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# Black Sea Defended

NATO Responses to Russia's  
Black Sea Offensive

Strategic Report No. 2

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# Acknowledgments

This report is produced under the auspices of the Center for European Policy Analysis' (CEPA) Black Sea Strategy Project. Led by CEPA Senior Fellow Janusz Bugajski and CEPA Director of Research Peter Doran, it is ongoing effort at CEPA to analyze the Black Sea as a critical component of Russian military strategy in the context of Moscow's revisionist geopolitical ambitions in the Central and Eastern European.

The first report in this series, "Black Sea Rising," considered Russia's regional goals in the Black Sea region. This second report, examines how Moscow is attempting to achieve those objectives, and the subsequent responses by Russia's Black Sea neighbors particularly the two newer NATO members, Romania and Bulgaria.

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# THE ISSUE

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Russia's military and political assertiveness in the Black Sea region is generating uncertainty and insecurity among all littoral states. Moscow's offensives will have serious repercussions for the future of NATO by testing the alliance's political unity, strategic vision, U.S. leadership, force deployments, mission operations, institutional willpower and military capabilities. NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit in July acknowledged the seriousness of the threat and agreed to some preliminary steps. If the alliance's eastern flank is to be fully secured, it must accomplish several key objectives. In particular, the littoral states and leading NATO members need to increase defense spending, modernize their armed forces and naval capabilities, and cooperate more intensively to deploy effective deterrents and defenses.

Moscow seeks supremacy in the Black Sea in order to restore its Eurasian dominion and to project power toward the Mediterranean and Middle East. Its 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. Russia is using the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of neo-imperial 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 or intervening on behalf of vulnerable neighbors; it threatens to choke the trade and energy routes of states not in compliance with Russia's national ambitions; and it gives Moscow an enhanced ability to exploit offshore hydrocarbon resources.

This strategic report is the second in a series. Conducted under the auspices of CEPA'S Black Sea Strategy Project, it focuses on NATO's eastern flank along the Black Sea and examines several pressing questions for which the alliance needs a prescient answer through effective deterrents and defenses. It provides an update on the threats faced from an assertive Russia by NATO members Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey; outlines the strategic interests of the frontline states; examines the extent of regional cooperation; appraises Romania's and Bulgaria's military capabilities; considers NATO and U.S. initiatives in ensuring Black Sea defense; and offers specific recommendations to strengthen the alliance's eastern flank.

# Threats Along NATO's Black Sea Flank

A key factor encouraging Moscow's threatening posture is an ineffective Black Sea security structure, with an inadequate NATO presence along its eastern flank. Over the past two decades, 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 any maritime security arrangement, preferring to maintain the regional status quo. Although NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit, held July 8-9, decided to increase the alliance's presence in the Black Sea, allies have yet to develop effective plans for the southern portion of their eastern flank that will ensure sufficient deterrence, in comparison with those for the northern sector involving Poland and the three Baltic states. While security along the whole front has been declared as indivisible, strengthening only one part of the eastern sector would increase risks to the entire Baltic–Black Sea flank.<sup>1</sup>

Russia's escalating threats in the region, as examined in CEPA's first report on Black Sea security in February 2016 (*Black Sea Rising: Russia's Strategy in Southeast Europe*), intensifies the challenges not only to NATO's credibility, but also to the national security of the littoral states. Russia is building up weapons systems in the Black Sea region in order to project power and intimidate neighboring countries. When fully developed, these systems—including missiles, naval aviation, and long-range bombers—could isolate the Black Sea basin and NATO allies therein from the rest of the alliance.<sup>2</sup> Moscow's combined arms force of land, sea, air and electronic capabilities is now capable of denying access to NATO forces seeking to enter the Black Sea during a conflict. It has also deployed nuclear-capable weapons and is building a similar network of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities against NATO in the eastern Mediterranean around Syria and in the Caucasus.

Russia's maritime power projection capabilities can prevent NATO expeditionary forces from assisting frontline members in case of attack or offering help to other neighboring states menaced by Moscow or other aggressors. It also poses a direct threat to U.S. bases, such as the one near the Romanian port of Constanta. In addition, the Black Sea has become more significant militarily because of uncertain relations between Russia and Turkey, ongoing crises in the Middle East and Russia's escalating involvement in Syria's civil war. Indeed, Moscow is developing operational military links along the Black Sea, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Russia continues to relentlessly pursue its militarization program in the Black Sea, in which the Crimean peninsula, annexed by force, serves as a platform for escalation. For instance, Russian officials announced in early 2016 that it has deployed at least 15 new Russian combat ships—including at least four with modern cruise missiles like the Kalibr-NK—in the Black Sea.<sup>3</sup> Russia now possesses nuclear-capable weapons and platforms in the Black Sea region, including Tu-22M aircraft. Although state funds are shrinking, Moscow continues to prioritize militarization and expansion, and plans to develop a fleet that will surpass that of Turkey in coming years, and prove larger and more effective than the combined forces of all littoral states.

Russia's military buildup also has security implications for maritime traffic on the Black Sea that can hurt the region's economies.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Russia has reduced Ukraine's share of growth in Black Sea shipments and is poised to challenge other littoral states by strengthening its competitiveness by military means. Bulgaria is concerned about disruption to maritime trade routes because 80% of its imports and exports are shipped via the Black Sea. Region wide, Black Sea shipments are important for the flow of oil, grain, fertilizer, iron ore, metals and other commodities, and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles are among the world's most critical oil-flow chokepoints. The risks of disruption to maritime trade flows is growing, and the prospect that Russia will try to increase its influence over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles should not be underestimated.

In addition to hard security threats, the Kremlin continues to develop an assortment of softer hazards for the Black Sea littoral states. It manipulates energy supplies and contracts both as carrots and sticks. Bulgaria is particularly vulnerable because of its high dependence on Russian gas and oil. In the case of both 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 the market economy and EU membership. Moscow media sources claim that neither EU nor NATO inclusion have improved living conditions. Kremlin-sponsored outlets campaign against secularism, multiculturalism and liberalism in order to widen the alienation of disorientated citizens from the European project.

Russia also seeks to foster mistrust and division among Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey in order to preclude them from acting in concert or forging a stronger NATO flank. Bulgaria and Turkey, in particular, remain dependent on Russian oil and gas supplies, making them susceptible to outside pressures. Moscow 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.<sup>5</sup>



# Strategic Interests of Frontline States

NATO countries across Europe's eastern flank face common security challenges and must develop a common security agenda. NATO has not envisaged the same level of defense measures in the Black Sea region, and the onus has been on the capabilities of littoral states supported by allies from outside the region.<sup>6</sup> The Black Sea countries have thus far been unsuccessful in uniting their efforts to build joint defenses. The main impediment to regional cooperation is their diverse histories, neighborhood relations, individual interests, budgetary limitations and bilateral relations with Russia. The most basic principle of a joint agenda would be to strengthen NATO's posture by developing a more effective common diplomatic front. This would entail avoiding bilateral dialogue on security issues between any NATO state and Russian officials, as this invariably allows Moscow to drive wedges between alliance members.

NATO's eastern flank not only includes Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey but also countries further north, particularly Poland and the three Baltic states that remain vulnerable to Russia's pressures. As the two largest NATO allies in the region, Romania and Poland have an enduring interest to develop their strategic partnership with a stronger security component. Romania has also initiated the Bucharest Format with the four Visegrád states (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic) and Bulgaria to discuss common concerns at the ministerial level, as well as trilateral consultations with Poland and Turkey.

During the past two years, the governments of Romania and Bulgaria have realized that Russia's military escalation undermines both NATO and EU cohesion. They were largely unprepared for the prospect that the NATO umbrella does not automatically shield them from regional security dangers. Furthermore, they realize they have neglected their territorial defense capabilities since the early 2000s, having focused primarily on out-of-area, U.S.-led missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both Bucharest and Sofia found themselves possessing armed forces that were underfinanced, underequipped and unprepared for the new type of threats with no coherent contingency plans.

Russia's 2014 attack on Ukraine had a significant impact on the two littoral states. Romania's national security threats were considerably modified in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, both in terms of strategy and operations. As a neighbor of Ukraine, Romania perceived a high degree of direct risk to its national security interests. As a result, 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 has been frustrated by the muted NATO reaction for greater security instruments in the Black Sea and is pushing for a more substantial allied presence in the region.

Because of the Montreux Convention (*see section below*), observers conclude that the expansion and credibility of any NATO deterrent largely depends on the three littoral NATO states to modernize and reinforce their maritime capabilities, supplemented by frequent exercises by U.S. and Western European navies.<sup>7</sup> Rather than committing itself to a naval buildup, NATO is more likely to support a semi-integrated structure for the navies of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, with funding for infrastructural modernization. A rotational NATO air patrol mission, similar to the Baltic Air Policing mission, is also possible. In the event of more provocative military actions by Moscow, NATO calculates that it could deploy anti-ship or anti-aircraft missiles to Bulgaria and Romania, which would circumvent the Montreux Convention.

A key component to enhancing security is the intensification of regional cooperation. Currently, 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 Russian military assault. 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 by shifting the alliance's focus toward the Black Sea.

Unfortunately, the positions of various Bulgarian government officials are often contradictory, which leads to an overall confusing policy on Black Sea security. In turn, this generates mistrust between Bulgaria and its neighbors and hesitation on the part of NATO to take more decisive steps in the region. While Romania's policy has been consistent regardless of the ideological makeup of the government, Bulgaria's foreign policy has undergone frequent revisions, depending on the preferences of different political forces. Socialist governments have continued the communist tradition of maintaining friendly relations with the Kremlin, although for economic—not ideological—reasons. Russia's energy projects in Bulgaria have presented various corrupt schemes for the enrichment of political elites. Non-socialist governments have sought to curtail Russia's policy of deepening Bulgaria's energy dependence. Foreign and security policy has undergone similar turns, depending on the Moscow connections of the governing party.

Differences at the top matter. On one hand, Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev has emphasized numerous times the dangers Russia presents to Europe. In a June 2016 speech in Strasbourg, he urged the West not to succumb to provocations from Moscow, stressing that Russia does not support the principles of international order and seeks to destabilize the West.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov has displayed a more careful approach toward Russia, which some observers attribute to his fear of President Vladimir Putin. After the demise of the South Stream natural gas pipeline project and with the Kremlin blaming Bulgaria, Borissov has become particularly fearful of Moscow's retribution. He evidently believes that Moscow helped bring down his first government in February 2013.<sup>9</sup>



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg meets with the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov - NATO Multimedia Library/NIDS.

Nevertheless, high-ranking Bulgarian military and navy officers as well as civilian defense officials understand the importance of strengthening Bulgaria's defense capabilities and building regional alliances. Work on creating a regional maritime task group was underway and welcomed by defense officials until Borissov declared on June 16, 2016, that Bulgaria would not join forces with Romania and Turkey to establish a joint fleet.<sup>10</sup> His comments sent a negative signal to Bucharest and placed Romanian President Klaus Johannis in an uncomfortable position, as he had just made an official visit to Sofia to discuss Black Sea defense cooperation. Shortly after this incident, Borissov announced a course of "normalization" of Bulgaria's relations with Russia, dispatching his foreign minister, Daniel Mitov, to Sochi for the foreign ministers' meeting of the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

Bulgaria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserts 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 in the Black Sea through joint exercises and visits by NATO naval task groups, as well as frequent visits by ships of other NATO countries. Bulgarian officials believe that Ankara has a more obstructive stance, as it views Black Sea security to be a regional matter to be decided solely by the littoral states. In addition, Turkey's strategic partnership with Russia has played a decisive role in Ankara's refusal to involve NATO more substantially in the Black Sea.

According to Bulgarian officials, media reports about the potential formation of a joint fleet by Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey stirred public outrage. Given Bulgaria's history, it is difficult for many Bulgarians to accept that their navy could be under Turkish command within a potential rotational command structure. By rejecting the idea of a joint fleet, Borissov was catering to that part of the population. He was also wary of the Russian lobby in Bulgaria, fearing retribution if Sofia openly pits itself against Moscow. Presidential elections are scheduled for November 2016, and Borissov may decide to run for that office.

As the NATO Summit was concluding in Warsaw on July 9, 2016, Borissov made a surprising call in Sofia recommending that the Black Sea be proclaimed a "demilitarized zone."<sup>12</sup> This placed Bulgaria at odds with NATO's leadership, which had just decided to work on increasing its presence in the Black Sea—a decision officially supported by the Bulgarian delegation headed by Plevneliev. NATO is expected to adopt more concrete measures for Black Sea security in October 2016, but Bulgaria's position might remain unclear and uncommitted in the midst of the presidential election campaign, especially if the prime minister and other officials seek to placate Moscow.

Following Borissov's public pronouncements, negotiations on Black Sea security may have been set back, and trust among neighbors needs to be rebuilt. NATO and the United States will need to take the lead in brokering a regional agreement. Simultaneously, both Romania and Bulgaria can expedite their military modernization and adaptability to the new challenges, while seeking military and financial support from other NATO allies. Military cooperation in the Black Sea requires reconfiguration, going beyond the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR) format that focuses on humanitarian emergencies and which Russia's participation can simply neutralize.

Romania and Bulgaria share similar interests regarding the need to consolidate NATO's military presence in the Black Sea and along its shores. They both play an important role within the new NATO strategic re-alignments on the eastern flank by hosting NATO Force Integration Units (FIUs) and elements of the NATO/U.S. missile shield (detailed below), in the case of Romania. These elements can enable both countries to develop a broader agenda for cooperation, by strengthening naval collaboration, working jointly to counter cyberattacks and other forms of subversion, coordinating their diplomatic approaches, and cooperating to diversify energy supply routes and energy sources to reduce Russia's export primacy.

In further moves toward military cooperation, 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 July 9, 2016, that an agreement for a larger frontline presence on the southeast flank had been reached, and that it will be based on a Romanian-Bulgarian brigade which will provide the framework for enhanced NATO training exercises.

Bucharest and Sofia could also join forces in support of extending economic and financial sanctions and other punitive measures against the Russian government for its annexation of Crimea and its continuing attacks against Ukraine's sovereignty. Bilateral cooperation needs to be consequential and not merely a political instrument for good neighborly relations. It can also enhance initiatives such as the Craiova Group with Serbia to develop economic, transportation and energy links throughout the Balkans.

## Black Sea Security Shortcomings

NATO lacks an adequate force structure and command and control system in the Black Sea region. One key factor limiting NATO's presence there is the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates access through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and distinguishes between Black Sea countries and foreign states.<sup>13</sup> It limits the tonnage and time spent in the Black Sea by ships from non-littoral states. In peacetime, it allows those ships up to 21 days, while submarines and aircraft carriers from non-littoral states are banned altogether. The convention also gives Turkey enhanced control of the Bosphorus Straits. The United States, which is not a party to the Montreux Convention, respects the treaty even though the document limits its ability to project naval power into the region and constrains NATO's response to Russia's aggressive posture.

Given these constraints on NATO, Romania's and Bulgaria's military forces are inadequate to defend these countries in case of a Russian attack. Turkey is in a much stronger position, although Russia's military buildup is altering the balance of power and undermining Ankara's longer-term capabilities. Russia's expanding Black Sea fleet should be of direct concern to Turkey. In order to maintain some degree of parity in the Black Sea, Turkey's naval forces need to pursue extensive modernization, with a possible repositioning of these forces to better ensure naval supremacy and control access to the Bosphorus Straits. The failed coup in Turkey in mid-July 2016 and the subsequent purge of the military by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government may weaken Turkey's defense capabilities, enfeeble NATO's forward presence and favor Russia's assertive stance in the Black Sea region.

Ankara has been seeking to defuse its dispute with Russia following the November 2015 shootdown of a Russian warplane by Turkish forces along the country's border with Syria. The government placated Moscow by issuing an apology in late June 2016. As a condition of this rapprochement, the Kremlin is likely to demand that Turkey does not commit itself to any regional security organizations in the Black Sea. Ankara has opposed any NATO expansion in the Black Sea and is staunchly opposed to amending the Montreux Convention. Nonetheless, according to the convention, Turkey possesses some flexibility in exceptional circumstances such as wartime emergencies to decide what ships to let into the Black Sea. However, given the recent moves toward rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow, any amendments to the Montreux Convention appear highly improbable.

Romania's military capabilities remain weak, as the country has a relatively modest defense budget and has been preoccupied with out-of-area missions such as the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. The modernization program that Romania launched in 2007 has largely stalled; it has completed only 15 out of 85 planned acquisitions, and some Romanian forces still use equipment dating back to communist times.<sup>14</sup>

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 weaknesses also include an underdeveloped reserve force, limited naval and A2/AD 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 in the past inhibited large investments in the defense industry and continue to obstruct technological development.

After joining NATO in 2004, Romania reformed its armed forces according to the needs of multinational missions in projecting power outside the NATO area, while neglecting territorial defense.<sup>15</sup> With Russia's ongoing expansion and subversion in the neighborhood since 2014, the modernization of Romania's armed forces and the ability to defend the country against a growing Russian threat became especially important. A positive trend can be seen in Romania's defense budget. Starting in 2017, it is due to rise to 2 percent of GDP over the following decade, with additional money to be ringfenced for armed forces acquisitions, potentially reaching about €10 billion (\$10.9 billion) over a 10-year period.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visits the Multinational Headquarters South-East - NATO Multimedia Library/NIDS.

The Romanian Navy's modernization program is approaching a critical phase to create a more credible and flexible force for national defense.<sup>16</sup> Chief of Naval Staff Rear Adm. Alexandru Mirsu has stated that Russia's militarization of Crimea places Romania's entire coastline within reach of Russian long-range surface-to-surface missiles. Moscow also possesses land-based aircraft deployed at Crimean airbases, and its growing Black Sea Fleet will soon match all other Black Sea navies combined.

Romania's navy is focusing on the Type 22 frigate Phase 2 modernization program and the acquisition of a new class of corvette. The existing combat management system (CMS), electronic warfare (EW) suite, radars, and electro-optical systems are all obsolete and will need to be replaced. The program is also planned to enhance anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti-surface warfare (ASuW) capabilities through the installation of anti-ship missiles and the provision of a missile-based air-defense capability.

Romania's navy is committed to replacing its current shore-based anti-ship missile batteries with a new system, and aims to upgrade its fast attack craft fleet. Successfully implementing these modernization plans by the mid-2020s would enhance the navy's regional response and its ability to contribute to broader NATO operations. Nonetheless, financial uncertainty is possible. The effort to bring defense spending up to 2 percent of GDP by 2017 will require an additional 26 percent one-year increase which, in light of Romania's wider financial constraints, may prove difficult.

Bulgaria has also made contributions to Black Sea security. For instance, the Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Center was established in Burgas, based on an October 15, 2004, decision taken by the Heads of Border/Coast Guard Services of the Black Sea states at their meeting in Odesa. Sofia has also pledged 400 ground troops to the land brigade hosted by Romania and vows to expand maritime security cooperation with Bucharest, especially in combating illegal migration and terrorism.



A rocket is launched from the Bulgarian navy frigate *Drazki* during the BREEZE 2014 military drill in the Black Sea. - Stoyan Nenov/Reuters.

The BLACKSEAFOR Agreement, as the legal basis for the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group, aims to enhance cooperation and interoperability among the naval forces of the littoral states. It includes political consultations and regular Black Sea Naval Commanders (BSNC) meetings but also includes Russia. Bulgaria chaired BLACKSEAFOR in 2014; Georgia and Romania refused to take over the chairmanship in 2015 and 2016 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Next in line was Russia, but Sofia did not offer the chairmanship to Moscow. Bulgarian Defense Ministry officials asserted that the mechanism was suspended, with little chance of being revived as Russia refuses to discuss the annexation of Crimea.

Bulgaria is planning to increase its defense spending from about 1.35 to 2 percent of GDP by 2024. The mechanism is already in place by being included in the defense ministry program and has been adopted by parliament. Under the plan, 20 percent of Bulgaria's defense expenditures will be spent on acquiring new equipment. Bulgaria's naval plans are more modest than those of Romania. Sofia is preparing to acquire two new domestically produced patrol frigates worth €400 million (\$452 million) in the next three years, as specified in the 2016 state budget, but other similar programs are likely to take longer. The Bulgarian parliament also approved expenditures for refurbishing two of its existing Belgian-made frigates.<sup>17</sup> The country possesses a few other ships, including anti-mining vessels, which are valuable for the region. Sofia has also made a decision (and the parliament approved funding) for updating its air fleet by buying a new escadrille of modern aircraft—either American F-16s or Swedish Gripen fighter jets.

Given that a buildup of maritime capabilities is an expensive and long-term proposition, in the shorter term Romania and Bulgaria also need to focus on surveillance and missile defense in a cooperative regional framework. This would entail coordinating missile defense capabilities, developing more advanced radar capabilities that integrate with existing NATO architecture, and coordinating counter-cyberattack 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. Creating a robust A2/AD zone for Romania would entail lower costs than building a fleet of naval vessels.

In this broader security setting, whereas Moscow's offensive strategy integrates military, informational, economic, energy and various soft-power instruments to achieve its desired strategic goals, NATO's frontline states have been slower to develop an active multidimensional security posture.<sup>18</sup> This is evident not only in the military domain but in inadequacies in informational policy, cyber defense and regional cooperation. An important example of what can be done is Romania's assumed responsibility to lead the Ukraine Cyber Defense Trust Fund, adopted during the 2014 Wales NATO summit to help Ukraine reform and modernize its defense capabilities. Romania can provide valuable expertise and professional support in several domains such as countering Russian propaganda, combating corruption and developing cyber defense.

# NATO and U.S. Initiatives

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has said he wants NATO to have a “permanent naval presence” and to establish a regular Black Sea flotilla that respects international conventions and includes German, Italian, Turkish and American vessels.<sup>19</sup> He has called for increased security for NATO members bordering Russia. In February 2016, Defense Minister Mihnea Motoc announced that Romania would negotiate within NATO to establish a regular multinational naval patrol in the Black Sea.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, even if a Black Sea fleet were created, it would only include Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey on a permanent basis, as other countries would be required to rotate their ships in accordance with the Montreux Convention.

NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow has voiced support for a regular NATO naval presence on the Black Sea.<sup>21</sup> In addition to closer maritime integration among Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, the Romanian proposal envisages cooperation with non-NATO partners Georgia and Ukraine, as well as with the United States. Turkey’s Erdogan also appeared to endorse the proposal, bemoaning the absence of NATO and complaining that the Black Sea was becoming a “Russian lake.”<sup>22</sup> The NATO Warsaw Summit underscored the alliance’s responsibility to ensure the security of its members in the Black Sea and declared that it would develop a “tailored forward presence.” This 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 U.S. and other allies may prove insufficient to deter further Kremlin aggression, given the weakness of Romanian and Bulgarian naval capabilities and Turkey’s apparent unwillingness to confront Moscow. For the time being, Romania’s proposal for a more formidable Black Sea flotilla appears to be dead in the water.

NATO currently lacks a contingency plan along its Black Sea front where Russia poses an immediate threat to freedom of navigation and overflight, and is poised to engage in hostile actions against one or more of the littoral states. The U.S. has been implementing the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) following Russia’s attack on Ukraine in order to strengthen the defense of frontline NATO states. In February 2016, the U.S. quadrupled its fiscal 2017 funding request for the ERI to \$3.4 billion, up from \$789 million in fiscal 2016. The largest proportion (56 percent) of this funding will go toward “Prepositioned Equipment,” with about 31 percent dedicated to “Increased Presence.”<sup>23</sup>

NATO has increased its rotational presence in the Black Sea during the past two years. In 2014, US warships spent a total of 207 days on the Black Sea, while in 2013 they only made two short visits, for a total of 27 days.<sup>24</sup> Washington’s ERI funding will also support the continuous presence of an Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) in Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. 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 receive \$17.9 million to increase the volume and scope of engagements with NATO allies and partners conducted from Romania’s Mihail Kogălniceanu air base and Bulgaria’s Novo Selo air base. The funding is earmarked for exercises, training, transportation and maintenance costs.

The U.S. Navy has allocated \$5 million for Black Sea engagements, with a focus on multinational exercises. Another \$4 million will go toward Bulgarian and Romanian participation in Flying Training Exercises with U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE). The aim is to boost interoperability. Each exercise will involve about 300 personnel and 12 Combat Air Force (CAF)/4 Mobility Air Force (MAF) airframes. Funding will be directed toward air force munitions storage areas in Bulgaria (Graf Ignatievo air base)

and Romania (Campia Turzii air base). Romania and Bulgaria are also projected to receive additional funds for airfield infrastructure. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) seeks to improve airfields and refueling capability in parts of southern and eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup>

U.S. and NATO training exercises have become more regular in the region. 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.<sup>27</sup> Since 2013, military exercises have led to an almost continuous U.S. naval presence in the area. In December 2015, the U.S. guided-missile destroyer USS Ross participated in a bilateral passing exercise (PASSEX) with the Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish navies. Further U.S. deployments to Romania, including combat aircraft, are expected to ensure that the Deveselu air base, which hosts 24 SM-3 ballistic missile interceptors and forms a part of NATO's ballistic missile defense (BMD) system (see below), is defended against possible Russian attack.

Among the periodic exercises conducted by NATO, it is worth mentioning Steadfast Cobalt, a NATO Response Force interoperability exercise in Romania staged in late May and early June 2016.<sup>28</sup> NATO has also conducted several AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) surveillance flights over the Black Sea. In March 2016, a NATO AWACS was deployed to Turkey's Konya air base to participate in surveillance exercises.<sup>29</sup> NATO's Standing Naval Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) has also deployed on several occasions to the region.

In December 2015, NATO and the Romanian Ministry of Defense activated the Bucharest HQ of NATO's Multinational Division Southeast.<sup>30</sup> Attached to it are two Force Integration Units (FIU) and 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. NATO has established small Force Integration Units (FIUs) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, in order to coordinate the logistics for moving materiel into those countries. These locations are 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.



Steadfast Cobalt 16 awards ceremony in Bucharest, Romania on June 1, 2016 - NATO/SSgt Dan Bardsley GBRA.

Instead of constructing permanent NATO bases, alliance officials have proposed dispatching brigades of up to 1,000 troops in each of the key frontline states: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter says the plan aims 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.

NATO is reinforcing its Mediterranean presence in the wake of Syria’s civil war and Russia’s growing military assertiveness in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> This includes increased surveillance and reconnaissance, deployments of troops in advisory roles to crisis-hit countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and reinforced military deployments. NATO’s new southern strategy also envisions more regular, large-scale military drills. In the Black Sea region, the U.S. has also been conducting joint drills in Georgia, deploying tanks shipped across the Black Sea for the first time; a NATO-Ukraine Regional Airspace Program (RASP) has also been developed.<sup>32</sup> In April 2016, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said he supported the creation of a joint Bulgarian-Romanian-Ukrainian brigade, similar to the one Ukraine established with Poland and Lithuania in 2009.

In the realm of missile defense, Romania is on the front lines of a technologically sophisticated effort to defend Europe, including its Black Sea states, from ballistic missile proliferation. Known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), Romania recently became NATO’s first Central European member state to host one of the U.S. Navy’s Aegis Ashore missile defense facilities. Located at Deveselu air base, the site became active May 12, 2016, joining an ever-widening missile defense network that includes a forward-based radar in Turkey, a command and control center in Germany, and Aegis-equipped cruisers in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>33</sup>

Romania’s Aegis Ashore missile defense facility is a key element of the Pentagon’s staged rollout of EPAA. The next phase will see an Aegis Ashore base set up at Redzikowo, Poland, in 2018. Back in Moscow, officials knowingly and wrongly claim that the U.S. missile shield may erode their nuclear deterrent when the system becomes more powerful in the future. In reality, EPAA’s upper-tier, land-based missile defense is designed to detect, track, engage and destroy incoming ballistic threats outside the atmosphere and originating from Iran. This means that it is not capable of intercepting Russian ballistic missiles.

EPAA is important for three reasons. The first is practical; Deveselu gives NATO’s European member states a needed layer of protection against potential ballistic missile threats from the Middle East. This safeguard will become more potent once an additional Aegis Ashore facility comes online in Poland. Without EPAA, however, NATO will fail to achieve its historical goal of protecting Europe primarily from Iranian ballistic missiles by 2020. If NATO can meet this deadline, it will demonstrate that the alliance can still set ambitious objectives and meet them—something that has come into question in recent years.<sup>24</sup>

A second, yet no less crucial, aspect of EPAA is Deveselu’s strategic significance for Romania. The Deveselu facility provides an important psychological element for the defense of NATO allies through a permanent U.S. presence. Indeed, the Deveselu base is to be staffed by 200 to 500 U.S. military, civilian and contract employees. EPAA elevates Romania’s strategic importance to Washington as the host country for U.S. defense assets while also creating a powerful demonstration effect in the U.S.-Romania defense relationship. It shows that the United States is on the ground, investing for the long term in Black Sea security and contributing to both a deterrent and trip-wire effect during a crisis.

Finally, EPAA creates additional, knock-on bonuses for the alliance. As NATO integrates the U.S. Aegis Ashore system into Europe's combined missile defense architecture, it bolsters allied interoperability while increasing opportunities for joint training and exercises.

If EPAA provides Black Sea states and NATO with many positive advantages, it is also important to be real about the system's physical limitations. In a real-world crisis, the number of currently deployed EPAA interceptors would be unnervingly limited. WMD-capable ballistic missiles could still penetrate EPAA's defenses. This is deeply troubling. The layer of protection provided to European populations is dangerously thin. Ideally, NATO members could address this deficiency by fielding a rotational presence of national (mid-tier) missile defense assets in the Black Sea region, such as the Patriot missile defense system used by the U.S. Army. Neighboring NATO members like Poland are currently in the process of acquiring this kind of capability. By bolstering the upper-tier defense of EPAA with the mid-tier capabilities of systems like Patriot, all of NATO would be safer from the 21st-century threat of ballistic missile proliferation.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (L), Romanian Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș and U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work (R) take part in the inauguration of the U.S. Navy's Aegis Ashore missile defense facility at Deveselu air base, Romania. - INQUAM Photos/Reuters.

# Preliminary Recommendations

Preliminary recommendations on enhancing security for NATO's Black Sea flank can be divided into five main clusters: Developing NATO Contingency Plans, Intensifying the NATO Presence, Improving Military Capabilities, Boosting Regional Cooperation, and Enhancing Soft Security Instruments.

## **1. Developing NATO Contingency Plans**

A common security threat assessment is needed for NATO's Black Sea eastern flank that would classify the level of vulnerability of each NATO state, both in the military and non-military realms. Conversely, NATO needs to review its force structures and responses to a variety of potential assaults. NATO contingency plans must envision a broad range of subversive and aggressive actions against alliance members in the Black Sea region and simultaneously promote a common NATO defense rather than an isolated regional initiative. NATO's eastern flank countries also need to undertake more elaborate plans regarding civil and military response strategies to acts of subversion and aggression. Both Romania and Bulgaria must identify domestic vulnerabilities that could be targeted by Moscow and prepare a comprehensive and credible response framework.

## **2. Intensifying the NATO Presence**

Plans to maintain frequent joint exercises and rotations in the Black Sea, in response to Moscow's assertiveness, must be undergirded by a regional command that would coordinate all defensive activities in the region.<sup>35</sup> This should include the three NATO members—Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey—along with key NATO powers such as the United States, France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy. The alliance can also increase the capabilities of its Standing NATO Maritime Groups. NATO possesses two such groups, designed as multinational, quick-reaction maritime forces.<sup>36</sup> 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 seapower tool. 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.

## **3. 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.<sup>37</sup> The strategy needs to be reviewed and updated in the light of Europe's changing security environment. The maritime domain will rise in strategic importance in the coming decade due to an increase in the number of new naval powers, the resurgence of geopolitical competition, and the intensifying globalization of trade. This will test the maritime dimensions of NATO's collective defense, deterrence and crisis management.

Among the core components for Black Sea defense are effective electronic means of reconnaissance and communication, enhanced cyber defense and intelligence penetration, missile capabilities to defend military bases and other high-value assets, and effective anti-submarine capabilities. Some NATO naval assets could also be reflagged under the three Black Sea members to increase permanent naval capabilities.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Romania and Bulgaria should modernize their armed forces. This needs to be a systematic process that will entail an assessment of capabilities and priorities, establishing a stronger territorial defense force with detailed contingency plans, and pursuing closer integration with other NATO members. Apart from being a potential base for aircraft for operations throughout the region, Romania needs support in building a more significant naval force that would also include amphibious ships and unmanned aircraft, which are hardened against EW.

Capabilities need to be modernized in line with new technological developments, especially in the field of A2/AD systems where the United States can take steps to mitigate Moscow's competitive advantage. Russia is a threat to freedom of navigation, trade, fishing, energy exploration and overflights. Frontline states should invest together with the alliance in layers of A2/AD platforms capable of securing the network of ports, airfields and the broader infrastructure necessary for receiving NATO reinforcements. 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. Moreover, in dealing with Russia's A2/AD it is vital to employ penetrating electronic intelligence (ELINT) collection against the associated radars.

#### **4. Boosting Regional Cooperation**

In their own self-interest, states along the Black Sea coast need to develop a common security strategy buttressed by regular military cooperation. Romania or Bulgaria could become convening countries for the NATO littoral states and partner countries. To foster collaboration, several lingering territorial disputes need to be resolved—for instance, between Romania and Ukraine regarding the exclusive economic area in the Black Sea and the Bystroye Channel. SEEBRIG, the multinational South East European Brigade, can be a model for regional political and military cooperation in the area. NATO partner countries, particularly Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, need to be engaged in the process. 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 the Visegrád states and Bulgaria to focus more systematically on common security dangers.

#### **5. Enhancing Soft Security Instruments**

NATO states must strengthen their internal institutions to combat corrosive and destabilizing Russian influences. This includes combating official corruption, countering blatant misinformation, 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 its political interference. Economic development is crucial among NATO states in the Black Sea 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. Constanza and Batumi (in Georgia) could also play a major role as key ports in trade and economic investment.

Greater investments should be allocated to cybersecurity, 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.

Within the EU, a revised Eastern Partnership (EaP) needs to be promoted that would strengthen the prospect of eventual EU integration for Ukraine 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 and other forms of propaganda that exploit social, ethnic and religious tensions throughout the region. Such soft power defenses can help neutralize Russia's soft power offensives.



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