



GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES AT REGIONAL LEVEL REQUIRE A ROMANIAN MARITIME STRATEGY

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This article aims to analyse the security environment in the Black Sea Region, the importance of the region, the regional initiatives of the littoral states and main international actors, the importance of a regional security project as well as of a Romanian Maritime Strategy.

The change in the regional balance of power, the invasion of Ukraine, the existence of an uncertain security situation in the maritime space, and the transformation of the Black Sea region, for EU and NATO, from a secondary military theatre to a main military theatre require for Romania to develop a Security Strategy for the Black Sea.

This strategy should underline Romania's role as a supporter of a substantial NATO and EU presence in the region, the development of the Naval Forces and their own deterrence and naval projection capabilities, the need for a free and open Black Sea, as well as a procedure for the exploitation of fossil fuel reserves and other offshore resources.

Keywords: Black Sea Region; regional security environment; Security Strategy for the Black Sea; conflict in Ukraine; Russia's harmful influence;



INTRODUCTION

Russia has unilaterally changed the security architecture and dynamics in the Black Sea region through its actions over the past decade and through promoting geopolitical revisionism. The invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a complete change of the fragile regional balance and has demonstrated that changing borders by force remains a reality, especially when you have as a regional neighbour a country with unpredictable behaviour, such as Russia. In addition to direct aggression, the Russian Federation is also carrying out information and hybrid warfare against EU member states and in the maritime environment, in the Mediterranean, Baltic, North Sea and Black Sea.

In this context, the Black Sea has gained particular international importance through international trade, digital communications, energy production and transportation, its maritime dimension (including submarine infrastructure such as cables and pipelines), maritime transportation routes (including those ensuring food security), river and land routes between different regions on the North-South axis and on the increasingly important East-West axis. It has become an area of economic and strategic competition and a complex geopolitical, economic and security point of interest not only for the littoral states, but also for major international players such as the United States of America, the European Union and China.

The Black Sea has several strategic points of interest, but three stand out in any kind of geostrategic analysis, the mouths of the Danube, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits and the Crimean Peninsula. The Danube mouths provide the link between the Black Sea and central and western Europe, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits act as a gateway between the Black Sea and the planetary ocean, and the Crimean Peninsula offers a dominant geostrategic position in the Black Sea and facilitates the control of all trade routes. The control of these geostrategic points ensures absolute control of the Black Sea.

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INTERESTS AND INITIATIVES IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

In this complex geopolitical, economic and security environment some littoral states, and those having interests in the region, have considered it is important to clearly define their position and intentions by developing maritime doctrines or strategies.

Thus, the **Russian Federation** is acting to credibly maintain its status as a superpower, considering the Black Sea and the countries of the region as critical elements in achieving a security buffer zone against Western influence, NATO expansion, and increasing Islamist threat.

Turkey is trying to become an international actor with its own regional agenda, often different from, if not contrary to, that of the USA, the EU and NATO. For Turkey, the Black Sea is not a main maritime security objective. However, it has an interest in maintaining the existing status quo, which ensures managing regional competition with Russia by maintaining the regional balance of power and converging views on the non-acceptance of non-Black Sea littoral states' involvement in the region.

Ukraine aims to increase naval capacity, recover occupied territories and ensure maritime sovereignty. The strategy is intended to ensure the effective readiness, deterrence and response to threats to Ukraine's maritime security, while also addressing economic, trade and environmental issues essential to strengthening Ukraine's sovereignty and global position.

Bulgaria does not have a Black Sea strategy, although the region is extremely important for its economy, for its transportation industry, energy routes, raw materials and tourism. However, Russia's war against Ukraine has prompted Bulgaria to rethink its political and security agenda.

Georgia considers the development of cooperation in the field of maritime security as a priority, given its vulnerabilities and geostrategic position, but does not have a strategy at the Black Sea, security being influenced by Russian threats and the possibility of China to develop alternative routes to Western markets for trade, transport and energy.

China has not prioritized the region, but is interested in developing the *Belt and Road Initiative/BRI*, so it has deepened investment

and diplomatic presence in the Black Sea region in recent years, opened new markets and built or intended to build infrastructure targets to connect Europe and the Middle East (Anaklia Deep-Water Port, Georgia).

The USA has developed a strategy for the Black Sea – "*Black Sea Security Bill of 2023*" (https://www.romney.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/black_sea_security_bill_2023.pdf). Even if we talk more about a set of principles, a vision, the USA has sent a strong political message, regarding the interest in this region. The document will facilitate increased military assistance and coordination with NATO and the EU, deepening economic ties, strengthening democracy and economic security, and enhancing security assistance with Black Sea countries.

The signing of the agreement with Ukraine on rare minerals and other resources will lead to an increase in the US interests in the Black Sea region, probably the continuation of support for Ukraine, but also an involvement in the security of the region through the support of NATO member countries in the region. In turn, these countries will be directly involved in ensuring the freedom of navigation in the region, the security of shipping and critical infrastructure.

The European Union, for its part, intends to respond to these urgent regional challenges, with a view to strengthening regional security and reducing dependence on the USA. Among the strategic premises promoted at EU level, it is worth noting the point on the transformation of the Black Sea from a secondary to a primary military theatre for the EU and NATO, thus making it a region of strategic interest for European security. Given that the maritime space under EU responsibility is subject to all types of threats, including hybrid threats, response measures must be developed.

NATO has increased its military presence in the region and has shown readiness to expand the combat groups at brigade level, including Bulgaria and Romania, countries that have also committed to modernizing their armed forces.

NATO's involvement in the region must take into account the fact that the Russian Federation Fleet in the Black Sea has been sized to ensure the projection of power in the Mediterranean and even the Red



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Sea, and, under these conditions, the countries in the region cannot respond to Russia's aggressive actions alone. For these reasons, the allied naval presence in the region must be permanentized, given that it is desired to strengthen the Eastern flank and to create defence arrangements that covers the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

DEVELOPING A REGIONAL SECURITY MODEL AND A ROMANIAN MARITIME STRATEGY

The change in the regional balance, the invasion of Ukraine, the existence of an uncertain "neither peace nor war" situation in the maritime space, the transformation of the Black Sea region from a secondary military theatre into a main military theatre for the EU and NATO, have found Romania and the Romanian Navy under the influence of a lack of vision on the maritime environment, the absence of a clear policy on the Black Sea region and the lack of a Maritime Strategy.

Romania can no longer continue with this lack of vision in various areas and must initiate the development of strategic projects, focusing on increasing security, defence, economy, energy security and democratic resilience, deepening security cooperation between allies and regional partners. In this context, one of the priorities is the need to define its own position on the regional security. Otherwise, our country will continue to accept the security model promoted by Turkey and the Russian Federation based on the balance of power between the two countries, which has proved to be bankrupt. The election of the new president and the development of the country's new national defence strategy represent a favourable moment to define the new directions of action necessary to promote and implement national interests in the maritime space and to define the priorities of national security at the regional level.

The recognition by NATO and the EU of the importance of the Black Sea region for European stability and security, the definition of the objectives of the EU's energy strategy and the encouragement of reducing energy dependence on Russia, by increasing the use of domestic sources, also influences regional security.

The Maritime Strategy must take into account that the Black Sea basin has become inhospitable. Moreover, maritime blockades,

drifting mines, attacks on civilian or critical maritime infrastructure, jamming of ships' GPS signals and diversion of trade routes threaten to further disturb the region. Basically, at sea, we can consider that we have a situation of "neither peace nor war", and Romania must react firmly to these challenges and the Naval Forces will have an increasingly important role. I think it is time to develop a regional model of "preventing war", which is strengthening the deterrence and immediate intervention capacity, to prevent any escalation of hostilities.

As the region becomes increasingly unstable, Romania must change the mentality regarding the development of its Naval Forces, which has been marked by a misperception specific to the post-NATO accession period, characterized by a minimalist, defensive approach, which promoted the concept that membership in the North Atlantic Alliance automatically guaranteed security of the national maritime space. This model of almost exclusive dependence on NATO has inevitably led to chronic underfunding of the Romanian naval component, stagnation of modernization programs and neglect of the construction of its own naval deterrence and projection capabilities. The evolution of the security situation in the region in the period 2014-2025, generated by the Russian-Ukrainian war, has demonstrated that the security of a state in the face of a direct military threat cannot depend exclusively on allied solidarity, but on its own level of preparedness, capabilities adapted to the new forms of conflict, and the existence of credible naval forces.

Romanian deterrence and naval projection capabilities can be complemented by developing a long-term strategy within NATO, the EU, with allies and partners in the region, to enhance security (ensuring freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, protecting critical infrastructure), to ensure an effective response to threats to maritime security and critical infrastructure, maritime and river critical infrastructure, to establish a permanent and lasting presence along the eastern flank of NATO. Romania can coagulate the interests of NATO countries in the region, partner countries, and other countries interested in ensuring security, in order to get involved in achieving joint control of the Black Sea.



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Moreover, the Romanian Maritime Strategy must also include the aspects generated by the new European Union Black Sea Strategy, designed as a key political framework for connecting the countries in the region, with a focus on security. Considering the security situation in the region and the possibility of continuing peace negotiations, maritime security and military issues will be an important chapter. The focus will probably be on ensuring command and control, at the seaside and on board a ship, for mine removal operations, as well as on ensuring the freedom of navigation in the area of responsibility but also in Ukrainian waters, maritime surveillance, the development of an EU, NATO mechanism to protect the offshore and submarine infrastructure, the cable proposed for the transport of electricity Azerbaijan Georgia-Romania, as well as on ensuring the logistical support for these missions.

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The European Commission's regional projects are particularly ambitious, but EU projects will be influenced by the provisions of the 1936 Montreux Convention, because access for military vessels from non-littoral states will be restricted for a long period of time in order to reduce the escalation of tensions in the region. Thus, Romania and Bulgaria, the only Black Sea littoral states bordering the EU, will have to support the EU's effort in the region with capabilities, as well as the USA, after the signing of the US agreement with Ukraine on rare minerals and other resources. The two countries will take on a significant part of the regional security burden of ensuring freedom of navigation for own ports as well as for the transportation of grain, minerals and other goods from Ukrainian ports. It entails permanent naval presence in the area of responsibility, participation in missions to ensure freedom of navigation and support for mine removal actions that will be carried out on the communication routes, providing the necessary facilities for a command post. It should also be taken into account that these missions are long-lasting and will require a particular commitment of forces and means, especially from the naval forces of the two countries. But the situation of the naval forces of the two countries is not optimistic, both have old ships that will be fully engaged during long-term missions and with an intense operational rhythm.

Romania also needs to define its strategy on the development of the exploitation of fossil fuel reserves in the Black Sea and other offshore resources, which would effectively reduce the region's dependence on Russian supplies and undermine Moscow's energy pressure on the EU. Control over energy resources is thus becoming a factor of tension, and Romania needs to develop the capabilities needed to protect them in long-term missions. In addition to the technological or economic aspects, ways of responding to Russia's hybrid tactics used to prevent the implementation of these offshore energy projects in Romania must also be identified. The strategy on maritime security must also identify the security threats to offshore installations and how to respond to such situations, given that the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), unlike territorial waters, is not covered by NATO Article 5, and the development of national defence forces is an increasingly necessary requirement.

CONCLUSIONS

These radical changes in the regional security architecture, the increasing involvement of the EU in the region and the development of offshore economic projects have surprised Romania without the necessary defence, countering hybrid threats, protection and surveillance capabilities. Thus, the Romanian Naval Forces are faced with the need to adapt their capabilities quickly. Under these circumstances, the modernization of old ships and the acquisition of platforms are emerging as urgent and inevitable strategic priorities, especially given that the acquisition of multirole corvettes has been delayed for a long time. The modernization of the vessels in service gives Romania the time to integrate the "European Patrol Corvette/EPC", program supported by the European Defence Agency. This project can benefit both the Vard yards (Braila, Tulcea), which Fincantieri owns in Romania, but also other yards that can join the program.

In order to have a stronger voice in regional security, Romanian politicians must prioritize this aspect at national level. It entails developing and promoting regional projects to attract Romanian and foreign investors, to finance such projects.

The need for the Black Sea to be free and open must also be promoted at international level, which facilitates the achievement



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of regional security and stability and is an essential element for economic development and the achievement of prosperity. At the same time, a stable security environment encourages investment, transport and trade in the region. Fostering regional benefits and a security model at the Black Sea, Asian countries, India and even China will be interested in supporting connectivity systems such as the Middle Corridor, designed as a multimodal transport route that starts in the coastal area of China to Poland and Romania, and will be involved in achieving regional stability.

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Given that the modification of the provisions of the Montreux Convention may generate tensions at international or regional level, ways must be identified for the direct involvement of NATO in strengthening the regional defence system. Therefore, fast and smaller (even unmanned) Allied boats armed with ship-to-ship missiles or long-range missiles can be brought via the Danube. The Danube also needs to be seen by NATO as a viable logistical route for transport insurance.

In conclusion, I appreciate that Romania must act to deter Russia and promote the EU and NATO presence in the region. This multidimensional approach in the Black Sea security project can attract partner and candidate countries. Moreover, it can also encourage Turkey to collaborate at regional level.

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