

Ukraine, NATO and the Black Sea

Iulian Romanyshyn *

Since its occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has steadily expanded military capabilities and technical infrastructure on the peninsula, transforming the region into a springboard for offensive military operations in the Black Sea and beyond. Despite growing insecurity and Russian militarization of the region over the years, the transatlantic community has not put as high of a strategic premium on the Black Sea compared to the Baltic region. Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine, however, has reshaped the strategic landscape, giving momentum for NATO to remedy its Black Sea defence posture. Greater military support to Ukraine and strengthened forward presence in the area would be key components of a new approach to deterring and confronting Russian aggression.

Why did the Black Sea lack comparative strategic value?

A number of factors explain why Black Sea security represented a low priority for Western policymakers prior to 2022 relative to the Baltic region. These range from a lack of cohesion and deficit of US leadership to excessive self-restraint toward Russia.

After Moscow sent its troops to Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, a common understanding emerged that the Baltic states could become the next target of a Russian intervention. NATO planners

subsequently prepared its Baltic defence posture on the region's geography (e.g., the Suwalki gap) and Russian forces' presumed ability to reach Riga or Tallinn within 60 hours.¹ At the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, Allies committed to deploy four multi-national battalions to the Baltic region in the form of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) but agreed only on a tailored (i.e., non-continuous) presence in Romania and Bulgaria. Reflecting a different sense of urgency at the time, such an imbalance between the north and the south of the Eastern flank was questionable given that all military conflicts involving Russia – active or frozen – had previously occurred in the Black Sea region, not in the Baltics. That Russia harboured military ambitions for the Black Sea region was further corroborated by Moscow's power projection into the Mediterranean region. Russia's sustained military intervention in Syria and its occasional incursions into Libya would have been difficult without Russia's naval dominance in the Black Sea.

While the Baltic states and Poland shared a common perception of the Russian threat, NATO Black Sea coastal states were generally out of sync in their assessment of Russia's growing presence.² Romania was the most vocal about the need to push back against the Kremlin in the region. Shortly after the

* Fellow at the Academy of International Affairs NRW and a senior fellow at the Center for Advanced Security, Strategic and Integration Studies (CASSIS) of the University of Bonn. He was Partnership for Peace Fellow at the NDC from September 2021 to January 2022.

Keywords

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1 D. Shlapak and M. Johnson, "Reinforcing deterrence on NATO's Eastern flank: wargaming the defense of the Baltics", RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2016.

2 D. Bechev, *Rival power: Russia's influence in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2017.

occupation of Crimea, Bucharest moved to allocate two percent of its GDP to defence, established the Multinational Division Headquarters Southeast, and pushed for deployment of US and NATO troops on its territory. In contrast, Bulgaria emphasized instead the need for economic cooperation. In 2016, Sofia rejected Bucharest's proposal to create a standing NATO Black Sea flotilla to counter Russian naval activities. Ultimately, Türkiye was the only littoral Ally with significant maritime capabilities to lay out a firm response to the Kremlin. Ankara, however, traditionally preferred to balance between competition and co-operation with Moscow.

Next, the absence of a single strategic vision for the Black Sea among NATO coastal states was complemented by less US resolve in the region. Prior to 2022, the United States maintained rotations between 500 and 1,000 troops in Romania, but this number paled in comparison to the American presence in the Baltic region.³ US lawmakers routinely passed legislation on the Eastern Mediterranean and the South China Sea to shape US policy toward these maritime regions, whereas the Black Sea failed to receive an equal level

of consideration. In addition, the US maritime footprint in the Black Sea has been inconsistent over the years. Following the occupation of Crimea, Washington stepped up its maritime presence by sending 13 warships to the area in 2014 but then drastically reduced the number

of vessels to 5 only two years later before increasing the number of entries again to 13 in 2021.⁴

Finally, even after the seizure of Crimea, Allies and Partners failed to impose sufficient costs on Russia's expansionism in the region. After completion of the Kerch Strait Bridge connecting Crimea to Russia's mainland, Russian authorities began actively detaining commercial and naval vessels attempting to pass through the Kerch Strait that links the Black Sea with the Sea of Azov. This has led to maritime clashes, including one in November 2018 when Russia's navy attacked and seized three Ukrainian vessels. Allies – Germany, Türkiye, the US – responded to Russia's use of military force with calls for de-escalation 'on both sides', while the EU belatedly added eight Russian individuals to its sanction list. At the core of such

self-restraint was always a belief that differences with the Kremlin can still be resolved through dialogue and cooperation, a key element of a broader Russia strategy for some Western states. Rather than taking steps to reinforce deterrence, responding to the Kremlin's actions in the Black Sea was often viewed as escalatory and damaging.⁵ It is no coincidence, then, that when Moscow closed the entire north-western part of the Black Sea under the pretext of military exercises days before the all-out invasion, no NATO warships from non-coastal Allies were patrolling the sea.

Strategic shifts in the Black Sea region

Russia's war with Ukraine has triggered significant changes in the region's strategic landscape. As the Black Sea emerged as the major frontline in the Kremlin's aggression, factors that for years contributed to the region's low priority value are no longer relevant.

First, NATO has recognized imbalances in its defence posture against Russia and has responded by establishing a single Allied presence along the entire Eastern flank. At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, Allies adopted a new Strategic Concept, which for the first time acknowledged the Black Sea region as an area of 'strategic importance for the Alliance'.⁶ Prior to the Summit, Allies agreed to set up four new multinational battlegroups, including in the Black Sea states. With more than 750 troops deployed, France has taken the lead in shoring up the battlegroup in Romania, joined by forces from Belgium, the Netherlands and Poland. Italy became a framework nation for the Bulgarian battlegroup consisting of contributions from Albania, the UK and the US. Besides combat troops, both battlegroups include pre-positioned equipment, such as air-defence systems, in line with NATO's new model of "forward defence".⁷

Next, the US has sharpened its focus on the Black Sea. In February 2022, Washington decided to relocate 1,000 troops from Germany to Romania, raising the overall number of its soldiers in the country to about 1900. The US has also committed to deploy an armoured-vehicle infantry company as a part of Bulgaria's NATO battlegroup. In addition to these reassurance measures, US lawmakers put forward a bipar-

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3 S. Garding, "Romania: an overview", *Congressional Research Service Report*, 14 June 2022.

4 Data collected from Bosphorus Naval News.

5 N. Bertrand and L. Seligman, "US drops plans to send destroyers into the Black Sea due to concerns over Russia", *Politico*, 15 April 2021; S. Cross, "NATO – Russia security challenges in the aftermath of Ukraine conflict: managing Black Sea security and beyond", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.15, No.2, 2015, pp.151-177.

6 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, p.11.

7 J. Stoltenberg, "Press conference following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers", 16 June 2022.

tisan proposal – the Black Sea Security Act – which calls on Washington to increase its commitments to countries in the region, augment military assistance and improve coordination with NATO and the EU.⁸ If passed, the bill would lay the groundwork for a first-of-its-kind US strategy for the Black Sea region.

Third, Russia's aggression has revitalized the defence policies of NATO coastal Allies. Within a few months of Russia's invasion, Romania pledged to raise defence spending up to 2.5 percent of GDP, greenlighted an expansion of the NATO battlegroup to brigade level and finalized the purchase of 32 F-16 fighter jets to replace ageing Soviet-era aircraft. In a major step to reinforce its naval capabilities, Bucharest announced an intent to procure at least two French-made submarines.⁹

In a similar vein, Bulgaria became more clear-eyed about the Russian threat to its security. In January 2022, the Bulgarian defence leadership was unconvinced about the need of NATO military presence in the country¹⁰ – a position it reversed only a few weeks later. Sofia phased-out Russian gas imports, sealed the deal to modernize its air force with new F-16 jets, and committed to deliver weaponry to Ukraine.

Türkiye, on the other hand, appears to still be evaluating its regional security approach. If anything, Russia's aggression has cemented Ankara's image as a neutral mediator, evidenced by the role it played in brokering the deal which lifted a Russian naval blockade on Ukraine's Black Sea ports used for food exports. Seeking a middle way seems to have shaped the Turkish response. Ankara closed the Bosphorus Strait to Russian naval ships, as required by the Montreux Convention, but also denied transit to all other military vessels.

Ukraine's maritime resistance

While NATO, the US and regional allies started to recalibrate their policies, the war's largest effect in the Black Sea region has been on Russia itself. Ukraine's resistance to the Kremlin's assault has weakened Russian naval power and exposed its vulnerability. At first, Russia dominated the sea by blocking Ukrainian ports and threatening an amphibious attack on Odesa. Two months into the war, however, Ukraine turned the tide on the maritime front. With two anti-ship

missiles, Ukraine sank the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, pushing away remaining ships from the Ukrainian coast. According to Moscow, Kyiv further struck offshore drilling rigs used by Russia for surveillance purposes, wiped out a great share of Crimea's naval air force with onshore missile strikes and attacked the Sevastopol naval base with air and maritime drones.¹¹ Most crucially, Ukraine has managed to retake Snake Island, which holds the key to controlling the northwest of the Black Sea.

Had the island remained in Russian hands, the grain deal that resumed food exports from Ukrainian ports would not have likely materialized.

It is a paradox that Ukraine managed to thwart and degrade Russia's Black Sea fleet without practically having a fleet of its own. Following the occupation of Crimea, the country lost 75 percent of its naval capabilities, along with significant shipbuilding capacities and its navy headquarters in Sevastopol. Individual NATO Allies, primarily the US and UK, had taken the lead in rebuilding Ukraine's naval capabilities. Prior to February 2022, Washington donated five Island-class patrol boats and reached a deal to sell 16 Mark-6 boats. In addition, Ukraine secured a GBP 1.7 billion loan from the UK to enable Kyiv to purchase two minesweepers and construct eight new missile boats. The acquisition of these ships was in line with Ukraine's 2018 naval strategy.¹² Its main objective was to build a large fleet of small, fast and highly manoeuvrable vessels ("mosquito fleet") which could inflict damage on larger and superior warships of Russia's Black Sea fleet.

Since Russia's invasion, Ukrainian defence planners have complemented their naval strategy of asymmetric responses, relying on stronger coastal defence infrastructure and unmanned capabilities. Western-supplied and homemade anti-ship missiles have helped Kyiv create an area denial zone against Russian battle ships, thereby aiding maritime trade from Ukrainian Black Sea ports. Drawing on the logic of "an amphibious raid",¹³ while not officially confirmed by Kyiv,

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8 Black Sea Security Act of 2022, S.4509 – 117th Congress, 12 July 2022.

9 M. Bran, "Romania prepares for eventuality of war at its doorstep", *Le Monde*, 24 July 2022.

10 K. Nikolov, "Bulgarian defence minister sceptical about foreign NATO troops", *Euractin*, 31 January 2022.

11 C. Olson, "A drone attack strikes Sevastopol, a Kremlin-backed official says", *The New York Times*, 22 November 2022.

12 "Strategy of the naval forces of the armed forces of Ukraine 2035", News of the Ukrainian Navy, Kyiv, 11 January 2019.

13 B. Friedman, "Naval strategy and the future of amphibious operations", in T. Heck and B. Friedman (eds.), *On contested shores: the evolving role of amphibious operations in the history of warfare*, Quantico, Marine Corps University Press, 2020, pp.355-363.

As NATO's door remains open to Ukraine, strengthening Ukrainian naval capabilities is an investment in the Alliance's own collective security

vanced capabilities – missiles and drones – designed to take out those navies.

The key to achieving this objective is to provide further support to Ukraine so that Kyiv can restore its territorial integrity. Allied assistance like anti-ship missiles, anti-mine capabilities and combat drones have played an important role in preventing Russia from cutting off Ukraine's maritime shipping. Helping Ukraine retake the occupied land and maritime areas constitute next steps. In addition to existing ground-based batteries, providing sea-based (missile boats) and air-based (combat drones) anti-ship missiles would allow Kyiv to consistently target Russian naval bases in Crimea and inflict irreversible damage to its naval forces. Strengthening Ukrainian naval capabilities is an investment in the Alliance's own collective security.

Another priority is to strengthen Allies' forward presence in the area. As any Eastern flank Ally would admit, there is hardly a better deterrent against the Russian threat than NATO's deployed forces. While land and air components of NATO's defence posture in the Black Sea region have been augmented, the maritime element is falling short. One way to improve is to help littoral allies – Bulgaria and Romania – modernize their current fleet of surface vessels and develop new capabilities such as submarines and maritime drones. In the meantime, as rearmament programs are underway, individual NATO member states can step up their maritime presence in the Black Sea. The US might take the lead, but the effort would ideally be a European one, drawing on British, French, Italian, Dutch and German assets. This would send a strong signal of transatlantic unity.

What next for NATO in the Black Sea?

After years of neglect, Russia's war against Ukraine has encouraged the transatlantic community to change its Black Sea policy. With NATO consolidating its presence in the southeast, the US putting more strategic value on the region, Allies growing more like-minded, and Ukraine revealing weaknesses in Russia's naval posture, the Alliance is now presented with an opportunity to push back against Russia's expansionism and to uphold regional security based on the rules and principles of international law, including freedom of navigation.



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Research Division

Marc Ozawa, PhD, and Cynthia Salloum, PhD,
Series Editors
NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143 Rome – Italy
www.ndc.nato.int

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