



Navigating Troubled Waters:

Black Sea Security in the Context of the War in Ukraine



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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EURO-ATLANTIC COMMUNITY ON THE MARGINS OF THE NATO SUMMIT IN WASHINGTON DC IN 2024

Elements of context

IN security in the Black Sea region has not been a black swan for the Euro-Atlantic community, it has been a veritable grey rhino.

The Black Sea is the place where the major players of the current geopolitical scene have met, and their interests are more convergent than ever: the Euro-Atlantic community, the Balkans, the Russian Federation, the Middle East, the South Caucasus. This strategic location is not only a border between the transatlantic alliance and the Russian Federation – the most persistent threat to the alliance's security, according to the recent Strategic Concept, but also a particular mosaic of overlapping military and non-military threats alike.

In the last decade, the Russian Federation has considerably increased its multi-domain military presence in the Black Sea. We note that dominating the maritime part of the Black Sea region has long been a desire in the Russian Federation's regional strategy to threaten the security of NATO members in the region. It has also allowed the Russian Federation to try to isolate countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, that have voiced their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The Black Sea Fleet and access to Sevastopol played a pivotal role in projecting this foreign policy objective. In the case of Georgia, the Russian Federation used its naval forces to destroy the Georgian fleet (Melvin & Seskuria, 2022). Through such actions, the Russian Federation has consolidated its power in the Black Sea. The war in Ukraine has partially changed this dy-

namic, showing that Russian power is not as great as the myth is.

By partially destroying the Black Sea Fleet headquarters in Sevastopol in September 2023 and substantially decimating Russian capabilities, Ukraine, backed by its allies with relevant military technology such as drones and long-range cruise missiles, has demonstrated that it can reshape the balance of power in the Black Sea. Ukraine's success is even more remarkable because it does not yet have a functioning navy (Dickinson, 2023). Another turning point in the conflict was the April 2022 event when Ukraine shot down the Moskva, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, followed by the liberation of Snake Island.

If it was commonplace from the moment Georgia was occupied by the Russian Federation in 2008 that this state actor is the biggest threat to regional security, today we see how other geopolitical actors with global power status, such as the People's Republic of China, seek to project various power goals in the region. This underlines the need for an integrated strategy for the Black Sea region, one that encompasses both NATO member and partner riparian states.

However, achieving consensus for a Black Sea strategy for NATO is not at all an easy job, especially since there are two main divergent views regarding the role of NATO at the Black Sea within the alliance. First, we have the view that argues for a more firm and consistent allied presence in the region, supported by countries such as Romania (the internationalist position), and then we have the position supported by Türkiye that calls

for less interventionism and less militarization in the region. Unfortunately for the internationalist camp, the Montreux Convention is the framework that favors a less concrete presence of the allies at the Black Sea and, additionally, more power to a single country, namely Türkiye, that controls the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, whose strategic relevance was also highlighted in the context of the war in Ukraine. Since Türkiye decided to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to the military forces of the Black Sea states, NATO's deterrent posture has been significantly limited to the Black Sea. NATO allies' naval representation in the Black Sea has been considerably reduced, which has also affected the training of Romanian and Bulgarian naval forces.

Now, even though the Russian Federation's Black Sea Fleet has been partially destabilized by Ukraine, the allies must remain on guard and realize that the Russian danger has not passed. Moscow's plans to build a naval base in occupied Abkhazia are another signal that the Russian Federation will not easily give up its offensive position in the Black Sea. The allies must continue to keep an eye on the dynamics of the region and act accordingly, while also thinking one step ahead and creating the political consensus necessary for a sharp Black Sea security strategy that is embraced by NATO.

The vulnerabilities highlighted by the war in Ukraine

When it comes to the biggest regional threat, there is a strong consensus that it is the Russian Federation. The same strategic consensus cannot be said when it comes to vulnerabilities. The Euro-Atlantic community's vulnerabilities in the region are not few, and some of them have been part of critical secu-

rity voices' analyses even before the war in Ukraine began. However, the war in Ukraine amplified a number of these vulnerabilities to a point where turning back was no longer possible, and quick decisions had to give way to strategic ambiguity.

1. Lack of a strengthened regional identity that could make Black Sea security cooperation possible

Differences in the vision of Black Sea allies and partners, their different degree of integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, as well as the two competing visions on the Black Sea (the one in favor of internationalization, supported by Romania, and the one against internationalization, supported by Türkiye and articulated through the Montreux Convention) have so far made it impossible to consolidate a regional identity, an important step in the regional security conversation. Existing cooperation structures, such as the BSEC - Black Sea Economic Cooperation, have been limited to talking about economic cooperation and joint investment projects, but have proved far too ineffective in relation to security needs.

Moreover, some of the allies, e.g. Bulgaria, depend on the Russian Federation for energy: before the war started, 77% of Bulgaria's gas needs and 90% of its oil needs came from Russian imports (Kogan, 2022). These unwanted dependencies make regional cooperation to deter the main threat much more difficult.

2. Insufficient capabilities of some NATO littoral states in the region - notably Romania and Bulgaria

The capabilities of the NATO Black Sea littoral states need rapid modernization and major investment, as some of them, especially the mines, are still of Soviet origin and have not yet made the transition to Western

ones. They are deficient in capabilities when it comes to the maritime domain, due to modest investments in this sector over the last few years. For instance, Romania and Bulgaria combined currently only operate seven escort frigates that can be considered major surface combatants (Lancaster, 2023). NATO partner states are no better off when it comes to naval forces either, with Georgia's naval capabilities non-existent.

Tailored Forward Presence:

At the 2016 NATO Summit in Wales, the Allies have agreed to establish this type of presence in the southern part of the eastern flank, which is a lowered version of the enhanced forward presence established in the north of the eastern flank. This taxonomy highlighted that more strategic importance was given to the north of the eastern flank rather than its southern part, where the Black Sea is situated. This tailored presence has land, sea, and air elements, and its land component is coordinated by a multinational brigade in Craiova, Romania.

3. Ambivalence of a key player in the region - Türkiye

Some NATO allies have shown ambivalent behavior towards the Russian Federation, such as Türkiye. It has particularly affected regional cooperation in recent years and even during the war, in the context of the decision to apply sanctions.

We also have in mind the episode in which Türkiye purchased the S-400 missile system from the Russian Federation, which resulted in Türkiye's removal from the F-35 program by the US (Flanagan, 2020). Episodes like this

only deepen the capability gap between East and West and perpetuate the state of mistrust between allies in the regional context.

4. Fragmentation of NATO's eastern flank and a weakened defense and deterrence posture in the Black Sea, partly due to the limitations of the Montreux Convention

NATO's two levels of forward defense – “enhanced” in the Baltic area and “tailored” in the Black Sea region - have created a vacuum in the region in recent years, leading to a fragmentation of the Eastern flank through this asymmetric defense posture.

The limitations of the Montreux Convention have made it almost impossible to conduct military exercises in the Black Sea in the context of the war in Ukraine, and in the wider context, makes talk of a permanent allied military presence unlikely and, in any case, difficult to implement.

5. Frozen conflicts in the region that are starting to boil are a real threat to the region, a threat which, together with the war in Ukraine, makes the region even less predictable. Note here the frozen conflict in Transnistria in the Republic of Moldova, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia in Georgia, but also the tense situation in the South Caucasus and the potentially escalating conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The existence of these frozen conflicts favors the influence of the Russian Federation in the region, as it is known that Moscow is interested in generating and maintaining hotbeds of tension to control sovereign states or strategic spaces by controlling a part of the state. This has several implications for regional security, given the complex cooperation between the Russian Federation and these conflict zones,

as well as the complicated relations between these irredentist units and the states on whose territory these conflicts are located.

6. Lack of clear vision for implementing a **victory theory** in the context of the war in Ukraine and lack of prospects for **Euro-Atlantic-oriented states** (Ukraine and Georgia, and possibly in the future the Republic

of Moldova) to join NATO is, in the acute context, the greatest vulnerability. Consensus must be built so that a future European security architecture includes the Black Sea region as a strategic point, but this security architecture will largely depend on the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, the liberation of territories and the recovery of Crimea.



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Steps FOR A MORE COHERENT approach regarding Black Sea Security since 24th of February 2022

Until the war in Ukraine, even though the expansion of the European Union and NATO has made the Black Sea a key region in the security architecture of Eurasia, it has not had any major international visibility. The current security situation in the region gave the allies the necessary impetus to bolster NATO's deterrence and defense posture at the Black Sea through a few important measures adopted during the last two summits – in Madrid and Vilnius.

NATO's new Strategic Concept, adopted at the 2022 Madrid Summit, premieres the beginning of an alliance-wide strategic conversation on Black Sea security, recognizing that militarization by the Russian Federation directly impacts the alliance's interests: "Moscow's military build-up, including in the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Sea regions, along with its military integration with Belarus, challenge our security and interests". Moreover, the strategic importance of the Black Sea is finally recognized, together with the one of the Western Balkans. The determination to support the transatlantic ambitions of the countries in the region is acknowledged. In addition to that, the strategic framework

also reaffirms NATO's commitment to support these states to strengthen their capabilities and address the various threats they face.

Since the war and in particular this year, regional cooperation between like-minded partners has started to intensify, notable in this respect being the Black Sea Grain Initiative (limited success), but also the establishment of the International Crimea Platform hosted by the government in Bucharest in April 2023, where Romania and Ukraine organized the First Black Sea Security Conference. Economic cooperation and joint infrastructure projects for more connectivity in the region were also main topics of discussion in this year's iteration of the Three Seas Initiative Summit and Business Forum, in which Ukraine and Republic of Moldova were welcomed as associated members.

Another example of cooperation between NATO allies is expected to be that Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria are on the verge of talks to create a joint force to clean up mines drifting into their waters from the war.

But, apart from forums of discussions and the diplomatic expression of the good intentions partners in the region have, the war in Ukraine has determined the alliance to address more firmly the vulnerabilities of the Black Sea. Perhaps the most concrete measure that proves this determination is the establishment of eight new battlegroups in the eastern flank of NATO as of July 2023. In the case of the Black Sea region, both Romania and Bulgaria benefit from these battlegroups integrated into the NATO command structure to ensure a rapid and effective response to threats. These battle groups are led by framework nations: France, in the case of Romania, and Italy, in the case of Bulgaria, with forces from contributing states providing a rotating

presence within the battle groups. In addition to these new battle groups, NATO has developed the surveillance and reconnaissance dimension in the region considerably, including maritime patrol aircraft and drones, necessary to improve the deterrence and defense posture in the Black Sea region.

The line taken in Madrid, of extended protection of the eastern flank, was taken up and extended in the context of the Vilnius Summit, with the existing battle groups being upgraded to brigade level. Moreover, the three regional defense plans were also adopted in Vilnius, with the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea included in the defense plan headed by the Italian command in Naples. The chiefs of defense from the allied countries have already met in September 2023 to discuss the operationalization of these new facilities. Although this is a step forward for the protection of NATO's eastern flank, it is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition to protect the Black Sea from existing threats. The limitations of the Montreux Convention and the reduced capabilities of some allies (especially maritime capabilities) such as Romania and Bulgaria are real vulnerabilities to solidifying the Black Sea component of these plans.

Further steps forward, in July 2023, the US Senate passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which includes, through an amendment, the Black Sea Security Act, the beginning of a US strategy for additional military resources invested in the region. The bipartisan support for this legislative initiative is important and demonstrates once again the relevance of the Black Sea region to Euro-Atlantic security. However, in the absence of sufficient US funding, this strategy will remain nothing more than a hollow form, a political statement of good intentions.

Finally, when counting the steps forward that the Alliance has made when it comes to a more consistent presence in the region, we cannot forget to mention that a new NATO-Ukraine Council has been established to facilitate strategic dialogue between the Alliance and the country supported in the context of the war. The existence of this council, although it cannot take the place of the security guarantees obtained by Ukraine's actual accession to NATO, demonstrates the permanence of the allies' support for the Ukrainian cause and eliminates the hypothesis that this support is circumstantial. In the medium term, this council may provide a more structured way of addressing the opportunity for Ukraine to join NATO (hopefully more than the NATO-Ukraine commission did) following the end of the war, although it is difficult to define what such an end might look like now. Thus, the NATO-Ukraine council has the prospects of being both the place in which concrete support is discussed, like the one provided through the Comprehensive Assistance package, but also measures regarding the security in the Black Sea region and the interoperability of the Ukrainian forces with the ones of the allies.

Policy recommendations

The future European security architecture, which is being decided in the context of the war in Ukraine and its aftermath, must contain a mature approach of the Euro-Atlantic community towards the Black Sea region. Strategic maturity must be assumed by both the riparian states and NATO allies, with pragmatic and medium-term thinking. This is necessary for the allies to learn from past mistakes and to avoid a situation where the Russian Federation (or, in the future, China, given its proximity through strategic investments in

key points such as the Georgian port) takes advantage of the lack of vision and preparedness of the allies in this regional context to promote its strategic objectives through military and non-military means.

When it comes to the Black Sea region, strategic ambiguity can no longer be an option for the Euro-Atlantic community, which is why the following recommendations should be considered:

- **Improving the Alliance's Black Sea defense and deterrence posture by getting NATO littoral states, especially Romania and Bulgaria, to invest in their fleets and naval capabilities, while ensuring regional cooperation**

In the case of Romania, the government in Bucharest has committed to increase the defense budget to 2.5% of GDP by 2022, but it must be considered that enough of this money will be for investment and new equipment for efficient and modern armaments, not just salaries and personnel costs. Against the backdrop of the sensitive domestic political situation, Bulgaria has failed to meet its NATO agreed 2% defense budget target, allocating only 1.51% to this sector. In addition, both countries have vulnerabilities when it comes to maritime and air capabilities, which is why we recommend that NATO assist the governments in Bucharest and Sofia to update their military equipment programs to address Black Sea security concerns. The modernization of coastal defenses and coastal surveillance systems needs to be harmonized for both Romania and Bulgaria, while also addressing the needs of the partner states where possible and providing assistance for the like-minded partners in the region.

Romania and Bulgaria need to give up the outdated equipment and invest significant resources in naval modernization programs including warships, frigates, missile systems for coastal defense. The mine arsenal must also undergo a regeneration process and procedures must be started to replace the Soviet mine arsenal with those used by the West.

Another issue that allies in the region need to address is situational awareness. Improved monitoring capability over the Russian fleet through **performant SIGINT units** must be developed for the NATO littoral states, in parallel with the counterintelligence component, to block situations where the Russian Federation can intercept the naval communications of these states, as well as attempts to penetrate the bureaucracy of these states through human intelligence.

It is also relevant to revitalize the context of strategic dialogue between NATO's Black Sea allies and its partners. To begin with, the trilateral Romania - Bulgaria - Türkiye could be revitalized as a diplomatic means to increase the level of cooperation between these states, but also to increase the frequency of joint exercises to stabilize the principle of interoperability and agility between partners. Countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can be invited to these trilateral meetings to maintain a permanent dialogue with partners on regional

security issues. The main aim of this diplomatic exercise is to make sure that all the NATO allies in the Black Sea agree on identifying Russia as a severe threat for the security of the region.

- **Creating a NATO strategy for the Black Sea, in line with the principles of the 2022 Strategic Concept, harmonized with existing and emerging national strategies, for a unified approach at Alliance level**

A NATO strategy for the Black Sea should signal that the Alliance will not accept the scenario

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that the Black Sea is a Russian lake. Alternatively, the Alliance should work with the allies and partners to ensure that soon the Black Sea will become, just like the Baltic Sea already is, a NATO lake.

Such a document agreed by all allies would not only recognize the strategic importance of the Black Sea for NATO but would add to the vision of the 2022

Strategic Concept and signal the allies' concern for this region that has been neglected in recent years. NATO should include in this strategy an increase in the frequency of naval exercises and a permanent naval military presence. The integration of NATO partners in the region in these exercises, such as Georgia, is relevant.

The idea of a **Romanian-Bulgarian-Turkish fleet**, first presented by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis in 2016, deserves to be reconsidered to improve NATO's deter-

rence posture in the region. History has shown that these formats that include like-minded countries within NATO that are swifter and can act more rapidly tend to be more effective than alliance-wide measures, thus following the concept of smart defense.

- **Exercises, exercises, and more exercises**

Exercises such as Sea Breeze 2023, multinational exercises, together with allies and partners, must continue in the Black Sea and in the context of the Partnership for Peace. These are necessary not only to project that we are ready, but also to develop, as an alliance, our interoperability and agility.

These exercises must be resumed and continued even in the context of the war in Ukraine, to build resilience, but also after it is over, as a way of internalizing the lessons of war. The focus on developing a common understanding of how to execute procedures, use different techniques and train personnel to be adaptable to multinational working environments is a goal to strive for through these exercises.

- **Continue to support Ukraine in the illegal war of aggression started by the Russian Federation and build consensus for its full integration in the transatlantic partnership**

It is likely that the multiple rounds of elections scheduled for 2024 will weaken the general support of the Euro-Atlantic community for Ukraine. Divisions within the major US parties in Congress are likely to affect the prospects that this massive contributor to Ukraine's victory will have the same options when it comes to providing additional military support. Moreover, the geopolitical agenda seems more crowded than ever, with the frozen conflicts in Gaza, Nagorno-Karabakh and Kosovo being ac-

centuated lately. Last but not least, transatlantic unity seems to be undermined by certain actors choosing to take a separate front when it comes to interaction with the Russian Federation, such as Hungary.

Continued support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's war of aggression is necessary to avoid a strategic vacuum in the Black Sea region again, and with the prospect of dialogue between allies, they will have to find solutions to make this support a constant in the coming year. Military support is essential, especially long-range modern missiles, artillery, and drones, but also tanks to continue the counter-offensive and liberate the occupied territories. The newly established F-16 training hub in Romania will also need both financial and human resources to run effectively and be able to train the Ukrainian pilots.

The summit in Washington must also represent a framework for allies to express their political options regarding the new security architecture after the war in Ukraine, and if the war will continue – which sounds like a more plausible scenario, to find new ways to overcome the internal political differences and advance solutions not only for winning the war, but for winning the peace too.

- **Full integration of Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic community (EU, NATO) and internalization of its lessons from the war**

There is a need to advance discussions on Ukraine's accession to NATO at the Alliance summit in Washington, but also an action plan whereby NATO, using coordinating structures such as ACT, can integrate Ukraine's war lessons from the front and deliver them to allies in a coherent manner. In this way, the Alliance can strengthen its pillar of education and training of

its soldiers and transition from peace-based to war-based training to increase readiness.

Also, given that Ukraine is already a candidate state of the European Union, it can participate in EU security and defense initiatives, thus contributing to strengthening the European defense pillar, complementary to NATO.

A security and defense sector reform assistance program for Ukraine is also needed. Already NATO member states in the region, notably Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye, but also Poland, could participate in the shaping of this reform program, with the aim of revitalizing Ukraine's post-war institutions and preparing for Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO.

- **Increasing the allied military presence in the Black Sea and ensuring freedom of navigation, in accordance with the international legal framework established by the Montreux Convention**

The reopening of Ukrainian ports for business and the resumption of Black Sea shipping trade are essential steps towards ensuring economic security, in particular global food security. NATO allies, especially those who are also members of the G7, should use their diplomatic capabilities to restore freedom of navigation on the Black Sea. The partner fleets of the US, UK, and France are particularly important to guarantee the safe maritime mobility of merchant ships.

Regardless of the outcome in Ukraine, NATO must focus on robust conventional deterrence in the Black Sea, coupled with an increased and frequent allied military presence in the Black Sea. Diplomatically, NATO must work closely with Türkiye to promote freedom of navigation and a pragmatic and coordinated response to Russian-led attempts to militarize the Black Sea.

In the coming period, the Alliance must focus on maritime patrols and a year-round naval presence in the Black Sea. This year-round presence would help deter the Russian Federation without violating the Montreux Convention.

Paradoxically, once the war in Ukraine started in 2014, although the rhetoric for a greater presence in the Black Sea was present in public discourse, it did not necessarily translate into action. For example, an analysis by Stars and Stripes shows that from 2014 to 2016, the number of days that US ships spent in the Black Sea dropped drastically, from 210 to 58 (the US being the main participant in these missions). Regarding maritime patrols, European allies should also invest more resources so that this responsibility does not only belong to US naval forces. Increasing the frequency of patrols is pivotal, because without them, there will be a strategic vacuum that the Russian Federation will try to fill.

Joint naval exercises should be increased and the involvement of NATO partners such as Georgia in these exercises should be considered. Surveillance and reconnaissance operations using aircraft as well as MQ-9 Reaper 13 and RQ-4 Global Hawk 14 UAVs in the Black Sea by the US and its transatlantic partnership allies must continue for a real-time view of the maritime domain and to prevent and deter any potential aggression.

It is worth stressing once again, as a recent NATO PA report shows, the need for the Black Sea allies, especially Romania and Bulgaria, to invest in modern naval capabilities.

NATO should also avoid the fragmentation of NATO's eastern flank without a layered presence - in other words, the Black Sea, like the Baltic Sea, should benefit from all aspects of an enhanced, not tailored, military presence.

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