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THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF THE BLACK SEA



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The Black Sea is a strategic trade and transportation artery which connects Europe and Asia (NSC, 2022). The countries surrounding the coasts of the Black Sea are EU and NATO members (Romania and Bulgaria), former members of the Soviet Union (Russia, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) and Middle Eastern powers (Turkey).

After the Cold War, the lack of agreement between Russia and the West on the power-sharing in the region and the disintegration of the Soviet Union caused a series of conflicts, which are still ongoing.

Recently, Russia and Ukraine have built up their military power in the region, and NATO has stationed additional forces in Romania to enhance the Alliance defence strategy (Miller, 2017). The Black Sea is therefore more militarised and less stable than at any point since the end of the Cold War. Tensions and instability in this key region can seriously affect global commercial trade and maritime activities.

RUSSIA'S ROLE

Since 1783, when Russia annexed Crimea to fulfil the need for a warm water port under the reign of Catherine the Great, the country has become an important power in the Black Sea. During the Cold War, the Black Sea was even occasionally referred to as the Soviet lake (Stronsky, 2021).

The region has always been a clashing territory between Russia, Turkey, France and the UK. Moreover, the Kremlin has seen the Black Sea as a buffer zone to protect itself from the Alliance's enlargement process. Russia has also been increasingly concerned about the proximity of the Black Sea to the Russian heartland, in the eventuality of US missile attacks during a potential West-East military confrontation. Russian officials have indeed complained that the deployment of the NATO missile defence system in Romania represents the encroachment of US strategic infrastructure in Russia's neighbourhood and is intended to undermine Russian security (Stronsky, 2021). The Black Sea provides Moscow with access to European neighbouring countries both for military operations and for exports of Russia's hydrocarbons. Thus, the Black Sea is a critical source of political, economic and military opportunities for Russia. This water basin in fact allows the Kremlin to project its influence into Africa and the Middle East.

Before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Russia retained control over the region through the Soviet Union's Black Sea Fleet deployment and a series of agreements with Ukraine to lease the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and strengthened its naval, ground and air defence capabilities. Moscow additionally invested in new infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines. Currently, the Kremlin is using energy as a geopolitical weapon to deter European states from sending aid and weapons to Ukraine. To maintain control of the region, Russia is also using a variety of other hybrid tactics, which include both military and diplomatic instruments. However, the highlight of the Russian strategy is the modernization of the naval forces and the increase of the ground forces in the Southern Military District (SMD), which significantly differs from those deployed in the Western Military District. (Flanagan, Binnendijk, Chindea, Costello, Kirkwood, Massicot, Reach, 2020). In the South, in fact, Russian troops are structured to address a wide range of threats and operations, such as local wars, peacekeeping missions and conflicts against technologically superior opposing forces (Muzyka, 2021). Before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow transferred tactical groups of contract soldiers to the Rostov Oblast. When the Russian formations of the 58th, 8th and 49th armies of the SMD began to suffer heavy losses due to the war, Moscow ordered to transfer a great quantity of heavy equipment from the occupied regions of Georgia. Moreover, the units of the Russian 102nd Military Base stationed in Armenia, which perform a peacekeeping function in Nagorno-Karabakh, have been completely withdrawn from the conflict

zone, to the point of deployment in Gyumri and are made ready for transfer to Russia. Only one battalion tactical group (BTG) remains in place, located in the field camps of Sisian and Goris bordering Karabakh (Komaxidze, 2022).

During the course of the ongoing war, Ukrainian forces have been able to sink Russia's Black Sea Fleet flagship *RTS Moskva* and regain Snake Island, which helped prevent Russia from conducting an amphibious assault on Odessa. Attacking the Saky Airbase in Crimea also sabotaged the Russian Navy's ability to attack other countries. Since *Moskva's* sinking, the Russian Navy mostly remained in Crimea, which has affected Russia's ability to control the body of water (Mongilio, 2022). However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought with it evident and considerable strategic developments. Firstly, Russian troops conquered three-quarters of Ukraine's naval fleet that was based there. Secondly, the Kremlin gained control of both sides of the Kerch Strait, which leads from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Thirdly, it increasingly undermined Ukrainian maritime power (Eckstein, Ozberk, 2022).

Under the current circumstances, the Black Sea is key to Ukraine's counter-offensive operations in the South (Mongilio, 2022).

Additionally, the Montreux Convention plays an important role in favour of Russia, as it prohibits non-Black Sea states' aircraft carriers and submarines from passing through. Only submarines from bordering, or riparian, states are permitted to pass through the straits, either to re-join their base in the Black Sea for the first time after construction or purchase or to be repaired in dockyards outside the Black Sea (Eckstein, Ozberk, 2022). According to Reuters, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu argues the country cannot stop Russian warships from coming back to their home base – meaning it could stop Russia from sending ships into the Mediterranean. Despite currently being a non-issue, it also means that Turkey could not stop Russia from sending more ships to the Black Sea in the name of sending them back to their home port (Reuters, 2022).

NATO'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE AREA

During the Cold War, the main NATO member state counterbalancing the Soviet Union in the Black Sea was Turkey. Even after the illegitimate Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Alliance thinking on this issue was limited to a brief acknowledgement of support for regional efforts by Black Sea littoral states (Hodges, Horrel, Kuz, 2022).

However, the situation has been slowly changing, as Russia has increased the use of large-scale snap exercises, military activities and the deployment of new high-end capabilities in the area (Hodges, Horrel, Kuz, 2022). In 2017, NATO members for the first time established the Alliance presence in the region, by creating four multinational battalion-size battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, led by the UK, Canada, Germany and the US. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO reinforced the battlegroups and established four more multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, for a total number of eight battlegroups. A Black Sea functional Centre was created within NATO's Maritime Command to increase awareness, collaboration and information-sharing between the littoral states and regional navies (Paul, Ciolan, 2021).

At the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, Allies agreed to enhance these battlegroups from battalions up to brigade size and to send additional ships, planes and troops to NATO territory in Eastern Europe (NATO, 2022). Stoltenberg affirmed that Russia's war on Ukraine "has turned parts of the Black Sea into a warzone". As a result, NATO is reinforcing its presence from the Black to the Baltic Sea,

including with fighter jets from Canada, and thousands of French, Belgian, Dutch and American troops (Reuters, 2022).

Last October, during a meeting with Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca at NATO Headquarters, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg pledged NATO's support to Romania and all other Allies in the event of an escalation in the region. Bucharest in particular has been very vocal, calling for a stronger NATO response to Russian aggression. Romania was the first country to host a Patriot surface-to-air missile system in the Black Sea region and since then has carried out regular rotational deployments of NATO forces. Another relevant example of the country's strong engagement with the Atlantic Alliance was its effort to organize Sea Shield 21, a multinational NATO exercise from 19 to 29 March 2021 (Paul, Ciolan, 2021).

The level of the US engagement in Black Sea countries' security will be critical to determine future developments in the region. Recently, a bipartisan group in the US Senate introduced draft legislation on a US assistance plan for the Black Sea, which included both NATO and non-NATO members. "It is an important bipartisan legislative initiative that should define the US strategy for the Black Sea region," declared Georgian ambassador to the US David Zalkaliani (Carafano, 2022).

CONCLUSION

"The war in Ukraine has served almost sort of like a wake-up call for the U.S. or NATO," said Natia Seskuria, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (Mongilio, 2022). The West has started to implement its defence strategy in the region to protect its Allies and to respond to Russian threats in the hybrid warfare domain.

In order to enhance their presence and role in the Black Sea region, NATO members should increase military mobility and elaborate a collective self-defence strategy. Permanent bases with rotational forces and the deployment of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) constitute a valid framework for increased presence. The three NATO allies that are Black Sea littoral states should in particular boost a common perspective on the Russian threat and the best way to overcome it. Concretely, NATO should establish a Black Sea maritime patrol mission to strengthen the resilience of the Eastern flank against Russian aggression. The creation of a Black Sea trilateral platform between Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria would also be a great step to boost the relations among the countries of the region. 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 (Paul, Ciolan, 2021).

Moreover, NATO must coordinate with the European Union and other international entities on economic security measures. Meanwhile, the Alliance should help non-Members in the region, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, to build their military capability and capacity (Horrel, Kuz, 2022). How this crisis evolves will certainly determine what NATO should do, though not necessarily what it will do, regarding the Black Sea (Ullman, 2022).

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