

BLACK SEA'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE AND NATO'S ROLE IN COUNTERING THE KREMLIN'S MILITARY DOMINATION

Navy Captain (r.) Professor Ioan CRĂCIUN, PhD

National Institute for Research and Development in Informatics – Bucharest

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The Black Sea region has become one of the key geopolitical spaces for the competition between Russia and the West on which the very future of Europe ultimately depends. The Kremlin wants to keep the Black Sea in its sphere of influence through a strategy of regional destabilisation based on a special military operation against Ukraine, the illegal annexation of new territories, historically considered to belong to Russia, and the strengthening of the military presence in these territories or the direct military threat to the states in the region in order to limit as much as possible the possibilities of their accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures. On the other hand, the West is trying to respond to Russia's expansion with an advanced defence strategy in which the Black Sea occupies a central place. Thus, the Black Sea region, which has traditionally been treated as a less important area, acquires new strategic features becoming a much more militarised, unstable and contested region, a region that is in dire need of a new regional status-quo in order to stabilise. Considering this state of facts, this article has as its main objective the geopolitical analysis of the Black Sea region, given that Russia has become the main destabilising factor in the region, as well as the identification of solutions to achieve regional stability based on the increasingly consistent involvement of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Keywords: geopolitical space; independent states; Ukraine; the Black Sea; NATO New Strategic Concept;

INTRODUCTION

In the years since the end of the Cold War, the global distribution of power has been in a permanent reset. The position of the US, as the most influential power in the international system, has been increasingly challenged, and the recent rise of regional powers has led to the creation of real conditions for the change of this world order. In this context, the Russian Federation, through its retaliatory attempts to strengthen its regional and global role and thereby restore its status as a major player in the international system, is at the forefront of these developments. Russians believe that they rightfully belong among the world's Great Powers, and that is why Vladimir Putin is doing everything to counter perceived threats to that goal. The strategy adopted in this regard is based, first of all, on dominating the regional subsystem and establishing it as a zone of direct/indirect control around Russia's borders followed by the expansion of influence in more distant regions. This strategy is more than evident today when, without any hesitation, Russia illegally invaded Ukraine trying by force of arms to block the Euro-Atlantic integration of this country, keeping it in its zone of influence as a buffer zone between it and a West which became more and more challenging for its own security. Moreover, by threatening the use of nuclear weapons, Russia's war against Ukraine has gone beyond the stage of a simple threat to this state's sovereignty and integrity, becoming a threat to European and global peace and security.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine takes the Black Sea region out of the shadow cone it was in, placing it in a geostrategic context of utmost importance for the security of the contemporary world. Although the anti access/area denial (A2/AD) and hybrid warfare strategy were practiced by Russia in this region long before the invasion of Ukraine, even before the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, as clear signs of the fact that the Black is becoming one of the geopolitical spaces of great interest for the Kremlin, the West largely ignored these signs, not giving them their due importance. Under these conditions, the Russian Federation did everything in its power to keep the Black Sea within its sphere of influence and to control the regions of immediate interest. Russia's reaction to Georgia's and, more recently, Ukraine's attempts to integrate into NATO and the EU are instructive examples of this strategy. On the other hand, the desire for Euro-

Atlantic integration of the states that were once part of the communist bloc either as independent states or as republics of the former USSR corroborated with NATO and the EU expansion near the borders of the former superpower were perceived as threats towards Russia and used as motivation for its illegal military response first in Georgia in 2008 and then in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 respectively. On the other hand, the West is trying to respond to Russia's expansion with an advanced defence strategy in which the Black Sea occupies a central place.

Thus, the Black Sea region, which has traditionally been treated as a less important area, acquires new strategic features becoming a much more militarised, unstable and contested region, a region that is in dire need of a new regional status-quo in order to stabilize. Considering this state of facts, this article has as its main objective the geopolitical analysis of the Black Sea region, given that Russia has become the main destabilising factor in the region, as well as the identification of solutions to achieve regional stability based on the increasingly consistent involvement of North Atlantic Alliance.

WHY IS THE BLACK SEA SUCH AN IMPORTANT REGION FOR RUSSIA?

Geographically, the Russian Federation is the largest country in the world, covering more than 1/8 of the Earth's land surface. However, relative to this huge area, Russia's population is only about 142 million, which is strongly concentrated in the western part, the rest of the territory being sparsely populated (CIA, 2016). From a military point of view, the defence of this extensive territory, which borders 14 different countries, along a border of more than 22,500 km, in the vast majority of which is not marked by any significant geographical barrier, has always represented a difficult task (STRATFOR).

Therefore, throughout history the defence of its borders against potential enemies has been an essential problem for which Russian leaders have decided that the only option is to *expand the borders*, in order to create a buffer zone that acts as a defensible barrier against its rivals. *"I can only defend my borders in one way, to expand them"* (Talbot, 2009, p. 133), said Empress Catherine the Great, and this option of ensuring security through expansion of borders would lead to the creation of the Russian Empire. Thus, after the creation of the Grand Duchy of Moscow from the 14th century followed centuries of expansion until the Soviet era when the Russian Empire reached its greatest extent (Friedman, 2012, p. 9).

During the period of Peter the Great, Russia began its expansion to the West and South, managing to complete the conquest of Crimea, the Caucasus region and Central Asia by the end of the 19th century, after having previously annexed the Baltic region, territories from Poland and Ukraine, reaching the Baltic Sea and the Carpathian Mountains to the West (Ib., p. 4). Russia's direct access to the Black Sea region (through the ports of Kerch and Azov) is confirmed by the signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774. Therefore, the end of the 19th century is the historical moment when the Russian Empire conquers the territories adjacent to the Black Sea and turns them into a buffer zone for the defence of its Southern border and obtains direct access to this sea.

Later, Catherine the Great made it possible to establish the first ports on the Black Sea, usable throughout the year, thus contributing to the consolidation of efforts to transform Russia into a naval power. Since 1783, the year in which the foundation stone of the city of Sevastopol was laid, the Black Sea has become a disputed space between the Tsarist and Ottoman Empires, later the USSR and Turkey (after the breakup of the two empires at the end of the First World War). The Black Sea region proved to be extremely important for the two empires and this fact is demonstrated by the events that marked the history of this region. First there was the Crimean War (1853-1856), then the treaties that attempted to redefine the region's geopolitics (Treaty of Sèvres – 1920, Treaty of Lausanne – 1923) followed by the signing of the Montreux Convention – 1936. Despite a so-called Straits Crisis in 1946, in the period after the Second World War the Black Sea region was characterised by a geopolitical balance determined by Turkey, NATO, the United States and the USSR. But this geopolitical balance was to be shattered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This event caused Russia to lose important territories in the West and South, most of them constituted in valuable buffer zones, and brought insecurity to the new Russian borders (Kuchins, 2000). So, the loss of control over important territories, as is the case of the Black Sea region, has caused great concern for Kremlin, and the situation has increased in complexity when the Central and Eastern European states, whether former Soviet republics or former satellites of the USSR asked one by one to join NATO and the European Union, and the expansion of the two Western organisations brought them closer to Russia's borders.

In this context, Russia was forced to do everything in its power to keep the Black Sea region in its sphere of influence and stop the growth of Western influence in the region, as well as the Euro-Atlantic integration of states that, traditionally,

constituted its strategic buffer zone. Thus, Russia first used the tactics of frozen conflicts, which it later combined with a whole arsenal of hybrid/unconventional tactics, with the construction of an Anti Access/Area Denial type zone, followed by the *green men* type of aggression, forcing the limits of international law, to end up triggering a real conventional war against a sovereign state, precisely because it refused to continue playing the role of a buffer zone. But for Russia, the Black Sea region is also important for the fact that it represents the only exit to the *warm seas* where it can make its military presence felt. So, for Russia, the geostrategic factors of the Black Sea region remain unchanged since 1853, only the main geopolitical competitors of Russia of those times have been replaced by NATO, the EU and the USA, otherwise Crimea has remained the source of military conflict, Turkey represents the same strategic pivot, and the control of the straits still represents the same strategic objective that leads to Russia's access and military presence in the eastern Mediterranean as a counterbalance to the US and NATO expansion towards the Middle East.

As things currently stand, the Black Sea will continue to witness aggressive Russian military actions and threats to use tactical nuclear weapons. On the other hand, Russia will continue to put the Black Sea under the hybrid pressures, including economic pressures, disinformation, cyber attacks or information campaigns with the aim of eroding the confidence of the riparian NATO member states in the Alliance's ability to defend them and deter non-NATO members to request integration into the Euro-Atlantic organisational structures. One way or another, through actions of the type listed above, Russia will continue to put pressure on all states in the Black Sea region. With no prospect of an end of the Russia's illegal war of aggression against it, Ukraine will be the hardest hit. With some of its most important territories lost, critical infrastructure destroyed and its economy severely damaged, Ukraine has no prospect of improving its relationship with Russia, even if it enjoys massive support from the West. The Republic of Moldova and Georgia are two other states in the Black Sea region, former Soviet republics, therefore located in the area considered a strategic buffer zone for Russia, which will continue to be under pressure from Moscow. The frozen conflicts on their territory, initiated and maintained by Russia, represent constant Kremlin's obstacles against these two countries institutional strengthening and Euro-Atlantic integration. Romania is also a Kremlin's target which, through a hybrid strategy that currently emphasizes bellicose rhetoric, is trying to call into question the benefits of our country resulting from Euro-Atlantic integration. It is expected that this rhetoric will intensify,

and it is not excluded that in addition Russia will use other nationalist tactics with the help of which to induce doubts about the national unity of Romania and the importance of Western values. Despite the strategic rapprochement with Russia, Turkey will never let go of its suspicions regarding Moscow's age-old dream of taking control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. Moreover, we are currently witnessing an increasingly consistent encirclement of Turkey by Russian contingents deployed in the Black Sea area, in the Caucasus and Syria. Even Bulgaria, a country of slavic origin and traditionally in a relaxed relationship with Kremlin, ended up being spied on by Russia by using high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Defence in Sofia.

Therefore, the Black Sea region is extremely important for Russia, which will not stop using complex tactics, either hybrid or conventional, including the threat of using tactical nuclear weapons, to achieve its strategic goals of maintaining this area far from Western influences.

WHY IS THE BLACK SEA AN IMPORTANT REGION FOR THE WEST?

Despite the fact that in current language we use the concept of the Black Sea region, in reality, the Black Sea represents a region only from a geographical point of view. The states in the region do not have a common history, they do not have common identity and culture roots, they have put on hold all forms of common economic, political and military cooperation, summing up only to forms of bilateral cooperation. The only thing that creates a unique perception is the hatred towards the common enemy, Russia. Therefore, the regionalisation of the Black Sea must be looked at very carefully, especially in the states located in this area. The more they support the idea of regionalisation, the harder it will be for them to understand the lack of a Western strategy regarding this region.

However, the Black Sea area is of crucial importance to Europe and the US, being a major geopolitical crossroads determined by the critical intersection of the East-West and North-South corridors. Many experts believe that whoever controls or dominates the Black Sea can easily project power on the European continent, mainly in the Balkans and Central Europe, but also in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as in the South Caucasus and the northern Middle East (Anastasov, 2018).

Russia's war of invasion of Ukraine has turned the Black Sea region into the provider of the most serious threats to the European security architecture since World War II. The West saw itself in the face of a *fait accompli*, Russia invaded

a sovereign country which it stripped of its important territories, and through this gesture showed that it is not only challenging the regional order in the Black Sea area, but is openly challenging the post Cold War world order itself. And for this, Russia uses conventional military force, applies asymmetric means of warfare and threatens to use tactical nuclear weapons to oppose the sovereign decisions of the former Soviet republics in the so-called *near abroad*, and to stop both their internal democratization processes, as well as their Euro-Atlantic integration. But above all, Russia wants to stop Western influences in these states and keep NATO and the EU as far as possible from its borders and out of its strategic buffer zone.

Under these circumstances, for the West, the Black Sea region acquires new strategic values, this area becoming one of the key geopolitical spaces for the competition with Russia, a competition on which, ultimately, the very future of Europe depends. The Kremlin wants to keep the Black Sea in its sphere of influence through a strategy of regional destabilisation based on a special military operation against Ukraine, the illegal annexation of new territories, historically considered to belong to Russia, and strengthening of the military presence in these territories or the direct military threat to the states in the region in order to limit as much as possible their Euro-Atlantic accession. On the other hand, the West is trying to respond to Russia's expansion with an advanced defence strategy in which the Black Sea occupies a central place. That is why the Black Sea region, which has traditionally been treated by the West as a less important area, acquires new strategic valences becoming a much more militarised, more unstable and contested region, a region that in order to stabilize is in urgent need of a new regional status-quo.

NATO'S ROLE IN STABILISING THE BLACK SEA REGION

In the current strategic context, NATO seems to be the most appropriate vehicle for the articulation of a unifying strategic vision that leads to the consolidation of regional security and to stopping Russia's ambitions, put into practice through military force. The North Atlantic Alliance can take a series of steps to secure the region and support both member and non-member states in promoting their own interests, respectively aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. First, the Alliance should start a process of creating a NATO strategy for the Black Sea. The Alliance must take into account the diversity of interests of the states in the region and develop meaningful ways of collaborating with each one. Many of NATO's recent initiatives have not taken these aspects into account and have failed to meet expectations. In addition, as part of this strategy NATO should encourage

the establishment of a permanent naval group in the Black Sea, whose primary mission would be maritime patrol (modelled on the successful air policing mission in the Baltic area) to maintain a robust NATO presence in this area, in accordance with the 1936 Montreux Convention.

Through these measures, the allies could demonstrate that the Black Sea is a very important region for NATO and therefore must receive the attention it deserves. A separate NATO strategy and support for the Black Sea countries would send a message that the Alliance takes the region seriously. Maybe NATO should have done this years ago, and then we would not have been in a situation of almost direct confrontation with Russia, but maybe it's not too late either. And this also considering the fact that the Black Sea is so interdependent with the Mediterranean and the Middle East region that what happens in the Black Sea is unlikely to stay only in the Black Sea. The geopolitical implications are multiple and that is why they must be analysed and followed by practical actions.

At the Madrid summit in June 2022, NATO adopted a *new strategic concept*, on which occasion it announced its strategy for the next decade. Although, regarding the Black Sea region, the most important programmatic document of the North Atlantic Alliance only includes the option of increasing the presence of NATO forces on the eastern border of the alliance, it paves the way for the development of a strategy dedicated to this region. The presence of NATO forces on the eastern border is a key issue in the context of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, but equally important is the creation of a strategy for the Black Sea region.

For the countries in the region, this aspect is encouraging. Before Russia's first aggression against Ukraine in 2014, NATO's strategic vision of the Black Sea region was almost non-existent, limited to brief mentions of the region in official statements and communiqués. Even after the annexation of Crimea, at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the allies did not consider it useful to adopt a clear vision of the Black Sea region. It was only considered that Russia's actions were contrary to the international principles that were the basis for the adoption of the Trust-Building Measures in the Black Sea (Document on Trust-Building Measures in the Black Sea) adopted in 2002 (Ibid.). However, NATO's response after 2014 to the threat posed by Russia to the members in the Black Sea region was to establish an advanced presence – Forward Presence (FP) and an enhanced presence – enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic Sea region. So the Alliance treated the two regions differently even though the threat was the same, Russia.

Subsequently, NATO began to pay more attention to the Black Sea region in order to emphasize more clearly Russia's aggressive actions in this area at the Warsaw summit in 2016. The allies realised that, through military activities in the Black Sea, Russia was strengthening its position in Crimea and deploying new capabilities that would allow it to project its power in the Mediterranean. Therefore, the decisions adopted at this summit also referred to the support that must be given to Romania to establish a multinational brigade in order to facilitate the integrated training of allied units affiliated to the South-East Multinational Division and to develop the surveillance and air defence of Georgia.

NATO's attention on the Black Sea region continued to grow so that at the Brussels Summit in 2018, the Alliance adopted new measures to strengthen security in this area. From a military point of view, the decisions aimed at strengthening the maritime presence, in the context of establishing an appropriate forward military presence – Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea region and developing cooperation with its partners Georgia, respectively Ukraine. Later, at the Brussels summit in 2021, the allies condemned Russia for its military build-up in the Black Sea, demanding an immediate end to the blockade measures of Ukrainian ports and the Sea of Azov.

Two years later, at the 2021 Brussels Summit, NATO's communiqué began to outline other areas of commitment in strengthening the security of the Black Sea: strengthening the allied maritime posture, increasing NATO's presence and activity, and developing cooperation between the alliance and its partners: Georgia and Ukraine. Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) was established in the Black Sea region, still maintaining differences between eFP and TFP.

Given the situation in the Black Sea region after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it was expected that the *new strategic concept* adopted by NATO at the Madrid summit in June 2022 would pave the way for the adoption of a long-awaited strategy for the Black Sea region. Indeed the NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid identified revisionist Russia as an adversary of the Alliance and showed the need for a strengthened NATO force position in the east. Even if they do not mention it directly, these outlines pave the way for starting a process of creating a real strategy for the Black Sea region.

However, for the development of such a strategy, NATO states in the region, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania, should, for the most part, speak with one voice. For now, the three NATO countries bordering the Black Sea lack a common perspective on the regional threat and the best ways forward to combat it, and that is essential

for a NATO strategy. On the other hand, the increased military presence in the Black Sea is more than necessary, but the necessary force structure must be analysed very carefully. The multiplier factor of surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, unmanned systems or those that ensure increased mobility must be taken into account for the success of a credible deterrence promoted by NATO in the Black Sea. The response to hybrid threats must also be taken into account, and with regard to economic security measures, especially in the energy and food fields, coordination with the European Union, but also with other international entities, will be essential. Last but not least, a NATO strategy for the Black Sea will also have to meet the expectations of the non-NATO partners in this area, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Undoubtedly, Ukraine is the most seriously affected country by the war it is forced to wage with Russia, and no one can say at this time when and how this war will end. However, Ukraine must already be given a chance from the allies to at least support post-war reconstruction, economic recovery and destroyed critical infrastructure, military capabilities and democratic consolidation. As for the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, it seems that they will continue to be the target of Russian pressure and, in the hope that they will not be the target of any special Russian military operation, they will need to be supported primarily to successfully deal with external hybrid actions and strengthen themselves as independent states and democracies. Regarding the three countries Euro-Atlantic integration, it is probably difficult to identify a path in the short term, but in the medium and long term, nothing is excluded.

So, in order not to allow Russia to strengthen its position in the Black Sea region, which would enable it to strategically control this area and ensure its base of action in the Eastern Mediterranean, becoming a potential threat to the key interests of NATO allies, the Alliance will have to adopt a clear strategy in this area. It is more than obvious that the NATO allies have a clear interest in preventing the Black Sea from becoming a Russian lake, and for that, a new geopolitical vision of this region is needed. Developments in the Black Sea region are connected to developments in other areas adjacent to it, especially the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea.

THE GEOSTRATEGIC RESETTLEMENT OF THE BLACK SEA REGION

At the moment, the situation in the Black Sea region is extremely difficult, which is why it requires an immediate solution to end the violence and the war in Ukraine, and in the medium and long term, a new geostrategic approach to the region is needed. Instead of a large-scale regional project based on the accession of all states

to NATO and the EU, a project based on smaller initiatives that are new or based on other existing strategic cooperation formats should be considered. It is possible that some of these initiatives have their success rate while others fail, but that cannot be known until they are tried. This does not mean that countries like Ukraine or Georgia should stop thinking to NATO and the EU accession. On the contrary, they must dose their accession effort by means of initiatives based on the cultivation of bilateral and plurilateral relations, initiatives that may even lead to a regional recalibration.

After the end of the Cold War, the states bordering the Black Sea tried several regional cooperation initiatives, more or less successful. However, when Russia invaded Ukraine, all these initiatives reduced their activity to the maximum that it can be said that they almost do not exist anymore. The reason is easy to explain since all cooperation initiatives have taken into account the fact that Russia not only should not be excluded, but it is absolutely necessary for Russia to be part of these initiatives. But even if Russia has excluded itself through its actions, these regional cooperation initiatives must continue. The states of the Black Sea region can and should continue themselves their efforts to build regional cooperation, even if there is no actor among them that can sufficiently stimulate cooperation in the region. Apart from Russia, the regional actor that could play this role would be Turkey, but given its limited military presence in the Black Sea and its external orientation towards the Middle East and the Caucasus, at least in the short term Turkey cannot fulfil this role.

In these conditions, one should look with more confidence towards other regional initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative or Bucharest 9 which can create the effect of deterring the adversary, making the transition from a type of defence through sanctions (deterrence by punishment) to one much more efficient and adapted to local/regional capacities, such as defence by denial of anticipated gains (deterrence by denial) (Zamfir, 2021). In this sense, the tactics employed by the Baltic states are worth following, the lessons learned by them can be extremely useful for the states in the Black Sea region as well.

As I have already mentioned, over time the countries of the Black Sea region have tried several plurilateral initiatives, not all of them successful. The steps taken within these initiatives highlighted the considerable disagreements between NATO's Black Sea allies and partners. That is why, in order to strengthen the dialogue leading to the mitigation of these disagreements, it would be necessary to create a *Black Sea Forum*, following the model of the *Northern Future Forum* as a regional

dialogue platform within which the states in this area can harmonize opinions and alleviates tensions that may arise between them. It is obvious that in the current situation Russia could not be a member of this forum, but such initiatives can also work without Russia.

To the extent that attention will be focused on initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative or Bucharest 9, the Baltic and Black Sea regions will be increasingly connected, and the integrated space of the two regions should be simultaneously reformed and redefined not as the eastern flank of Europe, but as the gateway to the continent, not only for Russia, but also for other actors such as China and its Belt and Road Initiative (Galeotti, Lanoszka, Rogers, 2021, p. 26). On the other hand, Turkey's regional policy shows that the Black Sea should be seen as a Euro-Atlantic gateway to the Middle East. Moreover, if Moscow succeeds in dominating the region, it would almost certainly strengthen its position in the eastern Mediterranean, jeopardizing the main sea gateway between Europe and the Indo-Pacific region (via the Suez Canal) (Ibid., p. 27). Therefore, the Black Sea region could be connected not only to the Baltic region to the north but also to the eastern Mediterranean so that what happens in one of these regions has an impact on the other two. In this way, a new vision on the regionalisation of the Black Sea would lead to its geostrategic redefinition taking into account a regional modelling along the north-south geopolitical axis and a regional opening along the east-west geopolitical axis.

CONCLUSIONS

The West is facing unprecedented political-military developments in the Black Sea region, which has made it one of the most vulnerable geographical areas in modern Eurasian geopolitics (Avdaliani, 2022). The Black Sea is not only the space where the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict is taking place, but also the intersection of two geopolitical axes that determine the geostrategic reshaping of this region. Russia sees the region as a buffer zone for the defence of its traditional borders, as well as a launching pad for its geopolitical goals in the eastern Mediterranean. Moscow has adopted a regional strategy based on a hierarchical regionalism in which Russia controls this area and in which the West has limited access. Russia's pressures on states in the region, and especially the war against Ukraine, represent not only Moscow's response to Western interference in its near abroad, but also Russia's desire **to return to the world elite with the intention of getting involved in the reshaping of the world order.**

In this context, in the absence of a long-term Western strategic thinking regarding the Black Sea region, NATO and the EU are struggling to find an adequate response to the change in the military balance of power in the Black Sea and to Russia's retaliatory actions. The problem is that the West still does not really know how to approach Moscow. Russia has certainly become stronger than it was in the 1990s, but it has yet to prove how strong it really is, and that is why the West is still hesitating. But, based on the new Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid in the summer of 2022, NATO could build a strong strategy to counter Russia in the Black Sea with effects in other related regions as well.

The process will not be easy at all because in the Black Sea NATO still does not have a strong ally or even a reliable partner to build a strategic approach. Ukraine is destroyed by war with Russia, and Georgia is smaller and weaker, while Romania and Bulgaria are not seen as actors willing to take on this role. Turkey would be the only state that could serve this purpose. For the moment, however, Turkey not only has a reduced presence in the Black Sea, but the unresolved differences between Ankara and the West represent the most important obstacle.

However, a NATO strategy for the Black Sea region is more than necessary and it must also lead to the geostrategic reshaping of the area. For this purpose, existing regional initiatives must be used, especially those that address regionalisation along the north-south geopolitical axis and open the region along the east-west geopolitical axis.

Regardless of what the future developments will be, the North Atlantic Alliance must assume an increased role in the Black Sea region with the aim of, in the short term, stopping Russia's violent actions in the war in Ukraine and countering its bellicose rhetoric against the states in the area, and in the long term, to adopt an integrated strategy to maintain peace and security in this area.

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