

MARITIME OPERATIONS AND EXERCISES – INSTRUMENTS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA –

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After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain – realities corroborated by the geopolitical implosion of the former USSR in 1989, the Wider Black Sea Region has experienced a phase of acute transition, now becoming the centre of geopolitical and geostrategic interests of major state and non-state actors with global or regional values, as follows: USA, NATO, EU, Russian Federation, Turkey. The sustained interest in ensuring security in the WBSR is represented by the launch and development of various formats of cooperation and exercises that denote an almost continuous presence of Allied forces in the Black Sea basin, respecting the conditions provided by the Montreux Convention. Ongoing training, achieving a higher degree of interoperability through standard procedures and increasing the responsiveness of military and civilian forces through the planning and conduct of maritime exercises and operations in the WBSR is the projection of political will through military initiatives, CIMIC and law enforcement specific instruments.

Keywords: cooperation; exercises; Wider Black Sea Region; maritime security; social security;

INTRODUCTION

Mastery of the seas and oceans has been a condition for gaining influence and power since ancient times¹. Positioning a state near a sea continues to be an advantage for both its own development and the region to which it belongs. The marine environment definitely influences the social development of all states and nations. The seas and oceans have remained a huge field of economic, industrial, diplomatic and military action, open to the strongest and most daring ones.

The title of the paper “*Maritime Operations and Exercises – Instruments for the Implementation of Regional Security in the Black Sea*” indicates the intention to disclose the significance of the continuous development of maritime security exercises and operations in the Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR). The permanent presence of the Allies in the Pontic Basin is meant to weigh and discourage the actions of the Russian Federation, which, following the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, in conjunction with the accelerated military build-up, increasingly threatens the balance of regional security. But the Kremlin ambitions do not stop at the Wider Black Sea Region, spreading its influence by planting Russian bases in the Baltic, the Mediterranean and Africa.

The Black Sea security environment has changed after the fall of the Iron Curtain, starting from the frozen conflicts, continuing with the Russian Federation’s neutral policy towards US and NATO policies, so that after the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008 the balance of regional security and the status-quo to experience repeated changes, more and more accentuated, culminating from 2014 until now, with the international maritime law violation by the Russian Federation.

The current international security environment challenges are *complex, atypical and non-linear*, being characterised by a *high degree of unpredictability*, with a direct impact on the security situation. These issues have led to the need to *continuously change and adapt the approach to missions and exercises in all operational environments*.

¹ See “*rimland theory*”, an extension of Halford Mackinder and Alfred Mahan paradigm, theory introduced by Nicholas Spykman (International Relations Professor, Yale University) in the paper “*The Geography of Peace*”, 1944.

The risks, vulnerabilities and threats to regional and international security derive from phenomena associated with the persistence of terrorist threats, continued efforts on separatism on ethnic grounds, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, perpetuation of frozen conflicts maintained by the Russian Federation (e.g. Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Ukraine, Transnistria), the phenomenon of illegal migration, the escalation of violence (e.g. the currents challenging the measures ordered by the authorities in the context of the pandemic generated by COVID-19), the proliferation of false news spreads and hybrid threats (figure no. 1).



Figure no. 1: Frozen conflicts in the Black Sea area
(New Strategy Center, Policy Paper, May 2017, p. 5)

CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

In order to facilitate the understanding of the submitted problem, a first step consists in defining the concepts that are operated during the paper, namely *maritime security* and *social security*, followed by the disclosure of the interdependence between conducting exercises in the Pontic space and ensuring a stable security climate.

The Copenhagen school, based on the vision and research of Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, supported by the joint declaration adopted following the 1991 NATO meeting in Rome, stated that security has five dimensions: political, economic, social, military and ecological.

“International security is fundamentally determined by the internal and external security of different social systems, to the extent that, in general, the identity of the system depends on external circumstances. Experts generally define social security as internal security. Its essential function is to ensure the political and economic power of the given ruling class or the survival of the social system and an adequate degree of public security”. (Buzan, 2000, p. 97).

Social security is the most comprehensive and complex form of security as it is interdependent and has connections in all media ranging from environmental security, space, population, food security, to maritime security achieved through military and specific means of law enforcement.

Maritime security is a set of measures (military, law enforcement, or civilian) taken by a state or international organisation to ensure a climate of normalcy in which maritime affairs take place. At the same time, *maritime security* means the situation in the world of maritime affairs, in which compliance with international law and national law is ensured, freedom of navigation is guaranteed, and citizens, infrastructure, transport, the environment and marine resources are protected. *Maritime security* has a direct impact on the normal conduct of economic activities at sea, ensures energy security (underwater networks and gas pipelines, oil etc.), prevents and combats piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal migration, ensures control of maritime borders, security shipping, prevents combat arms, narcotics, tobacco and human trafficking.

THE INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The maritime security dynamics in the Wider Black Sea Region is given by the sustained allied naval presence for a period of about 2/3 of the year, as well as the transnational, Euro-Atlantic involvement of the USA and Great Britain, together with regional partners, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania, in the context of the events in Ukraine and the implications generated by the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, in 2014, by the Russian Federation.

Following the annexation, the civilian population of Crimea (over 45,000 inhabitants) started the migration forced by the new realities. International organisations have also revealed persecution of Crimean Tatars in conjunction with

the relocation of the Russian civilian population to the peninsula. The year 2015 ended with the rationalisation of the Ukrainian defence industry, simultaneously with the re-subordination and administrative rearrangement of the new occupied territory.

Also, the construction of the bridge over the Kerch Strait, which connects mainland Russia to the Crimean Peninsula, started in 2016, was stating the intention to strengthen the new illegally annexed territory. With the help of the new civilian infrastructure created in Crimea, as well as a result of the relocation of its military forces, Russia imposed its position of strength, trying to negotiate in hard terms the new rights awarded by *the law of force* and not by *the force of law* over the territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone of Ukraine (figure no. 2).

New exclusive economic zone delimitation in the Black Sea



Source - www.russianworldforums.com

Figure no. 2: Delimitation of exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea: before (left side) and after (right side) the annexation of Crimea (Ib., p. 15)

In 2017, the Russian Federation adopted the new *Maritime Strategy*, with major implications for regional security. Thus, along with other strategic initiatives, guidelines and concrete actions, Russia started the massive militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula, by moving contingents and military units, while relocating high-tech weapons and redeploing the Russian Caspian flotilla in the Black Sea. All the mentioned strategic actions are important factors in alarming and increasing threats to regional security, as well as maintaining the current status quo in the Pontic basin.

At the same time, the imposition of the naval blockade in 2018, by closing the Sea of Azov, capturing three ships of the Ukrainian navy, and the navigation ban imposed on the ships of the Ukrainian fleet, are aggressive actions that contravene all legal norms of international maritime law.

At the end of 2019, the bridge over the Kerch Strait was put into use and opened to public traffic, with some Ukrainian voices declaring that the integrity and conservation of the ecological system of the Sea of Azov is threatened (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 2019). Kiev officials also complained that this road access route is intentionally designed to reach a relatively low height, in order to limit and restrict the access of large ships in the Sea of Azov.

Under the pretext of announced military exercises, in 2021 the Russian Federation imposed bans and restrictions on navigation throughout the northern part of the Black Sea, virtually paralysing freedom of navigation. These actions are practically associated with the closure of international navigation in the Sea of Azov, as Ukrainian ships are unable to reach their ports of origin.

The deployment of the Russian Federation's nuclear forces, weapons and capabilities in Crimea is an ongoing action. The nuclear infrastructure has been restored and developed, reaching practically the state of the art (figure no. 3). All these actions concerted by Kremlin are corroborated by the migration of the Russian population to Crimea and its massive encouragement.

KALIBR Cruise Missile - range 2500 km (1553 miles)
ISKANDES Ballistic Missile - range 500 km (310 miles)

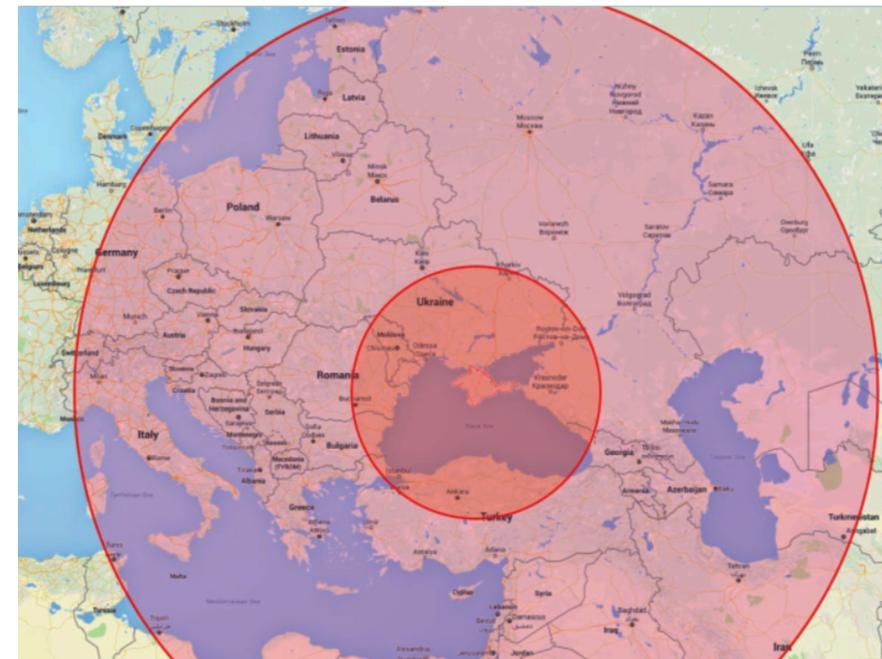


Figure no. 3: KALIBR (inner circle) and ISKANDES (outer circle) ballistic defence systems ranges (Ib., p. 9)

On 23 June 2021, the Russian Ministry of Defence stated that a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft fired warning shots at a British Royal Navy destroyer, HMS Defender, which entered Russian territorial waters in the Black Sea. Subsequently, the British ship left the territorial waters claimed by the Russian Federation after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, thus ending the armed incident. Kremlin authorities claimed that HMS Defender had patrolled 3 kilometres in Russian territorial waters. The United States, NATO and the United Kingdom have never recognised Crimea as Russian territory. Subsequently, the United Kingdom denied this armed incident, however admitting the existence of radio traffic between the destroyer HMS Defender and Russian Federation authorities (Ioniță, 2021).

Moscow's reaction to this incident was immediate, acting promptly by transferring three strategic Tupolev Tu-142 maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft from the Russian Navy Air Force to the city of Eisk in the Krasnodar region.

Also, the Russian Federation established and announced a large number of districts for exercises in the Black Sea, practically covering the entire northern coast, throughout the calendar year, paralysing activities in the area while violating the regime of freedom of navigation.

It is noteworthy that while the USA, NATO, the EU and the Pontic riparian states behave predictably, responding proactively to security threats, the Kremlin administration reacts predominantly aggressively to the conduct of Allied naval exercises, to the harmless passage of UK ships, using electronic and visual surveillance of the activities of SNMG2 (Standing NATO Maritime Group 2) and SNMCMG2 (Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2), as well as through press releases of Russian diplomacy, which contain subversive elements, misleading and misinformation, elements specific to asymmetric threats.

The security environment in the Wider Black Sea Region should be analysed from a broader perspective, that of regional and global interdependencies, cross-border risks and threats, where migrant and human trafficking networks, weapons of mass destruction, narcotics, tobacco and other products destined for the European black market must be annihilated and combated with the legal means at disposal.

At the same time, it should be noted that the situation of regional and international security, social security and *maritime security in particular, have suffered in the conditions generated by rising product prices, amid worsening problems caused by the global health pandemic COVID 19.*

Also, *amid the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan, the situation of the local society has become extremely complicated. The tense Afghan internal*

security environment is expected to generate a massive migratory flow towards Europe, and Turkey and Russia will certainly play key roles in managing it. At the same time, these masses of migrants, fleeing the war and extremely precarious economic conditions, are the currency of exchange, and probably blackmail, applied to the European Union by the leaders of Ankara and Moscow.

No later than July 2021, *the European Union Agency for Border Police and Coast Guard – Frontex activated the mechanism of rapid redeployment of the immediate reaction force (standing corps), which was sent to the borders of the Baltic states with Belarus. Migratory flows were directed from the Far East, via Russia and Belarus, to Europe's borders. Most likely, migratory pressure will intensify and Europe will once again be faced with extremely difficult situations in managing these flows of people, which can hide the full range of risks associated with terrorism, cross-border crime, trafficking in arms and ammunition, tobacco, narcotics etc.*

From the perspective of ensuring regional maritime security, Turkey's position is a robust one, being a partner with a strong regional footprint. At the same time, Turkey has made sustained efforts to accredit the NATO's MARSEC COE (Maritime Security Centre of Excellence) in Istanbul, through which Erdogan places his country on the short list of major NATO states that are able to ensure and provide maritime security education, both in the military and civilian environment. Thus, the Ankara administration has achieved its goal of competing with the NMOTC (NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre), the Greek centre of Souda/Crete.

Though participating in all Allied maritime initiatives, exercises, activations of NATO naval groups SNMG2 and SNMCMG2, Turkey has an oscillating discourse at the political level, fluctuating between the policies of the largest global players – USA, the Russian Federation and China.

Turkey has been antagonistic to EU's policies on controlling migratory flows, often using the blackmail technique. In 2015, Turkey signed an agreement with the EU for the readmission of economic migrants, who did not meet the specific conditions of refugees and implicitly those of seeking asylum in an EU country. Under that agreement, the EU undertook to pay 6 billion euros a year for 6 years. In 2021 this agreement was extended between the two parties, on the same terms. The event did not go unnoticed, as President Erdogan sparked a diplomatic incident by failing to give the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen the right position at the table, along with him and the European Council President Charles Michel.

Romania represents an important ally, given all efforts made for the permanent consolidation of the strategic deterrence position by hosting on its national territory some important NATO structures – MNDSE, MNBSE, MNCSE. Also, in the military field, Romania participates with human resources and naval platforms in all allied exercises in the Black Sea, as well as in the activations of SNMG2 and SNMCMG2, in the NATO maritime operation Sea Guardian, respectively in the maritime operation EUNAVFORMED IRINI, and with staff officers at EUNAVFOR Atalanta – the maritime security operation in the Horn of Africa.

In the field of maritime security provided by civil naval mobility, Romania participates annually in the activation of Multipurpose Maritime Operation in the Black Sea, as well as in multi-purpose maritime operations implemented in the Mediterranean (Greece, Italy, and Spain) by Frontex, EMSA, and EFCA.

Bulgaria is a responsible and credible ally in NATO, actively participating in most regional initiatives in the field of maritime security. At the same time, a NATO command is hosted in Sofia, which reveals the efforts of integration, raising standards and operationalisation of its armed structures. Along with Romania, Turkey, Georgia and Ukraine, Bulgaria actively participates in the Cooperation Forum of the authorities with specific responsibilities to the Coast Guard/Maritime Border Guard at the Black Sea, an initiative that promotes the active exchange of information in the field of law enforcement.

Georgia, along with Ukraine, is working hard to reorganise its internal administration, fight institutionalised corruption, and meet the Allied criteria for NATO membership. At present, Georgia and Ukraine are allied partner states with important presences in the exercises and temporary activations of NATO naval groups in the Black Sea. Ukraine, in partnership with the United States of America, also hosts the annual Sea Breeze maritime security exercise, which aims to increase the interoperability of participating naval forces. Ukraine and Georgia are states in the former Soviet bloc, where Russia has expanded its influence, acting strategically to rekindle the outbreaks of instability. The so-called frozen conflicts in eastern Ukraine, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are Moscow's strategic buttons, which are pressed as needed, in order to exercise political control over the government administrations in Kiev and Tbilisi. Precisely because of the active maintenance of these foci of regional instability, Ukraine and Georgia cannot meet the essential criterion of admission to NATO, that of ensuring a climate of stability with neighbours, namely not being engaged in an armed conflict at the time of joining the Alliance.

DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION FRAMEWORKS IN THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

Given the regional and international security complex situation, the North Atlantic Alliance, the USA, the European Union, Canada, and the United Kingdom are actively involved in the Wider Black Sea Region, supporting both air and maritime security operations, from both military and civilian perspective – law enforcement.

All regional cooperation frameworks – the military (in 2014) and law enforcement ones, as well as joint exercises between the states bordering the Black Sea have been suspended as a result of illegal actions to annex the Crimean Peninsula to the Russian Federation.

However, states bordering the Black Sea and their international partners have continuously adapted their missions, actions and exercises in the Pontic and Mediterranean basins, in line with the moves made by the Russian Federation. Thus, cooperation formats in order to achieve predictability and maritime security, such as BLACKSEAFOR, Black Sea Harmony, Black Sea Cooperation Forum etc. have concluded, suspended, or completely revised the bases of cooperation put up until the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Romania's role by means of its maritime security structures, respectively: the Ministry of National Defence through the Naval Forces and the Air Force; the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the Coast Guard; the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure through the Romanian Naval Authority; and the Ministry of Agriculture, through the National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture, is particularly important and it is carried out by participating in various cooperation initiatives, increasing mutual trust between the Wider Black Sea Region actors, as well as by the responsibility to form the first line in order to ensure maritime security by preventing and counteracting the risks and threats associated with, imported or related to the Pontic Basin.

Romania is an active and constant presence in the two NATO naval groups - SNMG2 and SNMCMG2; in September 2021, the "*Regina Maria*" frigate holds the command of the NATO Sea Guardian maritime operation in the Mediterranean Sea. Also, in the first six months of 2020, Romania held for the first time in history the command of the SNMCMG2 group, which operated in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Romania's participation with a surface ship, in the EUNAVFORMED IRINI maritime security operation in the past 3 months of 2021, strengthens both the military commitments and the existing partnerships. Combating arms trafficking

off the coast of Libya and disrupting illegal migration networks, together with increasing combat capacity and specialised training for Libyan naval and coastguard personnel, are the main tasks approved by the EU Council following the UN's Security Council Resolution.

CONDUCT OF MILITARY EXERCISES

The main purpose of the planned exercises is to train combat forces in order to achieve and increase interoperability, by jointly practicing standard operating procedures in the operational environment. The Black Sea, for almost two thirds of the year, hosts maritime security initiatives and exercises, actions that take place in addition to the regional activations of the allied groups SNMG2 and SNMCMG2. NATO efforts represent actions to reassure allies on the eastern flank, demonstrating solidarity, coherence and strategic action to discourage the proliferating hybrid threats to regional stability. Predictability of actions, promotion of naval diplomacy and strategic communication are elements that support the security policies promoted at the highest level of the North Atlantic Alliance.

At regional level, Romania plays a particularly important role. As a NATO-EU border state, Romania has an added responsibility to stop at its maritime borders the manifestation of identified risks and threats.

The Sea Shield exercise takes place annually starting in 2015, and represents the largest concentration of allied forces in the Black Sea, being planned by Romania, through the Romanian Naval Forces that ensure the assets management, sequences implementation, and coordination of partner forces. As the geopolitical situation in the Pontic area has gradually changed since 2015 up until now, the Sea Shield scenario has been continuously adapted, in order to respond, promptly and efficiently, to the full range of proliferated risks and threats to maritime security and to the regional stability.

In 2021, the training activities were led by the Fleet Command, and the participating forces came from Bulgaria, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, the United States of America, and Turkey. NATO's Allied Maritime Command – MARCOM participated with the permanent naval group SNMG-2 (Standing NATO Maritime Group), which also included the "Regina Maria" frigate (General Staff of the Naval Forces, 2021).

Through the Sea Shield 21 exercise it was verified and strengthened the level of interoperability achieved between the Romanian Naval Forces and the other Romanian Armed Forces services, various structures subordinated to the Ministry

of Internal Affairs and other naval forces belonging to NATO (Naval Forces Staff, 2021). The exercise included all stages of a NATO naval military operation in response to a geopolitical crisis in the region, with the role of demonstrating Romania's constant commitment to strengthening the Allied maritime posture, while developing interoperability of forces in all combat environments: maritime, submarine, land and air. Also, the Romanian Naval Forces planned, within Sea Shield 21, the evaluation of the unique package of naval forces made available to NATO and the EU, as well as the certification of the "Regina Maria" frigate to be part of the NATO response forces package (NRF, NATO Response Force), in 2022 (Naval Forces General Staff, 2021).

The "Sea Shield" and "Poseidon" exercises planned, organised and led by the Romanian Naval Forces are included in the NATO Combined Joint Enhanced Training (CJET) Program, a complex concept for Allied forces training, which was proposed by Romania at the NATO Summit in Warsaw, in 2016, with the purpose of strengthening security measures on the south-eastern European flank, as well as of ensuring the continued presence of Allied forces in the Black Sea region (Naval Forces General Staff, 2021).

The multinational maritime exercise *Sea Breeze* is organised and hosted by Ukraine, in partnership with the USA, being conducted in the Black Sea, in order to strengthen interoperability between the means and forces of participating states, and to minimise risks and threats, in conjunction with strengthening regional maritime security (Defence Visual Information Distribution Service, 2021).

Breeze is a maritime exercise led by Bulgaria, which takes place annually in the Black Sea, together with allied partners, NATO groups – Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group Two (SNMCMG2). *Breeze* is designed to improve the interoperability of the participating naval units, respectively to strengthen cooperation by practicing different sequences involving surface, anti-aircraft and anti-submarine warfare, all in a multi-dimensional scenario.

The *Sea Shield*, *Sea Breeze*, and *Breeze* exercises, together with the activations and the almost permanent presence of SNMG2 and SNMCMG2 in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea represent the initiatives of riparian states, together with the USA and allied partners, whose main purpose is to strengthen regional maritime security and counteract conventional and hybrid threats from all environments.

Activations and exercises in the Wider Black Sea Region are subject to the planning, implementation and evaluation process from the perspective of exercising the single command over all categories of armed forces, the combined nature of the operation being one of the novelty elements practiced.

PROVIDING MARITIME SECURITY FROM THE CIVILIAN POINT OF VIEW

Starting in 2019, the Romanian Border Police through its Coast Guard structure, participates annually in the multi-purpose maritime security operation “*MMO Black Sea – Multipurpose Maritime Operation in the Black Sea*”, organised by Frontex, European Border and Coast Guard Agency, in partnership with the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) and the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA).

The purpose of MMO is to strengthen the security level at the European Union’s external maritime border by implementing operational activities such as combating illegal migration, combating cross-border crime, illegal fishing, maritime pollution, actions accompanied by SAR operations – search and rescue of ships and people in danger.

Frontex, EMSA, and EFCA thus provide operational support to the national authorities of Romania and Bulgaria to implement specific Coast Guard functions, by providing services, information, equipment and specialised training, respectively the development and implementation of joint actions. All these efforts are made in order to improve the operational situation and its awareness, corroborated with the real possibility to react in case of need. In this regard, an aircraft provides maritime surveillance in the Black Sea, providing real-time images to the command-and-control centres of the national authorities of Romania and Bulgaria, respectively of the participating European agencies.

In 2021, EMSA provided aerial surveillance equipment to the Romanian Coast Guard in two locations: a medium-sized drone at Mangalia for the EU maritime border surveillance, and a small drone on board the MAI 0201 Offshore Patrol Vessel Border Police ship in order to extend maritime surveillance beyond the radar coverage area installed on board the ship.

The specific Coast Guard functions implemented in the MMO and subsequent exercises are: maritime safety, including naval traffic management; maritime, ship and port security, activities specifically carried out by maritime customs authorities; preventing and combating migrant trafficking and related law enforcement activities;

maritime border control; maritime surveillance and monitoring; protection of the marine environment and appropriate response; search and rescue at sea; ship accidents and maritime assistance services; adequate response to maritime accidents and naval accidents; fisheries control and inspection; as well as any other activities carried out in connection with the above-mentioned Coast Guard functions.

The MMO also regularly conducts training exercises on human resources and ships belonging to the Romanian and Bulgarian national authorities. The exercise of 2021 took place in the presence of officials from the Frontex agency, representatives of the Romanian Naval Authority, the National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture, the Romanian Agency for Saving Human Life at Sea, the General Staff of the Naval Forces, the General Staff of the Air Force, ROMATSA RA, General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police, Romanian Intelligence Service (Romanian Border Police, 2021).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The long-standing Allied naval presence of the USA and the UK as well as the active involvement of the European Union in the Wider Black Sea Region is meant to ensure and contribute to the development of the concept of maritime security, in its multilateralism, starting from naval diplomacy, through the presence of naval technical means in sensitive areas, visits to ports, maintaining freedom of navigation, continuing to secure maritime borders, combating illegal migration and human trafficking, combating terrorism, piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal and unregulated fishing, and ending with trafficking in tobacco, weapons, and other consumer goods whose activity is not carried out according to legal provisions.

The continuing Russian militarisation of the Black Sea is the main challenge for NATO, the EU and Romania in terms of regional security. Unmanned naval and air systems, used for military and/or civilian purposes, can play an important role in overcoming these Moscow-orchestrated challenges. UAV/UAS systems certainly represent the future of the development of maritime security operations and exercises.

Through a mixture of pragmatic relations with regional powers, power games, institutional alternatives and hybrid conflicts, the Russian Federation is making serious efforts to maintain the status quo when the issue of frozen conflicts is put back on the table at the international level, maintaining them at the same time, when it deems it necessary (New Strategy Center, 2021).

The normal conduct, in accordance with the calendar of international exercises, of naval exercises and maritime security operations in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the entire planetary ocean, have been affected by the SARS COV-2 virus pandemic alike.

The complicated security situation in Afghanistan will have major repercussions on the security of the EU's maritime, air and land borders opening up to the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea.

The “*Strategic Compass*”, whose public debate and urgent adoption is expected in December 2021, is the response of the new European leadership, strengthening the provisions of the *EU Global Strategy* (2016), with member states expecting the level of ambition to ensure maritime security and the EU's advanced presence in the main areas of interest should increase and be decisive for the protection and pursuit of strategic interests.

Also, at NATO level, the *new strategic concept* is expected to be adopted at the Madrid Summit in 2022, in which the relevance of measures and actions to ensure maritime security will be increased. The realisation of these initiatives in conjunction with the Allied presence in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Baltic is NATO's robust response to the full range of hybrid threats, vulnerabilities and security risks to allied states.

The annual training through exercises in multinational partnerships aims to strengthen maritime security and regional stability, share relevant information and increase mutual trust between the participating actors.

Achieving an adequate level of resilience requires the existence of a holistic governmental concern. Anticipation, prevention, resilience and response should be the guidelines in any NATO action, in a context where challenges to test NATO's response, which risk turning into a larger-scale conflict, are possible at any moment. Considering that the Russian Federation has taken a much more aggressive approach, implemented from the Arctic to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, that its militarisation process is constant and also that it uses methods of asymmetric conflict and hybrid warfare, counteracting these threats using innovative means becomes crucial. The blurring of the border between conflict and peace and, consequently, the Western perception of peace, increases Russia's room for manoeuvre, augmented by the context of globalisation influences, in which hybrid warfare can be waged remotely (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

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