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THE REMILITARIZATION OF THE BLACK SEA



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Introduction

The Black Sea region, an intersection between Europe and Middle East, from the Eastern Balkans to the South Caucasus (Horrell, 2016) has always been a place of intense socio- economic relations, and it has increasingly transformed into a centre of attraction for the growing political and economic interaction of various parties (Zakaradze & Muradishvili, 2022). This persistent cycle of conflict and peace is in part driven by a complicated relationship between Russia, Turkey and other outside powers. With the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the area's defining characteristic has quickly transformed into one of precarious stability (Inayeh, 2022)

Recent Russian attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure have highlighted the devastation of twenty-first-century warfare and the resulting vulnerability to civilian life. The hybrid threat is a major component of modern warfare, and Russia is a particularly aggressive perpetrator. More specifically, hybrid warfare, which encompasses cyberwarfare and malign influence, enables states and non-state entities to alter enemies' political stability with little or no use of conventional military forces. This is significant because it allows states, as well as terrorist and criminal organisations, to influence the politics and policies of other states, or even acquire territory, at a low cost. Indeed, the Kremlin has repeatedly and effectively employed hybrid warfare to achieve a favourable political outcome, most notably in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea (Dupuy, 2023).

The ability to attack and disrupt civilian infrastructure, particularly the power grid and fuel distribution systems that form the backbone of a country's energy sector, is an important aspect of hybrid warfare (Dupuy, 2023). Despite battlefield setbacks in Ukraine, Russia's cyber-military dominance looms over the wider Black Sea region, particularly among NATO and its Partnership for Peace (PfP) states with their limited resources and vulnerable energy infrastructures (Dupuy, 2023). The return of war to Europe has created conditions that necessitate an increased NATO focus on this dynamic: it highlighted the importance of the region in energy security terms and shed light to the need of an increased transatlantic effort including military security, economic rehabilitation and regional security (Dupuy, 2022). Thus, the Black Sea Region needs NATO as a steady influence and NATO needs to address the Alliance's interests in the region (Horrell, 2016).

How can NATO keep up with hybrid threats in the Black Sea region

National security specialists must continue to examine the complex security issues surrounding the Black Sea Region while also enhancing NATO's operational energy capabilities, resilience and interoperability. More specifically, capability refers to the criteria that NATO must focus on to achieve its goals and effectively function in an energy-constrained world, for example, advanced warning technology and simplified messaging (Dupuy, 2023). This approach is quite similar to the already existing NATO Defence Planning Process, which provides an analytic framework for matching capabilities to mission objectives (Dupuy, 2023).

Moreover, NATO member states' resilience is defined as their collective or individual ability to dissuade, identify, endure and recover from a variety of hybrid attacks launched against their energy infrastructure (Dupuy, 2023). Simultaneously, increased resilience would enable NATO countries to absorb a shock to the energy industry and recover quickly. This increased resilience should also include a more thorough examination of malicious influence in the energy industry.

Finally, interoperability allows member states to interact in a variety of environments, situations and platforms (Dupuy, 2023). More specifically, it enables member nations to collaborate more effectively and to operate under a common set of NATO norms, with the goal of developing familiarity and a shared operational picture (Dupuy, 2023). This is currently achieved by ongoing interactions between Alliance and PfP members, most notably through joint exercises and NATO/PfP engagement (Dupuy, 2023).

Importantly, the NATO Science and Technology Board sanctioned the development of Systems Analysis and Studies (SAS)-183, titled "Energy Security and Building Capabilities, Resilience, and Interoperability," in October, which is a continuation of the earlier research of SAS-163, focusing on energy security in the Age of Hybrid Warfare (Dupuy, 2023). Simultaneously, the new study will focus on cross-cutting studies stressing the themes of capability, resilience and interoperability on the Black Sea, Baltic Sea and Arctic Sea (Dupuy, 2023). That way, the new analysis study, SAS-183, will include specialists from almost a dozen NATO members, PfP states and organisations, demonstrating the priority that the NATO Alliance and its PfP allies place on the developing challenge (Dupuy, 2023). Finally, the study will give better regional analysis, greater insight into cyber early-warning technologies and a more in-depth evaluation of the hybrid warfare threat to NATO member state security in the energy sector (Dupuy, 2023). Russia's evolving tactics in Ukraine, as evidenced by deliberate attacks on energy infrastructure, provide a glimpse into the future of warfare and, as a result, NATO must keep several steps ahead (Dupuy, 2023).

Why is energy security so crucial to NATO's Black Sea future

The Black Sea region, which sits astride the European and West Asian land masses, is critical to NATO's security. Given the potential risk of the Russia-Ukraine conflict drawing NATO into the war, it is time for the Alliance to address a vital, linked issue: energy security along its south-eastern border.

The Black Sea littoral states, like many of NATO's continental members, heavily rely on Russian energy while also being a major channel for oil and gas supplies into Europe (Dupuy, 2022). Importantly, NATO has already deployed additional forces in the region to counter Russian aggression (Dupuy, 2022). While these reinforcements have improved NATO's capabilities and sent powerful messages to both allies and adversaries, it is unknown if these host nations' energy systems can handle an even larger arrival of soldiers and equipment (Dupuy, 2022).

The focus cannot just be on the Black Sea NATO members, as many NATO allies in Europe are systemically reliant on Russian energy, with over 40% of all hydrocarbons consumed being imported from Russia (Dupuy, 2022). This dependence on a hostile energy supplier has obvious national security and military operational implications. Regional states must thus be ready to construct energy infrastructure and strengthen the reliability of their crucial pipeline network, which serves both civilian and military purposes. Importantly, the NATO Pipeline System, which has been in place since the early Cold War days, should be expanded to serve forward-deployed assets, for example (Dupuy, 2022). As the NPS links together storage depots, military air bases, civil airports, pumping stations, truck and rail loading stations, refineries and entry/discharge points (NATO, 2010), it could offer vital future opportunities. On the other hand, the Northern Italian Pipeline System and the Turkish Pipeline System should be updated with more resistant storage facilities to ensure NATO's Black Sea security posture. Finally, alternate routes and means of conveyance, such as via road, rail and barge, should be developed and tested (Dupuy, 2022).

However, it is important to note that NATO's military options in the Black Sea region for sourcing and distributing operational energy are limited (Dupuy, 2022). Supply-chain disruptions, shifting tactics, developing force structures and energy-hungry weapons systems exacerbate the Alliance's energy requirements (Dupuy, 2022). The Russia-Ukraine conflict has demonstrated how NATO can no longer expect on-demand energy in a large battlespace against an adversary with advanced anti-access/area denial capabilities. Undoubtedly, NATO's military logistics and supply-chain capabilities are now at risk like never before (Dupuy, 2022).

In conclusion, an invasion in the Black Sea region might have unanticipated political or military ramifications, disrupting oil flows for member states and weakening combined operational capabilities at a time when NATO requires it the most. Characteristically, in a 2022 meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Bucharest, the NATO Deputy Secretary General Geoană discussed the importance of Black Sea security (NATO, 2022). Mr Geoană mentioned that for more than two decades, the Black Sea region has served as a launching pad for Russia's aggressive acts, which have had a significant impact on critical allies, such as Ukraine, and pose a threat to NATO's security (NATO, 2022). Specifically, Mr Geoană stated, "As a result, we underline the strategic importance of the Black Sea region in NATO's new Strategic Concept, which our leaders agreed at the Summit in Madrid last June" (NATO, 2022). However, while the political leaders of NATO should address supply restrictions through realistic energy policies, its military leaders should also acknowledge the change of the modern battlespace due to operational energy considerations so as to reduce the impact on capabilities (NATO, 2022). Of course, security in its broadest sense cannot be only the responsibility of NATO, but according to Wittmann, K. (2022), the EU Security Strategy lacks a maritime component, and security is under-emphasized in the EU's "Maritime Strategy," as it is in the EU Baltic Sea Strategy.

The EU deals with security matters on a case-by-case basis, while the Baltic Sea States Council deals with "soft" security issues at best. NATO and the EU have separate "security cultures," and their complementarity is valued, although NATO is turned to for security in the broadest sense (Wittmann, 2022).

Recommendations on policy and strategy for attaining post-conflict Black Sea security, stability, and development

According to Inayeh (2022), Russia's interest in the Black Sea region, as well as its stated and manifested intention to keep it as a buffer zone between Russia and the West, has been overlooked and underappreciated. Due to divergences in member states' interests and threat perceptions, NATO and the EU have failed to discuss a Black Sea strategy (Inayeh, 2022). The conflict in Ukraine, however, serves as a stark reminder of the region's strategic importance and the need for a regional approach to ensure its stability and development. Since the start of the conflict, several of Ukraine's neighbours have banded together to facilitate military assistance and the transport of its exports, particularly grains (Inayeh, 2022). Regional solidarity is critical, and Romania and Bulgaria play vital roles in this regard (Inayeh, 2022). Their participation in sea and air exercises with nearby NATO partners, particularly Georgia, helps to strengthen the alliance's regional deterrence posture (Inayeh, 2022). This has prevented the war from escalating further, at least thus far.

On the energy front, Azerbaijan's re-emergence as a major gas supplier to Europe underscores the importance of the region, as does a joint project the country is developing with Georgia and Romania (Inayeh, 2022). It also reflects the complexities of regional military and economic security, which the US and the EU must actively engage with to achieve post-conflict Black Sea security, stability and development. As a result, Inayeh (2022) advocates for a transatlantic effort to begin immediately that includes military security, economic rehabilitation and regional security.

Military Security

Russia's exploitation of the Black Sea as a barrier to the West during the last three decades has resulted in the fuelling of lengthy conflicts, such as the ones in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These conflicts culminated in the invasion of Crimea in 2014 (Inayeh, 2022). In response, NATO reacted belatedly by shifting its posture from defensive to deterrent, expanding its ability to respond, and integrating its regional technical, human and logistical capabilities. Implementing similar measures, the US planned and eventually deployed an anti-missile shield throughout Romania and Poland, which quickly became the backbone of regional security (Inayeh, 2022). However, it was only after Russian aggressiveness became obvious to everyone that European governments authorised these installations. In 2015, Romania and Poland launched the Bucharest Nine, or B9, an organisation that provides NATO with a regional structure for discussing matters pertaining to the alliance's eastern border, including the Black Sea (Inayeh, 2022). Yet, the southern component of the B9, made up of Romania and Bulgaria, and the entire Black Sea region received less attention than the northern component of the B9 of Poland and the Baltic nations, which were far more outspoken in advocating their own security interests.

Simultaneously, according to Inayeh (2022), employing recent and historical lessons from other regional models, NATO can strengthen security in the Black Sea region and sustain post-conflict peace and stability by:

1. Long-term military presence

NATO and its member states quickly responded to the start of the war in Ukraine by sending troops and materiel to its eastern member states of Romania and Bulgaria (Inayeh, 2022). The deployment of these troops, as well as the provision of additional modern equipment, is an important part of the medium-term strategy of sustaining NATO's posture in the region. Additionally, Siman (2022), agrees that Romania and Bulgaria, as NATO and EU members, provide an excellent opportunity to establish a significant naval presence on the Black Sea, particularly if the Montreux Convention is preserved, to at least provide for alternative and additional military denial capabilities (Siman, 2022).

2. Maritime security and freedom of navigation

The excessive militarization of the Black Sea following Russia's takeover of Crimea has posed a threat to regional security and the freedom of navigation. The grain crisis this year demonstrated the extent to which Russian activities can influence these issues and have damaging economic ramifications. Both Romania and Bulgaria have inadequate naval fleets that will take years to improve despite modernisation efforts (Inayeh, 2022). As a result, NATO should enhance the frequency of naval exercises in the Black Sea and seek further partnership with Turkey, which also controls access to the Black Sea.

3.. Military mobility within and among the Black Sea's littoral states

The infrastructure of both Bulgaria and Romania continues to remain unsuitable for the rapid transportation of military personnel and equipment (Inayeh, 2022). Transportation across the NATO's eastern flank remains challenging, notwithstanding previous efforts to improve the situation. The Three Seas Initiative and other European sources of funding should also be used to update land-based infrastructure, boost regional connectivity and meet military demands (Inayeh, 2022).

4. A Black Sea strategy

NATO should establish and implement a regional strategy for Black Sea security. For various reasons, this should be closely tied to, while also being distinct from, the alliance's eastern flank strategy. First, the eastern flank excludes Turkey, which is critical to regional stability (Inayeh, 2022). Second, the security interests of Moldova and Georgia, which are both Black Sea littoral states and NATO partners, are underrepresented in NATO's nine-country eastern flank framework (Inayeh, 2022). Finally, the Black Sea is shared with Russia, lending strategic weight to the region, which is best addressed in a framework limited to littoral states that are NATO members and partners (Inayeh, 2022).

Importantly, by establishing a permanent military presence in the Allies, the US must account for the change in Europe's security and pay much more attention to the Black Sea region. This will demonstrate their long-term commitment to meeting NATO commitments and encourage the less committed coalition partners to fulfil their coalition commitments (Bakalov, 2022).

Economic reconstruction and regional security

The Ukraine Recovery Conference in Lugano, which happened in July 2022, boosted the necessary international joint effort in the country's rehabilitation and rebuilding. However, a subsequent meeting in Berlin in October did not provide any clarification on funding sources or the terms under which those sources would provide help (Inayeh, 2022). Thus, the transatlantic generosity and solidarity have been insufficient to ensure a successful restoration effort for the future. It is necessary that a future strategy secures long-term financial commitments and is efficiently focused on investments, which in turn necessitates regional engagement and stability (Inayeh, 2022). However, without the restoration of peace, a full effort to rebuild Ukraine is also impossible. Nonetheless, starting discussions on post-war reconstruction now is prudent, if only to iron out political, financial and technical impediments so that action can be immediately taken as soon as combat ends.

Additionally, "necessary stability" in Europe must be both national and regional. In an unstable Black Sea region, a stable Ukraine cannot exist (Inayeh, 2022). Only close economic and military cooperation with countries in the region can ensure Ukraine's economic revival and long-term security. As this year's grain crisis and the establishment of "solidarity lanes" demonstrated, commercial transportation cooperation is important for those lanes (Inayeh, 2022), to ensure Ukraine can export grain, but also import the goods it needs, from humanitarian aid to animal feed and fertilisers (European Commission, 2022). Importantly, according to Kutelia & al. (2023), strategic connectivity should be reinforced through increasing investments in military and dual use, multimodal infrastructure, and logistical infrastructure, making them rapidly expandable and interoperable for any possible contingencies (Kutelia et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis has reinforced the Black Sea Region's strategic importance, as well as the regional component of its security, stability and economic development in times of war and peace. This regional dimension is precisely what policymakers must keep in mind as they design measures to handle the conflict and its aftermath. Furthermore, national security experts must continue to investigate the Black Sea Region's complex security concerns while focusing on improving NATO's operational energy capabilities, resilience and interoperability. Simultaneously, the Ukrainian conflict underlined the significance of the Black Sea region, making energy security a concern for NATO's members. Equally importantly, NATO's political leaders must address supply restrictions through realistic energy policies, while its military commanders must acknowledge the change of the modern battlespace as a result of operational energy concerns in order to mitigate the potential impact on capabilities.

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