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**NATO Security Cooperation with Partner Countries in the Context of Countering the Russian Threat in the Black Sea Region**

The Black Sea region is a tangle of contradictions: it embodies influential states such as Russian Federation and Turkey, seeking to secure their national interests; a few dormant and ongoing conflicts; NATO member states and Alliance’s partners, as well as the concentration of overlapping and diverging interests in the realm of energy infrastructure. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and seizure of Ukrainian naval ships in the Kerch strait in 2018, the balance of power has been significantly shifted, thus, backing the notion that the Black Sea is indeed one of the regions that NATO needs to attach great importance to.

In 2004, with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, NATO became a full-fledged actor in the Black Sea, in addition to Turkey, present there since 1952. All three actors, however, follow a different regional policy. Romania is an ardent advocate of the Alliance’s enhanced military presence[[1]](#footnote-1). It allocates 2 percent of the annual GDP for defense, spends more than 20 percent of that for modern weapons systems and participates in multiple missions and operations alongside NATO allies. Bulgaria on the other hand, was tempted to become a hub for the transportation of Russian gas to Central Europe[[2]](#footnote-2).

Turkey has always been an influential actor not only in the Black Sea region, but also in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The advantageous geographic position on the crossroads of two continents and two seas enables it to play a role of its own. However, in the sought of securing its national interests, it was often caught balancing between Russia, the US and NATO. It needs to be noted that despite the lack of Turkey’s proactivity in the Black Sea region during the recent decade (in comparison with 1990’s and 2000’s), the upcoming years might open up a new political and security landscape. In this context, it is important to mention the Montreux Convention – leverage over the Black Sea that Turkey has enjoyed since 1936. The Convention[[3]](#footnote-3) governs naval passage through the Turkish Straits, limiting the number of foreign vessels that can enter the Black Sea via the Straits and how long these vessels can stay there, which has repeatedly created limitation for the increased presence of NATO in the sea. However, in addition to the Bosporus, Ankara has declared the construction of “Canal Istanbul”, not-bound by the provisions of the Montreux Convention. The canal, once built and put into operation, might create a new political and security landscape in the Black Sea region.

Regarding Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, Turkey did not recognize the illegal annexation of the Crimea peninsula. Historically, it has had strong ties with Crimean Tatars and therefore, Ankara condemned the human rights violations happening in Crimea. However, it cannot be denied that Turkish leaders were rather careful not to make extremely harsh accusations of Russian actions. Nevertheless, Turkey is one of Ukraine’s strategic partners, whose importance should not be overlooked. Both countries actively cooperate in the field of defense and security.

Ukraine and Georgia – two western-oriented states in their foreign policy aspirations, both striving to join the Alliance, and have already actively contributed to NATO-led operations and gained the status of Enhanced Opportunities Partners. Both have experienced the implications of Russia’s assertiveness to expand its influence over the region and destabilize the internal situation inside its neighboring states. Even though the Black Sea has been regarded as a so-called “blind spot” in NATO’s Eastern flank strategy, the situation started to change in recent years, while the readiness of Georgia and Ukraine to broaden cooperation with NATO has grown even stronger.

Relations between NATO and Ukraine date back to the beginning of 1990’s. After the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, cooperation has been intensified in a wide range of critical areas[[4]](#footnote-4) including peace-support operations, defense and security sector reform, military-to-military cooperation, defense technology, interoperability, civil preparedness, and public diplomacy. In 2017, Verkhovna Rada adopted legislation reinstating that Ukraine’s accession to NATO is a strategic foreign and security policy objective for the country.

Despite the fact that NATO already has three member states and two candidates represented in the Black Sea, it is quite evident that the Alliance’s strategy in the region is still in the process of being fully formulated. However, the need to increase the presence of NATO has already been recognized in Brussels, by Eastern European Alliance members and by Ukraine and Georgia, thus practical steps followed. After the 2016 Warsaw Summit NATO member states agreed to initiate the Tailored Forward Presence for the Black Sea region, by the same principle as the Enhanced Forward Presence was established for the Baltic states - Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland. Ukraine and NATO agreed to conduct joint exercises in Odesa, called “Coherent Resilience - 2020”[[5]](#footnote-5). In April 2020, NATO Foreign Ministers agreed[[6]](#footnote-6) to conduct more Black Sea exercises with Ukraine and Georgia, as well as to enhance cooperation in countering hybrid warfare, which is a sign of readiness to take action in face of the expanding Russian navy presence in the region. Taking into account that Turkey’s initiative BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony have been almost paralyzed after 2014, the search for alternatives and strengthening cooperation with NATO and its member states is the most reasonable and forward-lookin strategy for Ukraine.

The Black Sea region poses a great security challenge for the Alliance. However, it is clear that at this stage a more proactive approach is needed to fend off Russian assertiveness to turn it into the “Russian Lake”. Therefore, a few suggestions are provided:

1. **NATO should increase its presence in the Black Sea.**

The Alliace’s persistent naval presence will be hard to achieve due to the restrictions imposed by Montreux Convention. However, it could be the first step demonstrating the Alliance’s stronger commitment to protection of peace and stability in the region. Moreover, the number of air operations conducted by NATO over the international waters of the Black Sea can be an additional way of demonstrating the adherence to the common strategy. Participation of non-Black Sea members would make this approach even stronger.

Collaboration in the form of joint exercises and training programs with partner countries in the Black Sea region should also increase. Ukraine and Romania bilateral relations beholds promising potential, since both states have been quite active in deepening their military and political cooperation in recent years.

1. **Enhance NATO’s Eastern flank by developing a comprehensive approach across the Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions against the common threat.**

NATO’s asymmetry of engagement on its Eastern flank is one its greatest vulnerabilities. Both regions were initially equally sensitive to the possibility of the Russian aggression due to geographical reasons and the presence of Russian fleet in both seas. At the same time, in both regions NATO has partners willing to cooperate: Ukraine and Georgia in the Black Sea; Sweden and Finland in the Baltic Sea. With the increased interest in the Three Seas Initiative, cooperation between two regions is going to intensify even more.

However, taking into account the ongoing 6-year conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the unprecedented illegal annexation of Crimea, as well as the Kerch incident of 2018, the Black Sea region is still in the spotlight and needs to receive the same level of attention (if not more) as the Baltic Sea Region, where the Alliance has been successfully implementing its strategy for the last decade. In order to guarantee a coherent and well-clarified strategy, a comprehensive united approach over both regions is needed.

Overall, the Black Sea has already been recognized as a strategically important zone, which embodies the intersection of interests for different actors. NATO’s cooperation with partner countries, as well as a more unified approach within the Alliance members, is a key factor in turning it into the sea of peace, stability and prosperity.

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6. *NATO Allied ships patrol in the Black Sea*, NATO, 18 June 2020, URL: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176708.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)