COMMENTARY

Kremlin's quest for mare nostrum: Enhancing Black Sea security to stop Russian encroachment

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In this special series of Commentaries, EPC analysts look to NATO's new strategy for 2030 and outline what must be done to 'make a strong alliance even stronger'.

NATO must look for new ways to push back against Russia's military build-up and hybrid activity in and around the Black Sea. It should establish a Black Sea Strategy and a unified deterrence and defence posture for its eastern flank.

The Black Sea is a strategic crossroads between Europe and Asia of enduring geopolitical and geo-economic relevance. It connects energy routes from the Caspian Sea and

Central Asia to Europe. It is also a meeting point of four great forces (https://cepa.org/the-black-sea-or-a-black-hole/): democracy to the West, Russian military aggression to the north, growing Chinese financial influence to the east, and Middle Eastern instability to the south.

More recently, the Black Sea has become the maritime frontline between the West and Russia. As the importance of the Black Sea grows and Russia expands and reinforces its militarisation of the region, it is high time for NATO to buttress its presence, including developing a comprehensive regional strategy. Based on peaceful measures, the strategy would improve the land, air and maritime defence of NATO's three littoral allies – Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey – and decrease regional insecurity and the potential for unintentional conflicts.

Russia's encroachment policy

The Black Sea is a crucial stronghold for the Kremlin. Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea drastically changed the region's balance of power, allowing Russia to boost its influence over its neighbouring states. Crimea provides a springboard for regional power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean, Levant and Atlantic – a key route for Moscow's military operations beyond the neighbourhood. It also permits Russia to impact the energy economics of the South Caucasus, Turkey, the Balkans, and the rest of Europe.

Russia has significantly increased its number of troops and ships (https://www.newsweek.com/volodymyr-zelensky-says-russia-has-withdrawn-only-about-10k-troops-ukraine-border-1596963) in Crimea and beefed up its military infrastructure. It expanded its reach across the Black Sea by deploying air defence and anti-ship missiles and creating an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) network to protect its various interests.

Large-scale military drills, such as that of April 2021, are another element of Moscow's heightened activity. Coupled with over 100,000 Russian troops along Ukraine's eastern border and annexed Crimea, the April exercises sparked fears that Russia planned a new offensive in the Donbas (https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Donbas-Ukraines-continuing-predicament~31a114). The Russian Navy also constantly hassles Ukrainian commercial ships. On 20 April, two Ukrainian fishermen operating in Ukraine's maritime economic zone were seized by Russia's border patrol. Taken together, these defensive and offensive operations threaten the Black Sea's regional security dynamics.

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Scoffing at international law

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Russia   (https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54) repeatedly ignores, flouts and violates international law. This includes

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breaching the Budapest Memorandum (https://treaties.un.org/Pages /showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb&clang=_en) that commits Russia "to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and "refrain from the threat or use of force".

Furthermore, Moscow has deliberately ignored its limits within the 2003 Treaty of Cooperation in the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait by unilaterally closing parts of the Black Sea to foreign state vessels from April until November 2021. This seriously impacts Kyiv's connection with its ports in the Sea of Azov. It also blocks NATO's rotational fleet and threatens the maritime security of its littoral states.

What is more, maintaining a robust NATO maritime presence is hampered by the 1936 Montreux Convention. It places limitations on non-Black Sea NATO member operations in the Black Sea, including the number of days that they are allowed to stay and how many vessels can pass through the Ankara-controlled Turkish Straits at one time.

Revamping NATO presence

For decades, the Black Sea has played second fiddle to the Baltic Sea in NATO's priorities. This is partly due to fears that a Russian attack on the Baltic states was more likely than conflict in the Black Sea, and also a lack of consensus from allies over the need to enhance its presence in the latter. While NATO's engagement in the region improved after Crimea's annexation, it remains insufficient.

NATO boosted its Black Sea presence in the form of tailored forward presence. Following its Wales, Warsaw and Brussels summits (2014-18), it strengthened its land, air and maritime defence components. The tailored forward presence means creating a multinational training brigade in Romania, establishing joint air policing missions to cover Romanian and Bulgarian airspace, and increasing NATO naval exercises and ship rotations.

A Black Sea functional Centre (https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2018/05 /25/the-black-sea-region-a-critical-intersection/index.html) was created within NATO's Maritime Command to increase awareness, collaboration and information-sharing between the littoral states and regional navies. The Alliance also strengthened its cooperation with NATO aspirants Ukraine and Georgia (https://www.epc.eu /en/publications/NATO-and-Georgia-13-years-on-So-close-yet-so-far~3f974c), including exercises for the naval and coast guard forces.

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NATO's three littoral states have a critical role to play. **Romania** has been very vocal,
calling for a stronger NATO response. It became the first country to host a Patriot surface-to-air missile system in the Black Sea region. It also carries out regular rotational deployments of NATO forces. From 19 to 29 March 2021, Romania organised Sea Shield

21, a multinational NATO exercise.

Still heavily dependent on old Russian military technology, **Bulgaria** is more cautious vis-à-vis Russia. Moscow takes advantage of this by routinely penetrating Sofia's defence sector. In March 2021, five former and current senior Bulgarian defence officials were charged (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-russia-espionage-idUSKBN2BB1V4) with selling classified NATO information to Russia. Bulgaria is also a prime target of the Kremlin's hybrid activity due to energy dependence and a strong Russian influence in its political realm. Still, Sofia has taken some small steps to push back against Moscow, including updating its national security and defence strategies and inaugurating the Maritime Coordination Centre in Varna. However, more needs to be done, including building up Bulgaria's resilience.

Historically, as the gatekeeper of the Bosporus, **Turkey** has been the ultimate status quo power. However, this position began to shift following Crimea's annexation and Russia's subsequent oppression of Crimean Tatars. Today, Turkey perceives itself as being on the frontline, dealing with expanding Russian influence in the Black Sea and has adopted a more assertive position. Through regional collaboration, Ankara offers millions of dollars of military aid to Ukraine and Georgia to upgrade their military logistics and capabilities and endorses their NATO membership. Moreover, since 2016 and in cooperation with Bucharest, Turkey is pushing for a NATO maritime patrol mission in the Black Sea.

An opportunity for a geopolitical EU

While there are some achievements in boosting Black Sea security, more can be done – and not just by the Alliance. A possible NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in the Black Sea is also in the EU's interest, as it increases the security and stability of the eastern neighbourhood. As such, Brussels should be a strong advocate of NATO military and naval presence in the region.

The EU's Strategic Compass initiative aims to provide enhanced politico-strategic direction for the future of the Union's security and defence, including maritime security. Brussels wants to enhance its ability to respond to threats at home and in the neighbourhood, particularly by boosting the EU27's resilience with greater soft security cooperation. This includes the fight against disinformation (https://www.epc.eu /en/publications/Fear-and-lying-in-the-EU-Fighting-disinformation-on-migration-with-al~39a1e8) and other hybrid challenges. In its discussions on security threats to the Strategic Compass, the EU should be bold and include a strong focus on Black Sea security which complements NATO's approach.

Following the successful EU–NATO cooperation in fighting illegal human trafficking in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, the EU can further this partnership in the Black Sea.

The EU and NATO should work together on initiatives to increase intelligence- and surveillance-sharing, defence interoperability, operational cooperation and military mobility projects (e.g. military cross-border transport, air-to-air refuelling).

Time for a Black Sea strategy

Faced with structural changes in the international system, NATO has started a process of recalibration, adaptation and preparedness. With NATO 2030 and its discussions on amending the Strategic Concept, the Alliance aims to increase its readiness to react to today's security threats. It should respond to Russia's ongoing shifting of the Black Sea region's power, legal and military balance more actively.

More concretely, NATO should adopt the following recommendations during the upcoming Brussels summit to create a Black Sea strategy:

- **Establish a Black Sea maritime patrol mission**, modelled on the successful Baltic Air Policing mission. Non-Black Sea members would commit to a regular and rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea. This would effectively increase NATO presence as it would significantly strengthen the resilience of the eastern flank against Russian aggression.
- **Support the creation of a Black Sea trilateral platform** between Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria. It can be based on the Bucharest Nine and Romania–Poland–Turkey trilateral meetings, which aim to build common security projects. Such a platform would help these littoral allies accommodate their national interests in the Black Sea, build trust, increase operability and formulate joint security projects. The first step should be ratifying the cross-border NATO air policing mechanism. Georgia and Ukraine could be invited to join this initiative as partner countries and coordinate accordingly.
- **Boost ties with aspirants Georgia and Ukraine**. This should include NATO improving their military and defence capabilities further and reiterating its own commitment to its enlargement policy. Closer cooperation with both states will help NATO build a more effective Black Sea strategy.

NATO has taken important steps, but they are not enough. The Alliance must commit to pushing back against Russia, which is undermining Black Sea regional security. A consensus should be reached within NATO to provide the Black Sea region with the same security guarantees that the Baltic Sea enjoys, including a coherent Black Sea strategy. If NATO does not act promptly, then there is every chance that Russia will move even closer to its dream of transforming the Black Sea into a Russian lake.

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