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Black Sea Imperatives

Ensuring NATO Security and American
Interests for the Incoming U.S. Administration

Strategic Report No. 3

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THE ISSUE

The Black Sea region, a critical front line for Western security, is increasingly subject to turmoil and threat. A stable NATO eastern flank enables the United States to project and defend its interests in several neighboring regions—from Central Europe to the Middle East. Conversely, an unstable Black Sea region weakens the alliance and undermines the pursuit of Western interests. This final CEPA Black Sea Strategic Report provides an updated assessment of developments in the Black Sea region by focusing on Russia's assertiveness and NATO responses. It also provides concrete policy recommendations for Washington and the other NATO capitals to counter Moscow's destructive policy toward the West, and strengthen the alliance's role to promote national independence, regional security and economic development.

Moscow's Black Sea Ambitions

The balance of power in the Black Sea is changing in Russia's favor. Moscow is enhancing its Black Sea fleet and will possess a stronger navy than Turkey in the coming decade if its plans for expansion and modernization are fully realized. Moscow seeks supremacy in the Black Sea in order to restore its Eurasian dominion by projecting power toward all littoral states, as well as toward the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Russia's offensives in and around the Black Sea are part of a larger anti-NATO strategy in which naval forces play a significant and growing role. It exploits the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of neo-imperial revisionism than extensive land conquests. Control of ports and sea lanes prevents NATO from ensuring security for its Black Sea members or intervening on behalf of vulnerable neighbors. It threatens to choke the trade and energy supplies of states not in compliance with Russia's national ambitions, and gives Moscow an enhanced ability to exploit fossil fuels in maritime locations.



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Moscow's primary strategic objective under the Vladimir Putin presidency is to create a Eurasian "pole of power" or bloc of states under predominant Russian influence that will necessitate containing, undermining and reversing NATO influence throughout Europe's east. Even where it cannot pressure or entice its neighbors to integrate in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Kremlin attempts to neutralize nearby capitals by preventing them from moving into Western institutions, particularly NATO and the European Union (EU).

In this strategic context, the Black Sea region forms the key intersection linking mainland Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia. Access to and from the Black Sea is vital for all littoral states and nearby neighbors, and a substantial military presence contributes to projecting power into several adjacent regions. For more than two centuries, Russia had endeavored to establish exclusive control of the Black Sea. It waged numerous wars against Turkey in order to capture the Bosphorus Straits and lock the Black Sea for its own exploitation. During the Cold War, the Black Sea was a virtual Soviet lake. Western influences expanded during the 2000s when Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO, while Ukraine and Georgia asserted their pro-Western orientations to deter Russia's unwelcome interventions. Moscow's revived attempts to control the Black Sea not only undermines the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, but also directly challenges the security of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.



Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Black Sea Tall Ships Regatta. Credit: Alexei Nikolsky/TASS.

Launching ceremony for the Project 636.3 Veliky Novgorod submarine, part of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Credit: Sergei Konkov/TASS.



Control over the Black Sea lies at the core of revisionist ambitions to restore Russia's international power and to limit NATO's presence.

Moscow's long-term goal is to roll back NATO so that the Black Sea becomes a predominantly Russian domain or one divided between Russia and Turkey, but where Ankara acquiesces to Kremlin empire-building. The Black Sea region also has enormous economic potential, as a transit for goods and with a continental shelf that possess abundant natural resources including natural gas deposits. With a growing naval presence, Moscow could disrupt energy supplies through pipeline connections between the Caspian Basin and Europe that bypass Russian control. This would also curtail U.S. and European economic connections with Central Asia. Given the increased international competition for influence in the Middle East, the Black Sea has also been transformed in the main logistical platform supporting Russia's naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Russia is using the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of revisionism than extensive land conquests. Control of ports and sea lanes delivers several benefits: it prevents NATO from projecting sufficient security for its Black Sea members; deters the intervention of littoral states on behalf of vulnerable neighbors; threatens to choke the trade and energy routes of states not in compliance with Russia's national ambitions; and gives Moscow an enhanced ability to exploit fossil fuels in maritime locations. Numerous tools of pressure are applied to ensure the fundamental goal—dominant influence over the foreign and security policies of immediate neighbors so they will either remain neutral or support Russia's international positions.

Moscow formulated a revised maritime doctrine in July 2015, which focused on creating an A2/AD (anti-access, area denial) zone in the Black Sea, while ensuring a growing threat to the alliance's southeastern flank.¹ It accomplished the first stage of containing NATO in the Black Sea in August 2008 following the invasion and partition of Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as separate states. This sealed Russia's dominance along the eastern Black Sea littoral. Since that time, Russian forces have boosted their presence in occupied territories and constitute a constant threat to Georgian stability, while effectively freezing Tbilisi's progress toward NATO accession. The Kremlin has also manipulated the simmering dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over occupied Azerbaijan territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh, in order to maintain primary influence as a mediator and arms supplier to both sides in the conflict and to prevent a resolution that would sideline Moscow.

Russia is pursuing control over the northern Black Sea littoral following the illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 and incitement of a proxy insurgency in Ukraine's Donbas region. Ukraine remains frustrated that NATO refuses to supply it with offensive military equipment that could help it ward off Russia's ongoing invasion. As the Kremlin cannot currently carve out a Novorossiia entity along Ukraine's southern coastline—largely because of Ukrainian resistance—it will probably settle for Crimea and Donbas for the time being and seek to destabilize Kyiv's pro-Western government. The underlying goal toward Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova is to prevent these countries from moving into Western institutions.

“Russia is using the Black Sea *as a more advantageous method of revisionism than extensive land conquests.*”

Control of Crimea expands Russia's maritime borders and its gas and oil fields. Moreover, the economic zones of Russia and Romania have become *de facto* adjacent; in effect, Russia now shares a maritime border with NATO and the EU in the Black Sea. Moscow has more than halved Ukraine's coastline and controls the country's access to open Black Sea waters. It is thereby establishing dominion over vast oil and gas reserves off the Crimean shore and damaging Ukraine's hopes for energy independence.

Moscow has largely subdued the Black Sea's southern littoral, as Turkey has not challenged Russia's gradual expansion and is preoccupied with conflicts along its own southern borders. Along the Black Sea's western littoral, Kremlin objectives are to neutralize NATO's eastern flank and ensure that Bulgaria and Romania do not oppose Moscow's international offensives while NATO militaries cannot deter its maritime deployments. The Kremlin subverts and weakens its neighbors through a host of instruments and pressures. It does not need to deploy overwhelming military force to achieve its objectives but relies on the element of surprise, camouflage and deception. Potential scenarios of instability could involve further splitting Ukraine by linking Crimea with Moldova's separatist region of Transnistria, strategically closing in on the Bosphorus Straits, gaining control of the mouth of the Danube and transforming Moldova into a satellite state.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea region has been a testing ground for Russia's application of its "shadow war" against Western interests and to suborn the littoral states.² In Moscow's non-military strategy, various "soft spots" are exploited for penetration, including intelligence services, police forces and military structures. The Kremlin capitalizes on a susceptible information space, corruptible officialdom and inadequate national defenses. It probes and encourages ethnic, religious and territorial grievances and benefits from political instability, social unrest and state failure. Moscow's pressure points also include economic instruments such as trade restrictions, ownership of key infrastructure and energy cut-offs.

Russia's Militarization

Russia's new military doctrine issued in December 2014 depicts an increasingly threatening foreign environment.³ It claims that intensifying threats emanate from NATO and the United States in particular, including the placement of Western forces in countries adjoining Russia and NATO's development of ABM, space-based and rapid reaction forces. Moscow is responding to alleged NATO provocations by deploying new offensive nuclear weapons aimed at Western nations, developing an air and missile defense system and producing new precision-guided weapons.

Russia is building up weapons systems in the Black Sea region for purposes of power projection and political intimidation. When fully developed, these systems—including missiles, naval aviation jets and long-range bombers—could isolate the Black Sea basin and NATO allies therein from the rest of the alliance.⁴



The Russian Black Sea Fleet's new frigate Admiral Grigorovich arrives in Sevastopol.
Credit: Alexander Karpushkin/TASS.

Since its attack on Ukraine, Moscow has enhanced its status as a maritime power in several ways. Its Black Sea fleet is positioned to deny military access to the Caucasus and to Ukraine. The integration of Crimea provides Russia with an additional coastline of several hundred kilometers, together with the crucial Black Sea port of Sevastopol. The Black Sea Fleet has been incorporated into Russia's southern military district. It now fulfills several tasks, including securing navigation and sea lines of communication, countering the presence of naval groups of NATO forces, supporting units coming from other Russian fleets operating in the Mediterranean and maintaining leverage over energy supplies from the Caspian Basin to Europe. The expansion and modernization of the Black Sea fleet has become one of the Kremlin's highest priorities. By 2020, Russia plans to significantly enhance its military presence in Crimea, while deploying additional mobile missile coastal forces.

Maritime power is the ability of a state to use this sphere to achieve specific policy objectives. In the case of the Black Sea, Russia can concentrate its forces in a relatively small area to gain advantage, whereas NATO has limited access to these waters largely because of stipulations in the 1936 Montreux Convention. Moscow seeks to develop a naval force that can dominate the Black Sea and expand Russian presence in the Mediterranean. At the same time, it retains the option of a preemptive nuclear strike when a military attack—whether from nuclear or conventional weapons—allegedly threatens the integrity of the Russian state.

The Kremlin has embarked on a long-term rearmament program designed to significantly strengthen its multi-regional naval power. Russia's bold Maritime Strategy document, issued in July 2015, declared a dramatic increase in the production of high-technology capabilities, with a significantly bolstered military presence in the Baltic, Caspian and Black seas. It emphasizes buttressing Russia's non-nuclear deterrence, with an investment in both short- and long-range high-precision strike systems. Such systems constitute a major threat to NATO states bordering the Black Sea. Moscow has developed technologies and positioning systems that deny the West access to maritime areas needed for regional force projection and deterrence.

“Moscow seeks to develop a naval force that can *dominate the Black Sea and expand Russian presence in the Mediterranean.*”

The modernization of the Black Sea Fleet is one of the most ambitious elements of the Russian State Arms Procurement program of 2011–20. Up to 18 units are being commissioned for the fleet, and new infrastructure developed. By 2020, Moscow plans to spend \$151 billion to modernize its entire navy, including the Black Sea Fleet. The objective is to build a combined arms force that can deny NATO access to the Black Sea and project power outward to threaten U.S. and NATO interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Although resources will be diverted from the civilian economy, it remains unclear whether all of Moscow's objectives will be fully realized, as state revenues continue to decline.

Crimea is the main platform for A2/AD operations in case of a restricted war in the Black Sea. Russia is seeking to rapidly develop Crimea for its naval infrastructure and firepower. It is increasingly able to deploy long-range, anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles to strike ground targets, interdict maritime traffic and impose no-fly zones around the Black Sea littoral. Putin has also indicated that Moscow will deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea. The *Iskander* tactical ballistic missile (either in conventional or nuclear form) has a 400-kilometer range and could reach all of southern Ukraine, a large part of Moldova, the entire Romanian coastline and a significant portion of Turkey's Black Sea coast. The Russian Navy aspires to acquire or produce nuclear-powered battle cruisers, with plans for a nuclear-powered supercarrier. New submarines with ballistic missiles would also increase the capacities of Russia's submarine fleet. In effect, Moscow is sequestering the Black Sea to deter its adversaries from countering future offensives.



A 9P78-1 Iskander-M guided missile system and a Bastion coastal defence missile system.
Credit: Yuri Smityuk/TASS.

Moscow aims to replace its aging Soviet-era ships with modern vessels—especially with highly maneuverable and fast platforms such as the French *Mistrals* that would increase its power projection capacity. By 2020, Moscow intends for the Black Sea Fleet not only to conduct operations in the Black Sea basin, but also to support the permanent deployment of the Russian Mediterranean Squadron and act as a supply line to Syria.⁵

Moscow is building a combined air and naval defense network to threaten and interdict foreign fleets in the Black Sea. In mid-August 2016, Russian naval and land forces practiced swiftly moving military hardware and troops to Crimea as part of a logistics exercise. This preceded much larger exercises, styled as Kavkaz 2016, involving Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet in September 2016. As Moscow increased pressure on Ukraine, it deployed S-400 Triumph air defense systems—some of the army’s most advanced air-defense missile systems—in Crimea. At the conclusion of the Kavkaz 2016 exercises, Russia’s first deputy defense minister, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, boasted that the Black Sea Fleet has the capacity to destroy its enemy before it leaves port or in the Bosphorus.⁶

Moscow is also developing Special Operations Forces (SSO) to conduct conventional and unconventional missions that could destabilize targeted states. These developments also present a military threat across the Balkan Peninsula and toward the Aegean and Adriatic seas. With a strong base in Crimea, Russia can conduct rapid amphibious operations across the Black Sea. This could threaten the Ukrainian port of Odesa and impose a more efficient blockade on Georgia. In case of war between Transnistria and Moldova, the SSO could also conduct diversionary operations or threaten Bucharest to dissuade it from intervening on behalf of the government in Chisinau.

NATO's Vulnerabilities

The Black Sea forms a zone of vulnerability for the eastern flank of the alliance. NATO cannot allow an ambitious adversary to threaten any of its littoral member states (Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey), or the alliance may lose its credibility as a security organization. The West also has a keen economic interest in diversifying energy sources and upholding routes from the Caspian Basin, in which the Black Sea forms a network for energy deliveries and pipelines to Europe outside of Russia's control.

Russia's assertiveness in the Black Sea is generating insecurity among all littoral states and is testing NATO's political unity, U.S. leadership, force deployments, mission operations and military capabilities. NATO's Warsaw Summit in July 2016 acknowledged the seriousness of the threat and agreed to some preliminary steps. If the eastern flank of the alliance is to be fully secured, several key objectives need to be accomplished. In particular, the littoral states and leading NATO members must increase their defense spending, modernize their armed forces and naval capabilities, and cooperate more intensively to emplace effective deterrents and defenses.

NATO has not developed an effective Black Sea security architecture that could deter Russia's advances. The Black Sea has not been a priority for Washington while Turkey—the region's long-standing NATO ally—has been cautious in involving the littoral states in maritime security arrangement. Moscow's maritime power projections can prevent NATO expeditionary forces from assisting frontline members in case of attack or offering help to other neighboring states. It also poses a direct threat to U.S. bases, such as the one near the Romanian port of Constanta. Russia's military buildup also presents security implications for maritime traffic and can hurt the region's economies.⁷ The risk of disruption to maritime trade flows is growing. Black Sea shipments are important for the flow of oil, grain and other commodities, and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles are among the world's most critical oil-flow chokepoints.

The Kremlin also develops an assortment of softer hazards for the Black Sea states. It manipulates energy supplies and contracts both as carrots and sticks. Bulgaria is particularly vulnerable because of its predominant dependence on Russian fossil fuels. In Romania and Bulgaria, Kremlin-generated propaganda exploits the persistence of poor governance, the pervasiveness of official corruption, growing income disparities and the emergence of social strata that have not significantly benefitted from EU membership. Russia also seeks to foster division among Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, to preclude them acting in concert. It has intimidated Sofia from joining regional security organizations and forging any effective regional naval agreements, thus undercutting efforts for maritime coordination in the Black Sea.⁸

Security of Frontline States

NATO countries across Europe's eastern flank face common security challenges and need to develop a common security agenda. The Black Sea countries have thus far been unsuccessful in uniting their efforts to build joint defenses. The main impediments to regional cooperation are their diverse histories, individual interests, budgetary limitation, and bilateral relations with Russia. Whereas Moscow's offensive strategy integrates military, informational, economic, energy and various soft-power instruments, NATO's frontline states have been slower to develop an active multi-dimensional security posture. This is evident not only in the military domain but in inadequacies in informational policy, cyber defense and regional cooperation.

The armed forces of Romania and Bulgaria are underfinanced, underequipped and unprepared for these new security threats. Romania substantially modified its national security assessments in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, both in terms of strategy and operations. As Ukraine's neighbor, Romania perceived a high degree of direct risk to its national security interests. During the past two years, Bucharest has developed a military strategy document, a framework for defense planning and a Strategic Concept approved by the government. Bucharest is also pushing for a more substantial allied presence in the region.



Bulgarian marines fire machine guns on board the Bulgarian navy frigate "Verni" during BREEZE 2014 military drill in the Black Sea. Credit: Stoyan Nenov/Reuters.

A key factor limiting the NATO presence is the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates access and distinguishes among Black Sea countries and foreign states.⁹ It restricts the tonnage and time spent in the Black Sea by ships from non-littoral states. In peacetime, it allows a maximum of 21 days for the latter. Submarines and aircraft carriers of non-littoral states are banned altogether. As a result, the expansion of a NATO deterrent largely depends on the three littoral states to modernize and reinforce their maritime capabilities. NATO has committed itself to rotating small U.S. and Western European navy forces through the region and conducting frequent exercises with Romania and Bulgaria.¹⁰ In the event of more provocative military actions by Moscow, NATO estimates that it could deploy anti-ship or anti-aircraft missiles to Bulgaria and Romania, which would circumvent the Montreux Convention.

A key component to enhance security is the intensification of regional cooperation. There is little regional integration and infrequent interaction among NATO's Black Sea states and an absence of well-defined contingency plans in case of a military assault by Russia. Romania and Bulgaria conduct no bilateral naval exercises, possess no common surveillance or early-warning capabilities, and have no collective defense plan. There is plenty of room for Bucharest and Sofia to cooperate extensively at the regional level and to lobby within NATO for building stronger defense capabilities.

While Romania's policy has been consistent—regardless of the government's ideological makeup—Bulgaria's foreign policy has undergone frequent revisions depending on the political stance of different governments. In general, non-socialist governments have sought to curtail Russia's policy of deepening Bulgaria's energy dependence. Outgoing Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev has emphasized numerous times the dangers presented to Europe by Russia. But in January 2017, he will be replaced by a new President perceived as more Russia-friendly—the Socialist-supported former Air Force Commander Gen. Rumen Radev. Bulgaria's Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, who painstakingly tried to display a more careful approach toward Moscow after Putin blamed Sofia for the demise of the South Stream natural gas project, swiftly resigned following his party's defeat at the presidential ballot in November 2016. These two political developments may enable Moscow to strengthen its influence in Bulgaria, thus undermining the country's commitment to boosting Black Sea defense.

High-ranking Bulgarian military officers and civilian defense officials in Borisov's government clearly understood the importance of strengthening Bulgaria's defense capabilities and building regional alliances. Bulgaria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has asserted that Sofia's official position on Black Sea security has not changed since 2004, when the country joined NATO. Sofia has insisted on an enhanced NATO presence through joint exercises and visits by NATO naval task groups, as well as frequent visits by ships of other alliance countries. As NATO was expected to adopt more concrete measures for Black Sea security the Bulgarian government made a turn toward Moscow in an attempt to pacify Putin: a renewed discussion about potential Russian energy projects was launched, while Bulgarian defense ministry signed a 21.8-million euro (\$23.75 million) deal with Sofia-based company Aviostart for the supply of 10 Russian engines for its aging fleet of Russian MiG-29 fighter jets. Sofia also plans to obtain a maintenance license from Moscow to overhaul its Russian MiG-29 airplanes at a state-owned facility in the country.¹¹

Romania and Bulgaria share similar interests regarding the need to consolidate NATO's military presence in the Black Sea. They both play an important role along NATO eastern flank by hosting NATO Force Integration Units (FIU) and elements of the NATO/U.S. missile shield, in Romania's case. These elements can enable both countries to develop a broader agenda for cooperation by strengthening naval collaboration, working jointly to counter cyber attacks and cooperating to diversify energy supply routes and sources to reduce Russia's export primacy.

Bucharest has proposed creating a permanent multinational brigade comprised of troops from Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey that would enhance interoperability and joint response to emergencies. Sofia has committed itself to participate with up to 400 troops in this multinational brigade. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced on 9 July 2016 an agreement for a larger frontline presence on the southeast flank based on a Romanian-Bulgarian brigade, which will provide the framework for enhanced NATO training exercises.

An expanding Russian Black Sea fleet should be of direct concern to Turkey. In order to maintain some degree of parity, Turkey's naval forces need to pursue extensive modernization to ensure naval supremacy and control access to the Bosphorus Straits. Turkey's failed coup in mid-July 2016 and the subsequent purge of the military by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may weaken the country's defense capabilities, enfeeble NATO's forward presence and favor Russia's assertive stance in the Black Sea region.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) attends a joint press conference with his Romanian counterpart Klaus Iohannis in Ankara, Turkey. Credit: Mustafa Kaya/Xinhua.

Turkey's strategic partnership with Russia has played a decisive role in Ankara's refusal to involve NATO more substantially in the Black Sea. As a condition of the current Putin-Erdoğan rapprochement, the Kremlin is likely to demand that Turkey does not commit itself to any NATO-led Black Sea security structure. Although ties have improved and Russian tourists have returned to Turkish shores, Moscow and Ankara are not poised to re-establish close relations. Uncertainty, lack of trust and regional rivalry are expected to dominate their relationship in the foreseeable future. However, this is unlikely to translate into closer Turkish relations with NATO. The Western reaction to Erdoğan's post-coup purges left a bitter taste in Ankara's view of Washington and Brussels. Over the coming years, Turkey could become a more independent player and a less reliable NATO ally.

Ankara is staunchly opposed to amending the Montreux Convention. Nonetheless, under the convention, Turkey possesses some flexibility in exceptional circumstances such as wartime emergencies to decide what ships to let through into the Black Sea. However, the most important country for Black Sea security is becoming the least predictable in terms of its cooperation in protecting the region from Russia's assertiveness. Ankara is no longer a trusted ally in the neighborhood for two reasons: first, the coup attempt demonstrated that the most reliable defender of secularism—the army—has been undermined, and second, the massive repressions attested that Turkey may become more Islamist and less democratic.



Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan arrives for the NATO Summit in Warsaw, Poland.
Credit - Kacper Pempel/Reuters.

Soldiers march during a military parade to celebrate Romania's National Day in Bucharest.
Credit - Bogdan Cristel/Reuters.



Romania's military capabilities remain weak, as the country has a relatively modest defense budget. The modernization program launched in 2007 has largely stalled. Military inadequacies are evident in Romania's artillery, anti-tank weaponry, ground air-defense capabilities, coastal defense capabilities and anti-landing and logistical support. Romania's vulnerabilities also include limited naval capabilities to secure the Danube Delta and Black Sea areas and limited investment in technological innovation. The country is also struggling to control corruption, increase transparency and fix its weak regulatory framework—all of which have inhibited large investments in the military industry and continue to obstruct technological development.

With Russia's ongoing expansion in the neighborhood, the modernization of Romania's armed forces and the ability to defend the country against a growing outside threat became especially important. Romania's defense budget is due to increase to 2% of GDP from 2017 for the following decade, with additional money to be ring-fenced for armed forces acquisitions potentially reaching about €10 billion (\$10.9 billion) over a 10-year period. The Romanian Navy's modernization program is approaching a critical phase to create a more credible and flexible force.¹²

Romania's navy is focusing on the Type 22 frigate Phase 2 modernization program and the acquisition of a new class of corvette. The program also plans to enhance anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti-surface warfare (ASuW) capabilities through the installation of anti-ship missiles and provision of a missile-based air-defense capability. Successfully implementing modernization plans by the mid-2020s would enhance the navy's regional response and its ability to contribute to broader NATO operations.

Bulgaria has also made contributions to Black Sea security. For instance, the Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Center has been established in Burgas. Sofia has pledged 400 ground troops to the land brigade hosted by Romania and vows to expand maritime security cooperation with Bucharest, especially in combatting illegal migration and terrorism. Bulgaria plans to increase its defense spending from the current 1.34% to 2% of GDP by 2024. Under the plan, 20% of defense expenditures are to be allocated to acquisitions of new equipment.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visits the headquarters of the NATO Forces Integration Unit Romania. Credit: NDIS/NATO.

In March 2016, Bulgaria's cabinet approved \$1.4 billion in spending to modernize its aircraft and navy. Bulgaria's navy plans are more modest than those of Romania. Sofia is preparing to acquire two new domestically produced patrol frigates in the next three years, but other similar programs are likely to take longer. The Ministry of Defense has announced a major overhaul of 18 navy vessels by 2020, including the missile corvette *Lightning*, several other corvettes, two frigates and minesweepers.¹³ The Bulgarian parliament approved expenditures to refurbish two existing Belgian-made frigates, including equipping them with modern military hardware.¹⁴ Along with approving navy modernization, the parliament also voted to update Bulgaria's air fleet with a new escadrille of modern planes—either American F-16s or Sweden's *Gripen*.¹⁵

The opposition of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the nationalist Ataka may become a serious obstacle to upgrading the country's defense capacities, especially since a socialist-nominated presidential candidate won the November 2016 election. Although former Air Force Commander Gen. Rumen Radev is a Western-educated military officer, he would probably have to comply with BSP policy. Radev has displayed a friendlier attitude toward Moscow than Plevneliev and even a willingness to accept Moscow's annexation of Crimea while lifting EU sanctions.¹⁶ With the end of Plevneliev's tenure, the country will lose a powerful voice opposing Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the Black Sea and the Balkans, and a staunch supporter of enhancing defense capabilities. The resignation of the government in Sofia on November 14, 2016 will result in early parliamentary elections. If the Socialists come back to power with support from Bulgarian nationalists, Moscow could find an ally in Sofia. Such an outcome may lead to scraping plans for military modernization and could weaken commitments to NATO. The context is particularly inauspicious, as Putin has firmly demarcated a concrete Russian zone of interest in Bulgaria, Romania and the three Baltic states. On 4 October 2016, he demanded that the United States reduce its military infrastructure and contingent in the countries that joined NATO after 2000, or Russia would stop cooperating with Washington on destroying military-grade plutonium.¹⁷

Given that a buildup of maritime capabilities is an expensive and long-term proposition, in the shorter term Romania and Bulgaria need to focus on surveillance and missile defense. This would entail coordinating missile defense capabilities, developing more advanced radar capabilities that integrate with existing NATO architecture and coordinating counter-cyber attack strategies. In addition, the eastern flank needs to develop an A2/AD concept for the NATO region that will help protect alliance members and project elements of security toward NATO partner states. This would entail lower costs than building a fleet of naval vessels.



A NTH NH90 overlooking the Turkish submarine TCG Atılay during Exercise Sea Shield 15. Credit: WO Artigues/HQ MARCOM.

Alliance Initiatives

The Warsaw Summit underscored NATO's responsibility to **ensure the security of its members in the Black Sea** and declared that **NATO would develop a “tailored forward presence.”**

It would include Romania's initiative for a multinational brigade to improve training of allied units under Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast. However, even an upgraded rotational maritime presence by the United States and other allies may prove insufficient to deter further Kremlin aggression, given the weakness of Romanian and Bulgarian naval capabilities and Turkey's unwillingness to confront Moscow.

The United States has been implementing the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) following Russia's attack on Ukraine in order to strengthen the defense of frontline NATO states. Washington plans to rotate an increased number of troops through the region and provide more tanks and other material support. The Marine Corps Black Sea Rotational Force (BSRF) will increase the volume and scope of engagements with NATO allies and partners conducted from Romania's Mihail Kogălniceanu Airbase and Bulgaria's Novo Selo Airbase. Funding is earmarked for exercises, training, transportation and maintenance costs.



NATO Warsaw Summit. Credit: NDIS/NATO.

U.S. Vice Admiral James D. Syring, Romania's President Traian Basescu, U.S. Under secretary of Defense for Policy James N. Miller and Romania's Defence Minister Mircea Dusa break ground at the U.S. Aegis Ashore missile defense facility, in Deveselu, Romania. Credit: Bogdan Cristel/Reuters.



The U.S. Navy has been allocated \$5 million for Black Sea engagements, with a focus on multinational exercises. Of this, \$4 million will support Bulgarian and Romanian participation in flying training exercises with U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE). The aim is to boost interoperability. U.S. and NATO training exercises have become more regular. For instance, the Bulgarian and Romanian navies, along with nine other regional players, conduct the annual U.S.-led Sea Breeze during the summer months.

Since 2013, military exercises have led to an almost continuous U.S. naval presence. Further U.S. deployments to Romania, including combat aircraft, will likely ensure that the Deveselu Airbase—which hosts 24 Raytheon SM-3 ballistic missile interceptors and forms a part of NATO's ballistic missile defense (BMD) system—is defended against possible Russian retaliation. NATO's Standing Naval Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) has also deployed on several occasions to the region. In December 2015, NATO dispatched an additional flotilla to the Black Sea to train with the Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish navies. In September 2016, U.S. and Bulgarian air forces conducted the first joint NATO air-policing mission—an initiative aimed at deterring violations of Bulgarian airspace.

While reassuring allies is one task, ensuring that NATO can field combat-ready units and material to frontline Europe during an emergency is more complex. The alliance's new Force Integration Units (FIU) deserve special recognition. Located across six Central European countries—Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania—these relatively small command-and-control headquarters play an outsized role for NATO. Their primary mission is to speed the deployment of the NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force into frontline Europe in the event of a military crisis.

By serving as a hinge point between frontline militaries and NATO forces, FIUs also contribute to allied planning and exercises in peacetime. Beginning in December 2015, NATO and Romania activated the Bucharest HQ of NATO's Multinational Division Southeast. Attached to it are two FIUs; a multinational framework brigade HQ is soon to become operational. The Bucharest HQ will be able to command troops deployed in NATO's southeast division to ensure implementation of NATO's Readiness Action Plan. As with the other locations, Romania's FIU is intended to assist in rapidly deploying air, naval and ground forces without resorting to Cold War-era military bases during an attack on a member state.



U.S. sailors take part in a military drill on board the U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Truxtun in the Black Sea. Credit: Stoyan Nenov/Reuters.

Instead of constructing permanent NATO bases, alliance officials have proposed dispatching a brigade of up to 1,000 troops to each of the key frontline states. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter stated that the plan aimed to move NATO to a “full deterrence posture” to thwart any outside aggression. However, this proposal has come under criticism for being inadequate and the planned rapid-reaction force, including air, naval and special operations units of up to 40,000 personnel to back up the initial brigades in case of emergency, has yet to be mobilized.

Another area of heightened complexity for Black Sea planners is the proliferation of ballistic missile technology. Romania is on the frontlines of a technologically sophisticated effort to defend Europe from ballistic missile proliferation: the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA). Romania became NATO’s first CEE member state to host one of the U.S. Navy’s Aegis Ashore missile defense facilities. Located at Romania’s Deveselu Airbase, the site became active on 12 May 2016. It joined an ever-widening missile defense network, including a forward-based radar in Turkey, a command-and control-center in Germany and Aegis-equipped cruisers in the Mediterranean.

Officials in Moscow claim that the U.S.-led missile shield may erode the offensive threat and the deterrent potential of Russian nuclear forces when the system becomes more powerful in the future. In reality, the land-based missile defense installation is designed to detect, track, engage and destroy ballistic missiles in flight outside the atmosphere but is not capable of intersecting nearby Russian missiles. The Aegis Ashore anti-missile defense facility is a key element of the second stage of the EPAA. Phase III will see an Aegis Ashore base set up at Redzikowo, Poland, in 2018.



U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter testifies before a Senate Armed Services Committee. Yuri Gripas/Reuters.

Deveselu air base command center in Romania. Credit: Octav Ganea/Inquam.



EPAA is important for two reasons: practical and strategic. Deveselu provides European NATO with an added layer of protection against ballistic missile threats from the Middle East. Deveselu also provides an important psychological boost for the defense of NATO allies through a permanent U.S. presence. This elevates Romania's strategic importance and creates a powerful demonstration effect in U.S.-Romania relations. It illustrates that Washington is investing for the long-term in Black Sea security and contributes to deterrence through a tripwire effect during a crisis.

As NATO integrates the EPAA system into Europe's overall missile defense architecture, it also bolsters allied missile defense interoperability to a significant degree. In strategic terms, it is important to note that recent statements by senior Russian officials regarding EPAA are inaccurate.¹⁸ The system does not undercut Russia's strategic deterrents or alter its balance of nuclear forces with the United States, which are guaranteed by treaty. Efforts by the Kremlin to mothball or remove EPAA from Europe are instead meant to deny the system's practical and strategic benefits to frontline U.S. allies. Western security officials and diplomats would be wise to make more assertive and public rebuttals of Russia's ill-placed arguments.

Project Conclusions

Russia's policy is testing the maritime dimensions of NATO's collective defense, deterrence and crisis management. Under Putin, Moscow's primary ambition has been to reverse the changes of the post-Cold War era. Its strategic behavior has been calibrated to this end: containing, undermining and reversing NATO influence throughout Europe's east. Even where Russia cannot pressure or entice its neighbors to comply with its concepts like Eurasian integration, the Kremlin attempts to neutralize nearby capitals by preventing them from integrating into Western institutions. The Black Sea has become a key front in this effort. As a result of the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and subsequent Donbas campaign, Moscow can now apply hard- and soft-power pressure along the northern coast of the Black Sea. This has a knock-on effect for NATO members Romania and Bulgaria, since it widens the potential vectors by which Russia can apply strategic pressure on both states.



A ceremony to raise the Russian Naval ensign aboard the Project 636.3 Veliky Novgorod submarine, part of the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet. Credit: Sergei Konkov/TASS.

Moscow's strategy in the Black Sea is a case study, both for its methods and implications. Russia is using the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of revisionism than extensive land conquests. Control of ports and sea-lanes is beneficial, since it threatens to choke the trade and energy routes of wayward states, prevents NATO from projecting sufficient security for Black Sea members and gives Moscow a larger stake in exploiting fossil fuels in maritime locations. The Black Sea strategy could also disrupt or challenge energy supplies through pipeline connections between the Caspian Basin and Europe and set back EU attempts to pursue energy diversity. This would further curtail U.S. and European connections with Central Asia and undermine prospects for future natural gas deliveries from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to Europe.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Russia's actions in the Black Sea are not occurring in a vacuum. In the coming decade, maritime domains around the globe will rise in strategic importance due to an increase in the number of new naval powers, the resurgence of geopolitical competition and the ever-growing globalization of trade. Russia's actions in the Black Sea therefore hold lessons for other maritime powers in their power projection and strategic aspirations. Russia's position can mirror, for example, that of China *vis-à-vis* the maritime energy claims of U.S. Pacific allies such as the Philippines and Thailand. There are also parallels between Russia's essentially maritime challenge to U.S. extended deterrence in the Black Sea area and the growing military assertiveness of China in advancing proprietary claims in the South China Sea. Such behavior is worth studying as a form of maritime revisionism that is likely to be an increasingly common pattern in the 21st century.



Tian Zhong, deputy commander of the Chinese Navy, and Fedotenkov, deputy commander of the Russian Navy, attend a welcome ceremony at Wusong naval port. Credit: ChinaFotoPress.

Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations to enhance the security of NATO's Black Sea flank can be divided into six main clusters: Determining Strategic Objectives; Developing NATO Contingency Plans; Intensifying the NATO Presence; Improving Military Capabilities; Boosting Regional Cooperation; and Enhancing Soft Security Instruments.

1. Determining Strategic Objectives



A strong transatlantic alliance is essential for preserving peace in potential danger zones. A weak alliance with vulnerable neighbors will more likely result in regional conflicts as aggressor states feel emboldened or miscalculate the political will of targeted states and their allies. Perceived weakness is more likely to pull the United State into a war than an alliance that projects credible strength and visible deterrents.



The Black Sea is important for U.S. power projection toward the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, as it provides the United States with an important buffer against Russia's advances into these critical regions.

“A strong transatlantic alliance is essential for *preserving peace in potential danger zones.*”

U.S. sailors and a Bulgarian cadet monitor ship movements during a joint military drill at the U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Truxtun in the Black Sea. Credit: Stoyan Nenov/Reuters.



A more secure Black Sea region protected by NATO profits the United States by providing a more stable environment for international trade, energy transit, infrastructural projects and long-term economic development.



NATO allies should not be excluded from regional decisions, as this will undermine trust in the United States and encourage adversaries to challenge the sovereignty of America's partners. Conversely, all allies must understand that any bilateral deals with Russia that are not discussed with allies serve to undermine the security guarantees enshrined in NATO's Washington Treaty.

The USS Porter fires its close-in weapons system during a live-fire exercise with Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine in the Black Sea. Credit: Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Sean Spratt/U.S. Navy.



2. Developing NATO Contingency Plans



Recent changes to Russia's force posture and power projection capabilities in the Black Sea region necessitate an updated and effective NATO response. This underscores the need for a common security threat assessment that would classify the level of vulnerability of each NATO state, both in the military and non-military realms, encompassing the entire spectrum of security threats, from "hard" to "soft."



Conversely, NATO needs to review its force structures and responses to a variety of potential assaults. Contingency plans must envision a broad range of subversive actions against alliance members in the Black Sea region and promote a common NATO defense rather than an isolated regional initiative.



NATO's eastern flank countries should formulate elaborate plans for civil and military response strategies to counter acts of subversion and aggression. Both Romania and Bulgaria need to identify their domestic vulnerabilities, whether in the political, economic, informational, social, ethnic or regional arenas, that could be targeted by Moscow and prepare a comprehensive national response.

3. Intensifying the NATO Presence



Russia's increased assertiveness in the Black Sea necessitates an increased profile for NATO. Plans to maintain frequent joint exercises and rotations in the Black Sea must be buttressed by a regional command that would coordinate all defensive activities in the region. This should include the three NATO members—Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey—along with key NATO powers such as the United States, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.



The alliance can increase the capabilities of its Standing NATO Maritime Groups. NATO possesses two such groups designed as multinational, quick-reaction maritime forces. However, they are under-resourced and lack the ability to sustain high-intensity operations over a prolonged time. By resourcing them more adequately, NATO will possess a more readily available sea power tool. Additionally, the alliance can also provide better military protection for the Constanta naval base, as a critical maritime infrastructure not only for Romania but also for NATO's entire eastern flank.



Rescue diver during a winch exercise with NRP D. Francisco de Almeida (F334) and HNLMS TROMP (F803).
Credit: WO ARTIGUES/NATO HQ MARCOM.

4. Improving Military Capabilities



An essential element in developing an effective security posture is the implementation of NATO's Alliance Maritime Strategy (AMS) as a foundation for building capabilities in a maritime environment. This means reviewing and updating the AMS to account for changes to the military balance in the Black Sea. Ideally, this would result in improved methods of command and control among allied forces, more robust Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), enhanced cyber and Electronic Warfare (EW) defense, better protections for counter-force assets in ports, military bases and other high-value assets, as well as effective anti-submarine capabilities. Some NATO naval assets could also be reflagged under the three Black Sea members to increase permanent naval capabilities.¹⁹



Romania and Bulgaria need to modernize their own armed forces to account for changes in the regional security environment. This must be a systematic process that will entail an assessment of capabilities and priorities, establishment of a stronger territorial defense force with detailed contingency plans, and pursuit of closer integration with other NATO members. Romania and Bulgaria need to be more than jumping-off points or safe harbors for allied forces operating throughout the region. Both countries have already signaled an intention to increase military spending and modernize their forces. These investments should be made where needs and national specializations are greatest.



Members of the visit, board, search and seizure team of the guided-missile destroyer USS Laboon during a multinational exercise with the Romanian navy corvette Admiral Eustatiu Sebastian. Credit: Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Desmond Parks/U.S. Navy.



For both Romania and Bulgaria, planners should focus their attention on building a more significant naval force with robust capabilities for unmanned ISR and EW missions; as well as a mixture of land- and sea-based A2/AD capabilities. Romania and Bulgaria can develop the ability to deny access to a battle space via anti-ship, anti-surface and anti-air capabilities while protecting critical infrastructure and military assets. Black Sea states should also explore ways to secure the network of ports, airfields and infrastructure so they may easily receive NATO reinforcements. Moreover, in dealing with Russia's A2/AD it is vital to employ penetrating electronic intelligence (ELINT) collection against the associated radars.



Romanian Navy ship ROS Regina Maria prepares to land her helicopter during Exercise SEA BREEZE in the Black Sea. Credit: Cpl Blaine Sewell/NATO HQ MARCOM

5. Boosting Regional Cooperation



Individually, NATO's frontline member states are relatively weak when compared to Russia. Collectively with their neighbors and other NATO allies, they are strong. Robust solidarity among allies is therefore one of the most effective ways to deter aggression or revisionist probes. This requires Black Sea states to develop a common security strategy buttressed by regular military cooperation. Romania or Bulgaria could become convening countries for NATO littoral states and partner countries.



To foster collaboration, several lingering territorial disputes must be resolved—for instance, between Romania and Ukraine over the Black Sea and the Bystroye Channel economic exclusive areas. SEEBRIG, the multinational South East European Brigade, can be a model for regional political and military cooperation in the area.



SNMG2 ships conducting a sail pass with Bulgarian and Romanian navy in black sea, Credit: WO Artigues/NATO HQ MARCOM.

Flight Ops on board NRP D Fransisco de Almeida (F334) departing from Varna.
Credit: WO Artigues/NATO HQ MARCOM.



NATO partner countries, particularly Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, must be engaged in the process of enhancing Black Sea security. The latter two states can offer harboring capabilities for NATO forces. Engagement with Moldova could include constant air patrolling of the Romanian-Moldovan frontier, common training with Moldovan military forces and the mobilization of Romanian-Moldovan task forces trained to tackle outside-inspired insurgencies in regions bordering Romania.



Beyond the immediate Black Sea region, Romania can further develop the Bucharest Format ministerial meetings with Central Europe's Visegrad states and with Bulgaria to focus more systematically on common security dangers along NATO's entire eastern flank.

6. Enhancing Soft Security Instruments



Better use can be made of the North Atlantic Treaty. Article 5 (collective defense in the event of war) is the document's best-known portion. However, similarly structured mechanisms can be arranged *between individual allies* without formally invoking Article 5 under an overt attack. In addition, when defending soft-power interests, Article 4 (diplomatic consultations) is under-utilized. Also valuable are provisions under Articles 2 (economic support) and 3 (self-help and mutual aid). Without having to draw upon the entire alliance, Black Sea member states can make better use of these clauses to protect against the wide array of non-military dangers.



NATO's Black Sea states need to strengthen their internal institutions to combat corrosive and destabilizing Russian influences. This includes combating official corruption, countering blatant disinformation, protecting against security service infiltration and guarding against politically tainted economic influences. The diversification of energy sources and supplies would also decrease dependence on Moscow and curtail the latter's political interference. Economic development is crucial, as this would help shield each society against Russia's disinformation, political penetration and populist appeals to sectors of society that have not benefitted significantly from EU membership.



Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in advance of the meetings of NATO Ministers of Defence. Credit: NDIS/NATO.

Polish Navy frigate ORP Gen. Kociuszko follows astern of Her Majesty's Canadian Ship HMCS Charlottetown in the Black Sea. Credit: Canadian Department of National Defence photo by Cpl Blaine Sewell/NATO HQ MARCOM.



National specializations need to be better leveraged. For instance, Constanza (Romania) and Batumi (Georgia) could play major roles as ports in trade and economic investment. Greater investments can also be allocated to cyber security, taking advantage of Romanian and Bulgarian technological prowess. NATO's Humint Centre of Excellence in Oradea, under the umbrella of SACT, can be integrated in this process. More resources are needed for cybernetic military activities, whereby the Romanian and Bulgarian militaries will be better trained and prepared to participate in joint NATO endeavors to combat cyber-attacks.



Elsewhere inside the EU, a revised Eastern Partnership (EaP) needs to be promoted in order to strengthen the prospect of eventual EU integration for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and enhance stability by stimulating regional economic development. Romania should assume a stronger role in supporting an EaP that would intensify economic and political ties between its eastern neighbors and the EU. A modernized and updated EaP can also include mechanisms to address Russia's disinformation offensive that exploit social, ethnic and religious tensions throughout the region. Such soft-power defenses can help neutralize Russia's soft-power offensives.



NRP D. Francisco de Almeida (F334) and HNLMS TROMP (F803) in the Black Sea. Credit: WO ARTIGUES/HQ MARCOM.

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Cover photo: Cover image

USS Truxtun salutes the Romanian frigate ROS Regina Maria (F 222) during a multilateral exercise with Romania and Bulgaria. Credit: U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd class Scott Barnes.

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