold out the possibility of Russian participation in this regional maritime security effort. At the very least, transparency of intent, operations, and outcomes of BLACKSEAFOR must be provided to Moscow.

- **The Alliance must increase NATO air missions in the region.** Increased NATO air operations in the Black Sea region would deliver presence, including persistent presence in the international airspace

¹⁰ Ibid., articles 121-122.

¹¹ Ibid., articles 32-34 and 36-37. Article 37e highlights the RAP commitment to the Black Sea region.

¹² *NATOSource*, "Romania Wants Permanent NATO Black Sea Force," Atlantic Council, January 21, 2016, <http://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/natosource/romania-wants-permanent-nato-black-sea-force>.

¹³ Reuters, "Bulgaria says will not join any NATO Black Sea fleet after Russian warning," June 16, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/nato-bulgaria-blacksea-idUSL8N19835X>.

¹⁴ See Franklin D. Kramer and Magnus Nordenman, "A Maritime Framework for the Baltic Sea Region," Atlantic Council, April 6, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/a-maritime-framework-for-the-baltic-sea-region>. While some challenges are unique to each region, this proposal provides a template for establishing such a maritime framework in the Black Sea.



Opening ceremonies of Saber Guardian 2013, a Black Sea regional exercise led by Romanian Land Forces and US Army Europe. Romania, Bulgaria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Republic of Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia, Poland, and US land forces trained and exercised battlestuffs and command post procedures. *Photo credit: US Army Europe/Flickr.*

over the international waters of the Black Sea, without encountering any of the restrictions the Montreux Convention places on naval forces. Of note, Bulgaria has raised the issue of a Black Sea Air Policing Mission, which would mirror Baltic Air Policing; in late July 2016, Bulgaria's defense minister called Russian flights, including military flights with transponders turned off, "provocations."¹⁵ While Romania, Bulgaria, and certainly Turkey have more air defense capacity than the Baltic NATO allies, rotations of NATO air defense capabilities through the Black Sea allies would improve capability for air policing or air defense. Airborne anti-submarine warfare (ASW) is another capability that could be brought to bear. In addition to maritime patrol/ASW aircraft, any NATO air mission in the Black Sea should include Intelligence, Surveillance, and

Reconnaissance, NATO Airborne Warning and Control Systems, or Alliance Ground Surveillance missions.

- **NATO ground forces should provide a persistent rotational presence in the Black Sea region.** NATO has established a headquarters for the Multinational Division Southeast in Romania. The Warsaw Summit highlighted this as progress in the Readiness Action Plan.¹⁶ This headquarters provides a structure to command and control rotational ground forces, which can conduct exercises and training in the three NATO Black Sea littoral states and would include United States' European Reassurance Initiative and ATLANTIC RESOLVE rotations. NATO ground forces in the region should also participate in training events with non-ally partners in the region.

¹⁵ Reuters, "Bulgaria calls rise in airspace violations by Russian aircraft a 'provocation'," July 24, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-russia-nato-airspace-idUSKCN1040JE?il=0>

¹⁶ NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," July 9, 2016, op. cit., article 37e.

- **Increase exercises and combined training events in the Black Sea region.** Bilateral/multilateral exercises should be rebranded as NATO exercises, with NATO gaining training objectives of interoperability, command and control, and NATO standardization. The naval exercises BREEZE and SEA BREEZE, which have evolved from bilateral to multilateral to NATO, exemplify this. In addition, NATO or NATO-branded exercises can include non-ally partners in the region and would achieve political aims, while continuing to improve NATO partners' interoperability and capabilities.
- **Focus on Building Defense Capacity (BDC) for regional partners.** The Alliance's BDC effort is frequently considered in terms of missions further afield such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Continuing to build the defense capabilities of the partners in the Black Sea region—Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova—will go a long way to increasing security and stability in the region. These cooperative efforts strengthen non-Alliance partners against potential aggression, contribute to their structural reforms, and amplify the diplomatic efforts of NATO and the member nations.
- **Enhance strategic communications on NATO Black Sea efforts.** The information domain is an important one in the growing geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West; Russia has proven adept at quickly advancing its narrative in any dispute. Public diplomacy is best executed at the national level, because it is far too unwieldy to manage information in a twenty-eight-member body, but the information domain is important for Alliance planning and thinking. NATO Operations and Exercises must be accompanied by a common voice in diplomatic and informational efforts. This enhances the overall diplomatic goals of the Alliance but also minimizes the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. NATO should not allow Russia's threat perceptions to drive NATO actions, but transparency in NATO's objectives and actions is an important part of collective defense and deterrence.
- **Support economic and energy security with infrastructure protection tasks and missions.** The majority of efforts toward economic security in the Black Sea region are better executed by individual

nations or organizations other than NATO. However, economic security—especially energy security—can be supported by infrastructure protection missions. These can be executed by regional or extra-regional NATO members with NATO branding.

- **Clarify and enhance the comprehensive approach in the Black Sea region.** NATO must cooperate with the EU and other international organizations in economic security and other efforts in the region. Only by clearly identifying NATO interests and the Alliance's strategic end states can the Alliance or member nations identify common ground with the EU and others and undertake a comprehensive approach to issues.

Conclusion

The Black Sea region is a complex geopolitical environment, with its international water and airspace providing a venue for potential friction between Russia and the West. NATO must ensure that efforts to shore up the Alliance's Eastern Flank maintain focus on the Black Sea region along with other areas. The most recent reflection of the region's importance came from the NATO Warsaw Summit, which not only re-emphasized collective defense and deterrence, while reaffirming concrete steps such as the Readiness Action Plan and the defense investment pledge, but included numerous highlights of NATO's commitment to Black Sea security.

The Alliance and its member nations must maintain a clear focus on this important flank and match this attention with actions to ensure the stability and security of the region. NATO should increase a persistent presence in the region of air, maritime, and land forces, while furthering its own diplomacy and a comprehensive approach with partner nations and international organizations.

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