ROMANIAN
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THINKING

TOWARDS A NEW TRANSATLANTIC STRATEGY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Global strategic environment has changed substantially in recent years, with the emergence of a considerable number of new challenges. One of the factors generating such challenges has been the continuation of the Russian Federation assertive foreign policy, which culminated in the illegal, unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. In this context, in the 2022 Madrid Summit Declaration, NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting "condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in the strongest possible terms. It gravely undermines international security and stability. It is a blatant violation of international law"[1].

The Black Sea region represents an area of maximum strategic interest for Romania. In recent years, it has become the main site of Russian military activity. Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to use the military instrument to protect and promote its interests in the region, both through land incursions into the sovereign territories of NATO partners and through the use of the Black Sea Fleet and other capabilities to project power in the operations in Syria and in the Mediterranean Sea.

Any kind of tension in this area involves NATO nations and therefore the Alliance's interests, given that three Black Sea littoral countries have the member status and other states in the region have the partner status. On the other hand, maintaining a dominant role in the Black Sea region is an important element of Russia's strategy; however, Western policymakers have been hesitant in paying strategic attention to the Black Sea region before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This aspect should undergo changes in the near future, as the security of the Black Sea region is a complex issue with multiple Euro-Atlantic implications and significant global impact, particularly with regard to the rules-based international order favouring human rights, humanitarian intervention and promotion of democratic values.

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[1] Madrid Summit Declaration, issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Madrid 29 June 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm, retrieved on 19 April 2023.

Different Views and Approaches
in the Baltic Sea Area and the Black Sea Area

The Black Sea region is one of the key areas where international actors are involved in the configuration of new power centres. NATO nations border former Soviet states that Russia claims to be in its sphere of influence. Moreover, the surface and airspace of the Black Sea were, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the environment in which the Russian military and NATO forces interacted on the fringes. In addition to military challenges and geopolitical disruptions, energy resources represent another important factor in describing the strategic environment in the region. The Black Sea is an important transit route for such resources, especially natural gas. Transit routes involve Russia, producers in the Caucasus as it is the case of Azerbaijan, as well as the European market, particularly for natural gas and hydrocarbons. The resulting dependencies have proven to be vulnerabilities, being exploited as a lever of coercion by the leadership in the Kremlin, as energy is a major economic issue for European states. Energy resources as well as existing and future gas and oil distribution routes are perhaps the most important transnational issues, thus affecting almost all bilateral relations in the region.

Regarding the Russian threat, even before the moment of 24 February 2022, it can be stated that the Baltic states and Poland shared a common perception of it, while the Black Sea NATO member states were generally out of sync in their assessment of the growing presence of Russia in the region. Thus, shortly after the occupation of Crimea, Romania decided to allocate two percent of its GDP for defence, established the Multinational Division Southeast and the NATO Force Integration Unit, at the same time making efforts for the deployment of US and NATO troops on its territory. Instead, Bulgaria emphasized the need for economic cooperation. Ankara preferred, according to a model that has become traditional, focusing on pursuing its own interests, oscillating between competition and cooperation with Moscow. Moreover, to the absence of a single strategic vision for the Black Sea among NATO member states it was added a relatively modest US presence in the region. Before 2022, the United States of America maintained between 500 and 1,000 troops in Romania and Bulgaria, on a rotational basis, but the number was small compared to the American presence in the Baltic region. Additionally, the US maritime footprint in the Black Sea has been inconsistent over the years. After the seizure of Crimea, Washington increased its maritime presence, sending 13 warships to the area in 2014, but two years later, it drastically reduced the number of ships to 5. In 2021, it again increased the presence to 13 ships. Therefore, even after the annexation of Crimea, the Euro-Atlantic Allies failed to impose sufficient costs on Russian expansionism in the region.

Not coincidentally, when in early 2022 Moscow closed the entire north-western part of the Black Sea under the pretext of military exercises, days before the invasion of Ukraine, not a single NATO warship belonging to non-littoral Allies was patrolling in the Black Sea. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered significant changes in the region's strategic landscape. As the Black Sea emerged as a major frontline in the context of the Kremlin aggression, the factors relevant to the region's importance were reassessed. One of the major consequences of that reassessment was that NATO recognized the imbalances in its defence posture against Russia and responded by establishing a single Allied presence along the entire eastern flank.

NATO Response following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Immediately after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the North Atlantic Council decided, for the first time, to activate the Allied defence plans, thus being deployed on the Allied eastern flank, including in Romania, elements of the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). In Romania, the precursor land element of the battalion-level VJTF was deployed, provided by France as the framework nation.

During the extraordinary NATO Summit in Brussels, on 24.03.2022, the Heads of State and Government decided to establish four new battle groups in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary, to safeguard the security of the Allies, as part of a wider set of measures to strengthen the Allied deterrence and defence posture in the medium and long term.

In Romania, France took over the role of the battle group's framework nation and, in July 2022, started the deployment of the troops of the Battle Group format, which have gradually increased, simultaneously

with the completion of the infrastructure works in the National Joint Training Centre Cincu.

Deterrence and defence measures also include the presence of air defence systems, airspace reconnaissance assets, and multi-role aircraft for air policing and enhanced vigilance missions.

At the same time, the USA has focused its attention on the Black Sea. Washington decided to deploy a divisional command and a brigade of approximately 3,000 troops to Romania. In addition to these reassurance measures, US Congress members advanced a bipartisan legislative proposal – the Black Sea Security Act –, that called on Washington to increase its commitments to countries in the region, increase military assistance and improve coordination with NATO and the EU. If passed, the bill would lay the foundations for a first-of-its-kind US strategy for the Black Sea region.

It is necessary to ensure a substantial agenda for the Vilnius Summit in the current year to advance and strengthen the objectives related to the long-term adaptation of the deterrence and defence posture.

Future Allied decisions and actions related to strengthening this posture, including in the Black Sea region, will be integrated into the wider framework of the implementation of the new NATO Military Strategy, to support the objectives of deterrence and defence of the entire Euro-Atlantic Allied area. These decisions and actions include the adaptation of the Allied response mechanism, a process to which Romania is a party along with all other Allies.

Romania also advocates for strengthening NATO-EU interaction, based on complementarity, mutual support and concrete areas of cooperation, as well as for maintaining and deepening existing partnership formats, with increased focus on political dialogue and provision of assistance to strengthen their resilience.

Russia's aggression has revitalized the defence policies of NATO member states bordering the Black Sea. Within few months since the Russian invasion, Romania pledged to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP and completed the procedures for the procurement of F-16 fighter jets. Moreover, there are other ongoing very important procurement programmes: HIMARS, PATRIOT missile systems and man-portable missile air defence systems – MANPAD, Piranhia V armoured personnel carriers, tactical-operational UAS, tanks,

submarines etc. At the same time, Romania contributes equipment and personnel to the NATO battle group in Poland, led by the USA, and, starting in April 2023, it has deployed a detachment of F-16 aircraft to ensure the security of the airspace in the Baltic area.

Similarly, Bulgaria clarified its position on the Russian threat to its security. In January 2022, the neighbours south of the Danube were not convinced of the need for a NATO military presence on their national territory – a position that was reversed only a few weeks later. Sofia has phased out Russian gas imports, signed the deal to modernize its air force with new F-16 jets and hosted the NATO Battle Group, whose framework nation is Italy. Turkey continues to meet its commitments as a NATO member state. Russia's aggression gave Ankara the opportunity to play the role of mediator in negotiating the agreement that lifted the Russian naval blockade on Ukrainian Black Sea ports used for grain exports. Ankara closed the Bosporus Strait to Russian ships, as required by the Montreux Convention. It has also denied transit to all other military vessels.

What Is 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. As NATO strengthens its presence in the southeastern flank, the USA places greater strategic value on the region, with the Allies becoming more synergistic and Ukraine exposing weaknesses in Russia's military capabilities.

Maintaining and strengthening the Allies forward presence in the area is the answer expected by Romania and an opportunity for the Alliance to reject Russian expansionism and support regional security, based on the rules and principles of international law, including in the field of freedom of navigation. As any Ally on the eastern flank would recognize, there is no better deterrent against the Russian threat than deployed NATO forces. It is necessary to increase the level of the Battle Group to a brigade-level combat structure and to simultaneously pre-position the necessary equipment and supplies as well as to maintain the presence of US forces at least at the current level.

While the land and air components of NATO's defence posture in the Black Sea region have been improved, the maritime element is insufficient. It thus becomes a necessity for Bulgaria and Romania

to modernize their current fleets of surface vessels and to develop new capabilities. Meanwhile, as the procurement programmes are underway, NATO member states can enhance their maritime presence in the Black Sea. It would be a strong sign of transatlantic unity.

Conclusions

The Black Sea region was and remains an area with strong disparities and different levels of political, economic and social development, with impact on the level of cooperation and integration. Russia's open and unprovoked war in Ukraine, the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia, Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, together with the economic, environmental, migration and illegal trafficking problems are obstacles that prevent the littoral countries as well as those in their near vicinity from capitalizing on their potential for cooperation.

As an organization, NATO is inherently interested in the sovereignty and defence of the Alliance members in the Black Sea region. This is the Alliance's fundamental raison d'être, which must be taken into account in developing a transatlantic strategy for the region. The Russia-Ukraine war has revealed a high degree of cohesion among NATO member and partner states, whose visions of what the Alliance is and how it should respond to threats are largely shared. In the longer term, however, NATO's cohesion will depend on the Allies' success in bringing together their different strategic cultures and threat assessments into a vision of even greater cohesion, synergy and interoperability.

NATO, the EU and the wider transatlantic community have an interest in deterring or resolving as quickly as possible the security challenges affecting the sovereign rights of non-NATO countries in the region. To ensure that the Black Sea region contributes to the overall goal of a free, whole and peaceful Europe, the transatlantic community should have four very clearly defined objectives in mind in developing a security strategy for the Black Sea region, namely:
- effective deterrence and credible collective defence;
- resilience;
- stability and security in NATO partner states in the region;
- regional economic security, so that no state has the power to use economic and energy resources to coerce other states.

In this context, resilience is of paramount importance to the Alliance's systemic preparedness. Actions are needed to improve societal and regional resilience. At the same time, our armed forces must adapt and modernize to respond to complex threats. Another element to consider is the concept of integrated deterrence, recently introduced in the US latest national security strategy. Like our adversaries, we must use new domains and emerging technologies, develop our cyber capabilities, and equip our armed forces with state-of-the-art technologies.

A security strategy of the Black Sea region will be feasible if it also addresses, in the same framework, the long-standing problems of the Eastern Balkans, the Caucasus, as well as the conflict in Ukraine. Conceptually, no security strategy for the Black Sea region could pass the test of feasibility unless it integrates the relevant diplomatic, economic and intelligence instruments of power along with the multiple aspects of the military instrument of power. It should address deterrence, resilience, hybrid threats, energy security. Moreover, it should be underpinned by a strong economic component and bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagements. The resources needed for its implementation should be provided by the countries involved as well as through the involvement of international institutions.