MANAGEMENT OF RISKS AND THREATS IN THE BLACK SEA: FUTURE SCENARIOS AND ROMANIA'S INVOLVEMENT

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Given the plasticity of the current geopolitical environment and the increasingly visible concern of NATO and the EU related to security in the Black Sea region in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the present article adopts a multidimensional approach to assess regional risks and threats. The paper begins by providing a comprehensive overview of the current security situation, focusing on diverse challenges that include both conventional and hybrid threats. Drawing on a diverse range of academic sources, policy documents and security analyses, and employing an empirical qualitative research approach, this study examines the factors that contribute to regional instability, such as territorial disputes, military buildup and hybrid threats.

An essential point of this article is Romania's role in addressing the identified risks and threats. The analysis investigates Romania's position as a NATO and EU member state and its contributions to regional security initiatives. In addition, it highlights the importance of inter-institutional cooperation and coordination for strengthening Romania's resilience in the face of complex security challenges. Overall, this article provides not only a comprehensive analysis of the security landscape in the Black Sea region, but also valuable insights into the potential paths that future developments could take.

Keywords: Black Sea security; risk assessment; threat analysis; regional cooperation; future security;

INTRODUCTION

In one of his works, the Prussian general and military thinker, Carl von Clausewitz, stated that *"the first, supreme and most comprehensive act of judgment that the statesman and commander must perform is to determine [...] the type of war they are embarking on"* (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 88). This act of judgment is actually the fundamental principle of defence planning. However, there is a lack of available empirical evidence, especially when dealing with a multi-faceted phenomenon like hybrid warfare. The same Clausewitz is of the opinion that, *"taking into account the countless dimensions of strategy, including those involving adversaries, forecasting future strategic developments inevitably remains a theoretical exercise"* (Gray, 2016, p. 61).

Consequently, the defence planning process must be guided by a combination of strategically plausible imagination that is shaped by strategic theory while remaining firmly grounded in historical lessons and the tangible realities of the physical world.

The irony makes this Clausewitzian judgment have the same meaning for the aggressors. An aggressor would be inclined to take action only if he were assured that he could exercise some level of influence over the nature of the war. This assurance depends on the belief that his strategy will be successful in shaping the character of any future conflict and the course of military operations (Wylie, 1989, pp. 76-77). This aspect is also of paramount importance to defence planners as they assess potential scenarios: Does the hypothetical adversary have the ability to effectively control the situation using specific methods and resources? And as a result, what are the implications for defence strategies? A variant that we propose to find out the answer to these questions, which also represents the purpose of the present article, is to explore the domain of the *"unimaginable"* in the most objective and rational way possible, taking into account what we already know, through sketching some scenarios on the future security of NATO's eastern region, with an emphasis on the Black Sea region.

WHY SCENARIOS? MOTIVATION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

The explanation can be formulated in the following way: scenarios represent the only method of managing the uncertainty regarding the future evolution. The inability to accurately anticipate technological progress and its implications, changes in social dynamics, and political developments have led to numerous incorrect forecasts in the past that have become notorious.

For example, in 1899, the readers of the American publication *"Literary Digest"* were assured that the automobile, called the *"ordinary horseless carriage"*, was a luxury only available to the rich and that *"no doubt it would never become as common as the Bicycle"*. David Starr Jordan, the founding president of Stanford University in the USA, wrote the following in 1913 with reference to the First World War*: "What can we say about the Great War in Europe? (...) We can say that it will never happen. (...) The bankers will not be able to find the necessary financing for such a conflict; European industry will not support it, and state leaders will not have the means to trigger it".* As for Margaret Thatcher, she is supposed to have said in 1969: *"It will be years before a woman becomes Prime Minister, but not in my lifetime".* Ten years later, she became Prime Minister (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014, p. 9). Obviously, all of the above have known the opposite over time.

The unfortunate events for the peace and stability of the Euro-Atlantic space in the last ten years were unexpected for the vast majority of observers of the international scene and demonstrated the importance of being prepared to imagine scenarios that seem inconceivable. The evolution of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has reconfirmed the fact that we must remain vigilant and understand that in the future more unexpected things than we are used to may happen.

As there is no official and commonly accepted definition by the specialized literature, we considered relevant for our study a collaborative article published in 2003 regarding the typology of scenarios (van Notten, Rotmans, van Asselt, Rothman, 2003, p. 424). The authors examined approximately 70 scenarios from various fields, such as management, economics, political science and environmental science, with the premise that, following the analysis of the case studies, they would identify and synthesize the predominant features of the scenario development processes. Furthermore, these characteristics, when combined, constitute the foundation of the scenario typology. According to analysts, *"scenarios are descriptions of possible futures that reflect different perspectives on the past, present and future"* (Ib.).

The design of alternative scenarios is a method based on the principle of developing some types of potential future, based on predetermined factors. The technique of alternative scenarios, also known as *multiple scenarios*, is a systematic procedure used to create several possible explanations for the direction of development of a situation. It is particularly useful when there are significant levels of uncertainty and a wide range of critical factors to consider. This technique involves selecting the factors with the greatest degree of impact on the problem under analysis, which by intersecting them form a matrix with four quadrants (Surdu, 2022, p. 115).
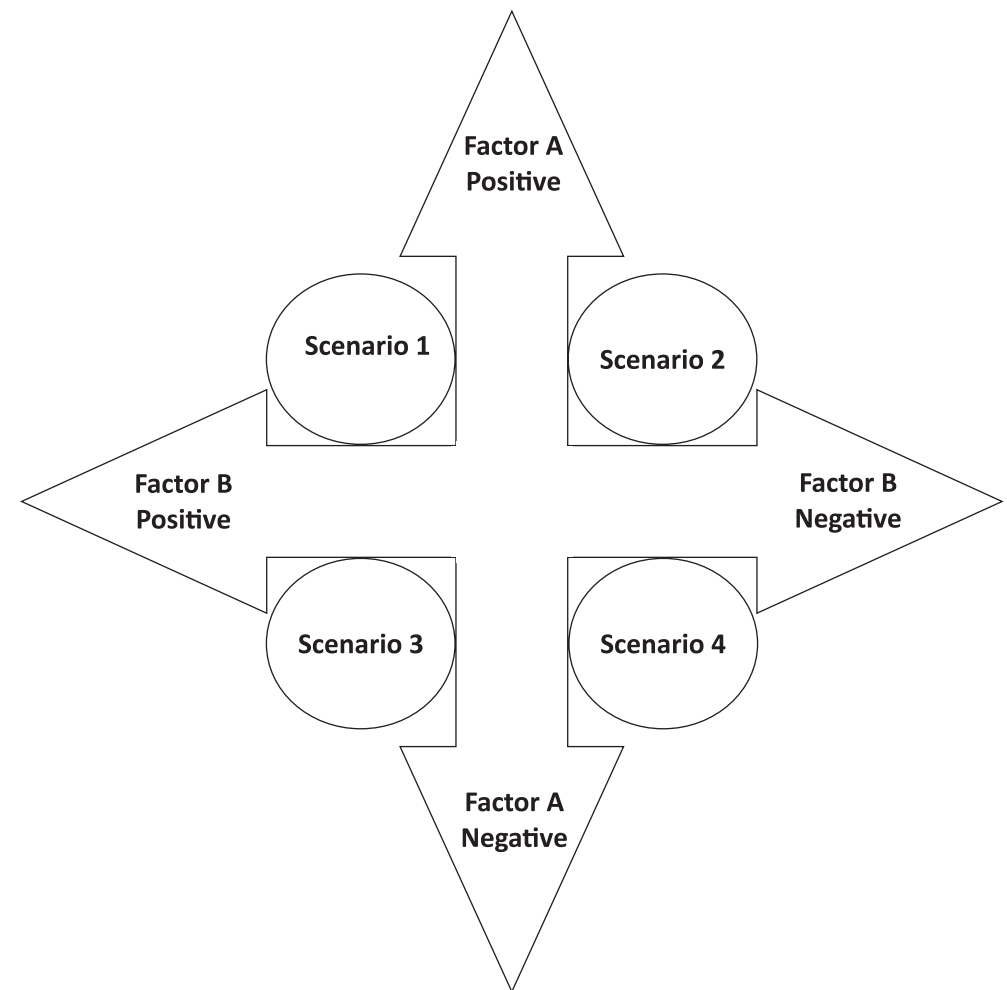

Figure no. 1: Matrix of alternative scenarios (Surdu, p. 116)

Alternative scenarios have demonstrated their success in various fields, either as a stand-alone analysis tool or as part of a broader methodology that integrates complementary techniques (Kuosa, 2014, p. 45). This success was attributed to adherence to fundamental principles: exploring multiple possible futures, maintaining consistency across scenarios, grounding them in rigorous data, and building them in a compelling manner (Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, 2014, p. 25).

Alternative scenarios are considered to prove their effectiveness by providing information and guidance in decision-making, planning and action selection (Surdu, p. 118).

Concretely, the process of developing alternative scenarios follows a set of steps:

a. identification of a group of critical factors;
b. defining the range of variability for each factor;
c. grouping factors in 2x2 matrices, thus creating possible combinations;
d. elaboration of narratives or stories for each quadrant of the matrix;
e. the selection of narratives that are considered relevant and significant;
f. detailing and refining the list of indicators that will describe the anticipated developments in each scenario (Black Sea Region Strategic Foresight, 2017).

Therefore, the elaboration of the scenarios proposed in this work knows three stages, namely: *orientation, elaboration* and *affirmation*. Orientation involves defining the problem, analysing the current situation and capturing the most relevant factors that describe the evolution of events in the Eastern Flank of the Alliance, more specifically the Black Sea region. In the elaboration stage, two essential factors will be selected for the trajectory of the proposed scenarios, and in the last stage, the confirmation stage, we will select the scenario that seem most likely for the established time horizon.

ORIENTATION

We consider it essential that, in order to outline a picture as clear and coherent as possible of the actual situation and to get closer to the topic discussed in this article, we make a brief foray into the evolution of events regarding the situation of the consolidation of the Eastern Flank of the Alliance from 2014 to present, with subsequent focus on the Black Sea region.

The Evolution of the Consolidation of the Eastern Flank of the Alliance

The year 2014 meant an awareness at the level of NATO and at that of all international actors that each state needs, first of all, a certainty that it can defend its territory by its own means, and then that it is able to support NATO's efforts to the extent which fulfils the Alliance membership status. The *"trigger"* of this fact was Russia's aggressive expansionist attitude which, using hybrid means, strengthened its military presence in the eastern region of the Alliance by illegally annexing the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014. For the affected region and for the states in the immediate vicinity, as well as for the transatlantic community as a whole, the behaviour of the Russian Federation represented a model of a confirmed threat to security. Among the hybrid tools used by Russia, we can identify the coercive use of political, economic, energy, informational etc. tactics. For an exhaustive picture of Russia's hybrid behaviour, we consider relevant a recent study carried out by the New Strategy Center. In the content of the work, the authors point out that *"energy represents Russia's most effective hybrid weapon"*, combined with commercial influence (blocking the market, economic pressure, smuggling) and political influence, through pro-Russian parties and cooperation in acts of corruption. In addition, the study shows that *"another lever of influence is the oligarchs because they have financial and political power to undermine the targeted authorities and sabotage Europeanization and reform"*, along with cyber attacks, propaganda, disinformation, but also the role of the Church, canonically subordinated to the Russian Federation (Scutaru, Solomon, Dadiverin, 2023, pp. 20-45).

A first solution identified at that time, during the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014, was the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), with the aim of quickly responding to the fundamental changes in the military environment security, both at NATO borders and outside them (NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance, 2023).

Later, at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, Alliance members adopted additional decisions based on the RAP. These decisions were taken to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence posture and to help promote stability and strengthen security outside the Alliance's territory. They included the deployment of a Consolidated Forward Presence in the North-Eastern region of the Alliance and the adaptation of the Temporary Forward Presence in the South-Eastern region. Taken as a whole, these measures represented the most significant strengthening of NATO's collective defence capability in the last generation. This approach, along with the resources and ability to quickly bring in additional forces, has helped to increase the security of all Alliance members (Ib.).

Another measure taken by NATO on the Russian threat was established by the resolutions following the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016. Thus, from that time until July 2017, four multinational battle groups were deployed in the member countries of the Alliance: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. NATO members have also stepped up activities in the Southeast region by deploying a tailored land, sea and air presence to improve situational awareness, interoperability and response capabilities (Ib.).

Following Russia's incursions in the Black Sea region since November 2018, NATO has taken the decision to expand its presence in this area to be able to closely monitor and understand the actions of the Kremlin. In addition, Allies provided concerted support to Georgia and Ukraine by conducting additional naval and coast guard exercises and training, as well as by conducting relevant port visits (Ib.).

After the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022, Alliance members mobilized additional resources in eastern and southeastern Europe, on NATO territory. This action further strengthened NATO's deterrence and defence posture. The effort was substantial and included: sending thousands of additional troops to reinforce NATO battle groups; fighter jets to support NATO air patrol missions; strengthening the naval presence in the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea; increasing the general training of the troops; and, for the first time, the deployment of the highest training element of the NATO Reaction Force in Romania (Ib.).

On 1 March 2022, immediately after the European security *status quo* was shaken, Turkey issued a decision to indefinitely close the passage between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea to Russian and Ukrainian ships, unless they return to their ports of origin. The measure was based on the provisions of Article 19 of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which gives Turkey the authority to close the straits to countries in conflict (Convention Regarding the Régime of the Straits, art. 19, 1936). This decision significantly influenced Russian naval activity in the eastern Mediterranean. Being unable to use the naval bases in the Black Sea, Russian military ships had to transit from the bases of the Northern Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean area, being carefully monitored by NATO member states (British Royal Navy, 2022).

At the extraordinary NATO Summit held in Brussels on 24 March 2022, the leaders of the Alliance member states decided to establish four new multinational battle groups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. The decision extended NATO's forward presence along the Alliance's Eastern Flank, starting from the Baltic Sea in the north and reaching the Black Sea in the south. Moreover, this measure effectively doubled the number of ground troops available for deterrence and defence in this region (NATO's Military Presence ..., 2023).

The 2022 NATO summit in Madrid meant, among other things, the Allies agreeing to expand the size of multinational battle groups from battalion to brigade level when and where necessary. NATO members also agreed on a new force model for the Alliance, which will replace the NATO Response Force (NRF) and which will involve an increased presence of well-trained troops and additional measures aimed at strengthening NATO's capability to support the member states of Eastern Europe (Ib.).

Under the current NRF, allies can mobilize approximately 40,000 troops in less than 15 days of training. Once fully implemented, NATO's new force model will have more than 300,000 highly trained soldiers. The precise details of this NATO force model, including its size and composition, are still being developed.

For the first time, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and New Zealand participated in the 2022 NATO Summit. The Strategic Concept (SC) adopted at the end of the summit emphasizes the importance of developing dialogue and cooperation with both existing and new partners in the Indo-Pacific region to address trans-regional challenges and common security interests, such as freedom of navigation issues (NATO Strategic Concept, 2022, p. 11). In other words, the allies recognized the existence of *"systemic challenges"* from China and, as a result, strengthened relations with partners in Asia and Oceania (Ib., p. 5).

For the first time in NATO history, the Black Sea region is mentioned in the content of the Alliance's current strategic concept. Part of the spectrum of strengthening NATO's position in the area of the Eastern Flank, reference is made to the implementation of a significant and robust ground presence, the strengthening of air and anti-missile defence capacity, the advanced placement of military equipment and the improvement of logistical support infrastructure. These aspects are of particular importance for Romania. Both the northern and southern regions of the Eastern Flank adopt a similar structure, based on the presence of American troops and battle groups, thus ensuring the cohesion and consistency of the position on the entire flank (Ib., pp. 4, 11).

The importance of resources is emphasized from the beginning of the allied strategic document. Based on this idea, the ratification of a new SC was aimed at ensuring that the Alliance will maintain an adequate level of readiness and have the essential resources to successfully face the challenges of the future (Ib., p. 1).

It is undeniable that today we are witnessing the double valence of a decisive factor in the nature of the conflict, namely, emerging and disruptive technologies. They bring with them both significant opportunities and risks and are transforming the character of war, gaining increasing strategic relevance and becoming focal points of global competition. Technological dominance increasingly influences success in the context of military operations.

In these terms, NATO supports and promotes innovation, allocating significant resources towards emerging and disruptive technologies with the aim of maintaining interoperability and continuous military advantage. In addition, the Alliance has committed to making available, individually and collectively, all the resources, capabilities, plans, means and infrastructure essential to support deterrence and defence efforts. Also, NATO's new attitude also refers to the ability to manage the conflict in high-intensity conditions, in various contexts, even in the face of adversaries that have nuclear arsenals.

Therefore, as American military strategist Bernard Brodie cogently argued in an early Cold War context regarding the concept of nuclear war, *"…so long as there is the possibility of limited conflict, we must be concerned with the consequences; and although almost all the consequences would be negative, some might be considered much more serious than others"* (Brodie, 1959, p. 178)

With reference to the disruptive factors to the security, peace and prosperity of the transatlantic space, the SC mentions: *"the most significant and direct threat"* is the Russian Federation because it uses conventional, cyber and hybrid tactics (NATO Strategic Concept, 2022, p. 4); terrorism, seen as *"the most direct asymmetric threat"* (Ib.); pervasive instability in general and conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East, in particular the stated ambitions and coercive policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC); increasing strategic competition; rising authoritarianism – challenge to NATO interests and values; contesting cyberspace; hybrid means and tactics of authoritarian actors; misinformation; migration; proliferation of nuclear weapons, emerging and disruptive technologies; climate change (Ib.). Under these conditions, part of the Alliance's solution to proportionately respond to security challenges, and mentioned at the end of the SC, is the increase in defence investments and the common financing of NATO. (Ib., p. 12).

At the Vilnius Summit in 2023, NATO leaders reiterated their belief that Russia is an imminent threat to the security of allies, which is why they gave the green light to a new generation of regional defence plans. One of these plans focuses on the Far North and the Atlantic, under the command of Joint Forces Command in Norfolk,

USA. A second plan with regional coverage focuses on the central area and is under the coordination of the Allied Forces Command in Brunssum, the Netherlands, thus covering the Baltic countries and the Alpine area. The third plan has as its area of coverage the southeast of the Alliance, including the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, with the central command located in Naples, Italy (NATO responds to Russia's threat and announces the three Regional Military Plans. Romania, part of the Regional Plan *"South-East"*, 2023). These plans will represent a significant step in the coordination and coherence of NATO's collective defence planning with the national planning of member states, taking into account aspects related to military forces, geographic position, capabilities, command and control (NATO's Military Presence …, 2023).

A crucial aspect that was also discussed during this summit was the threshold of 2% of GDP allocated to the defence budget, which is intended to be *"a minimum level, not a ceiling"* (Stoltenberg: Seven NATO member states allocated at least 2% of GDP for defence in 2022, 2023). Félix Arteaga, a researcher at the Real Instituto Elcano in Madrid, believes that this percentage is controversial because this figure is not relevant to the assessment in absolute terms of the military contribution. Moreover, the researcher points out that there are countries that exceed the threshold of 2% of GDP for military spending, but whose contribution to NATO's military capabilities is limited (NATO: Why 2% of GDP for military spending is so controversial, 2023). Practically, the equivalent in absolute, concrete terms depends on the size of the respective state's GDP. For example, 2% of Romania's GDP will be a much smaller amount than 2% of Germany's GDP.

Therefore, we can say without a doubt that as long as no armed conflict or war economy is identified among NATO member states, which would impose the prioritization of defence resources, it will be extremely difficult for all allies to reach the minimum threshold of 2% of GDP allocated to the field of defence. The proof lies in the fact that, no later than last year, only 7 out of 30 allied member states met the established financial requirements, with one less compared to 2021, given that, in 2022, on NATO's eastern border was carrying out a Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict of significant intensity (NATO chief urges members to boost defence spending as only 7 hit target, 2023).

Black Sea Region

Considered a region of *"significant strategic importance"* (Opening speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Aspen – GMF Bucharest Forum, 2022) in the current geopolitical context, the Black Sea has been characterized

by a constant series of tensions in various forms. Until 2014, we were talking about the preponderance of *"soft power"*, especially through the policies implemented by the EU and NATO in the region, which tried to stabilize the states here. In 2008, the spectre of conventional conflict was brought back by Russia's war against Georgia, and later in 2014, Russia came and brought the spectre of hybrid conflict by acting against Ukraine for its illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. After 2014, the Black Sea region has indeed evolved into the characteristics of a hot spot, where *"soft power"* politics has become as important as the conventional conflict, with strong hybrid accents, triggered by the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

The conflict generated by Russia gained momentum starting on 24 February 2022, through the invasion of Ukrainian territory. As Ukraine considers the Crimean Peninsula part of its national territory, the strategic interest attached to this area is implicitly major. Recently, Ukraine carried out the largest drone attack to date against Russian infrastructure in the Black Sea and Crimea regions (Ukraine launches biggest drone attack yet inside Russian territory, 2023).

Figure no. 2: Ukraine drone strike destroys Russian military aircraft
(Ukraine launches biggest drone attack yet inside Russian territory, 2023)

In response, on 28 September 2023, Russia launched a series of massive airstrikes on three regions of Ukraine, and Ukrainian officials said that some of the attack drones were able to hit targets, but did not provide details on the damage.

Ukraine's air defence forces managed to intercept and shoot down 34 of the 44 *Shahed* drones that were sent (Russia launches big wave of drone strikes on Ukraine, 2023). According to a Reuters analysis, the recent incidents related to the fall of drone waste on the territory of Romania underline the risk of a misunderstanding between Russia and NATO, which led the Romanian armed forces to intensify security measures in this region, in order to protect the civilian population. As a result, Romania will strengthen the defence in this area by deploying military observation posts and patrols. These actions come in the context of the additional deployment of F-16 fighter jets by the US and the extension of the no-fly zone in the Danube Delta area, signalling a growing concern on the part of both Romania and NATO regarding the development of the conflict in Ukraine (Dumitrache, 2023).

The Black Sea became the subject of the main discussions focused on managing security challenges with the aim of reducing tensions in the eastern region.

During the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Forum entitled *"Resilience at Sea and Its Impact on Land"*, organized in Bucharest by the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Forum (*E-ARC*) on 28-29 September 2023, Romanian officials initiated a debate on the existing geopolitical situation at the level of the Black Sea. According to them, the Pontic region has become the scene of an increased number of military actions, with maritime incidents and behaviours that restrict the freedom of navigation of ships. Both the anti-aircraft alarms in the Ukrainian cities bordering Romania and the alert messages sent to the inhabitants of the Danube Delta are more and more frequent. Imminent missile attacks, sea mines and the possibility of objects falling from the airspace, most likely drone debris, are the *"new normal"* of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, a permanent risk that finds its correspondence in the increasing probability of incidents on the infrastructure or territorial commercial vessels of Romania. GPS communications also periodically face intentional interference from Russia, impairing the navigational ability of ships and increasing the risk of collisions in the maritime environment (Romanian Armed Forces Chief: Russia interferes in the GPS communications in the Romanian territorial waters. *"Let us be prepared for a long-term confrontation"*, 2023).

The E-ARC event aims to support the affirmation of Romania as a pole of reference in global discussions on resilience, with an emphasis on the importance of the ingenious use of modern technology to facilitate global connectivity and bring together all relevant factors in the effort to find solutions to current challenges (Euro-Atlantic Resilience Forum, 2023).

The fact that the Black Sea was not included in the process of delimiting the zones of influence after the end of the Second World War led to the blocking of trade routes in regions where there are persistent tensions, regions affected by conflicts and which have now become increased points of interest in the competition between the orientation towards Western democracy and the authoritarian options proposed by Russia.

Consequently, the current situation in the transatlantic area is marked by dissensions, hybrid actions, intensified strategic competition, generalized instability and unforeseen events, which have a complex impact on the Black Sea region. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the ability to make predictions about imminent threats, to guarantee secure and rigorous access to strategic infrastructure and to provide protection to citizens. Russia's hostile actions that began in 2014 with the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula disrupted the stability and security in the transatlantic space and caused major international actors to reconsider their priorities regarding their own security and defence. Much of NATO, and especially the countries of Western Europe, now have the conviction that Russia can no longer be considered a strategic partner, but a danger in the true sense of the word to their security.

ELABORATION

To identify possible security threats and risks in the eastern region of the North Atlantic Alliance, especially in the Black Sea area, we will construct alternative scenarios using the four-quadrant model based on a two-factor matrix. Taking into account the volatility and unpredictability of the contemporary security context, the time limit will be a 5-year horizon. The result will be the outline of four scenarios with specific characteristics and implications for the security of NATO's Eastern Flank. We will also establish a representative title for each individual scenario.

Following the orientation directions regarding the evolution of events in NATO's eastern region over the past 10 years, with an emphasis on the Black Sea area, the matrix will be created by intersecting the following factors: the level of defence investments and common NATO funding and the number of hybrid actions held at the Black Sea.
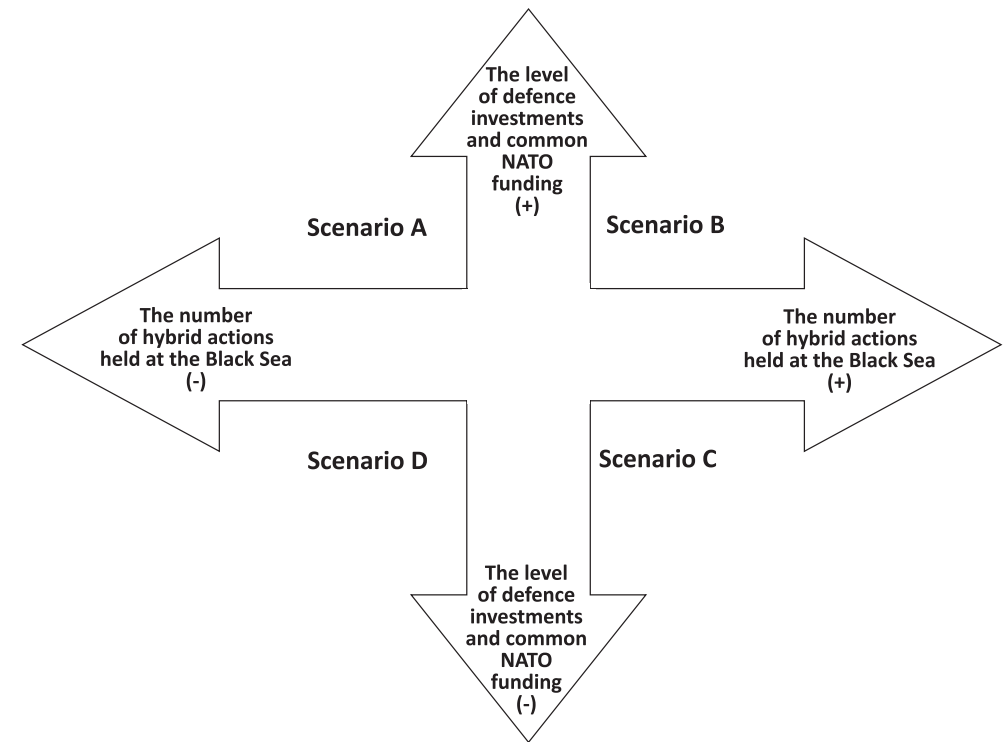

Figure no. 3: Alternative scenarios regarding risks and threats in the Black Sea (Author's conception)

Scenario A: *"Achieving new dimensions of transatlantic cooperation"*

In the next five years, a significant transformation is taking place on NATO's eastern border, especially in the Black Sea region, under the influence of a reduced number of hybrid actions and an increased level of NATO joint funding and financial investments exceeding the minimum ceiling of 2% of GDP for the defence budget agreed by the allies. As hybrid threats are reduced, increased investment in military capabilities by the US and European states may be seen as an overreaction, with the potential to leave behind a legacy of increased military spending, escalating weapons arsenals and possible power rivalries and instability. Instead, less expensive and less challenging military doctrines should be explored and promoted. A less conflictual outcome could be achieved through arms control and the implementation of confidence-building mechanisms.

This alternative scenario paints an optimistic picture of security in the region. The strategic approach will be based on bold and intelligent diplomacy, which includes recognizing the interests of rivals and providing assurances about the Alliance's intentions in ways that do not harm the core interests of its members.

The goal will be to identify more selective, targeted, and innovative methods to support military capabilities in key regions without resorting to a large buildup of military resources or adopting a dangerous new doctrine. This is the essence of the concept of *"defence without dominance"* that will become the common vision of the Allied strategic field: providing adequate military capabilities to achieve significant military objectives without attempting to dominate every aspect, domain or theatre of operations in a possible conflict. NATO member states in the Black Sea region are reassessing their defence doctrine to focus on preventing and deterring hybrid threats. Common strategies are being developed to counter disinformation and political destabilization. With a low level of hybrid actions and significant financial resources, the Black Sea region becomes a place of enhanced security. The military capabilities of Romania and its allies are modernized and strengthened.

Collaboration between NATO member states and partners in the Black Sea region continues to develop. A joint naval force is being established to ensure security in the Black Sea and to respond quickly to any challenges. Romania's maritime defence industry is being revitalized, with Romanian shipyards producing most of the ships and allied equipment. Also, their maintenance is also carried out through the defence industry in Romania. NATO member states in the region are allocating significant resources to modernize their military infrastructure, including advanced radar systems, anti-ship missiles, submarine detection technology, and nuclear-powered submarine technology. It increases surveillance and rapid reaction capacity.

NATO is engaged in constructive dialogue with non-Alliance states in the region to reduce tensions and promote mutual understanding, including with Russia, which has since withdrawn its armed forces from Ukraine, with its military capability severely weakened by sanctions imposed over time that no longer allowed it to invest in the armed conflict. Also, the hybrid tactics have not yielded any results. By modernizing military capabilities, NATO has managed to minimize the hybrid threat. In addition, confidentiality agreements regarding military activities are becoming more transparent. NATO investments in the region contribute to economic growth and political stabilization. Black Sea states are becoming more resilient to negative external influence and hybrid threats.

This alternative scenario, based on the reduced level of hybrid actions and the significant investments in defence and security, shows that a solid cooperation between NATO member states and regional partners can lead to strengthening security in the Black Sea region and redefining NATO's eastern border in a more stable and safer mode.

Scenario B: *"Confrontation continues: fragile security in the Black Sea"*

Over the next five years, a scenario characterized by an increased number of hybrid actions deployed in the Black Sea and an increased level of joint NATO funding, with financial investments above the 2% GDP limit for the defence budget at the level of the Allies, unfolds. Therefore, the PRC Navy is likely to make more frequent visits to Europe, including participating in joint exercises with the Russian Navy, which has fleets in both the Asian and European regions. All these developments indicate that the impact of maritime incidents will no longer be limited to just one region, but will expand to Europe, East Asia and Southeast Asia.

In light of these aspects, threats and risks on NATO's eastern border, especially in the Black Sea area, remain persistently present. As hostilities in Ukraine continue, the link between geopolitics and hybrid attacks has become increasingly clear. Russia's close collaborative relationship with states in Europe (Belarus) and the Middle East (PRC, North Korea, Chechnya, South Ossetia, the Republic of Abkhazia), which reject NATO policy, is turning into a military-specific alliance, in which NATO nuclear intimidation programs and strategies are being developed. In addition, Turkey's involvement in this partnership contributes to the fulfilment of one of the goals of the alliance: weakening confidence in NATO, developing dissensions within it and dissolving its existence. Disinformation, subversion and political-military influence are used to undermine Euro-Atlantic stability. These actions are becoming more sophisticated, and tensions in the Pontic region are intensifying. Naval incidents are recorded and a maximization of the number of aircraft is observed in the Black Sea area. Diplomacy is becoming increasingly difficult.

Massive defence spending and security measures are beginning to put pressure on the economies of NATO member states. It leads to concerns about long-term financial sustainability. Initiatives to increase defence spending and develop coherent, mutually reinforcing capabilities while avoiding unnecessary duplication are essential to the Allies' joint efforts to make the Euro-Atlantic area more secure. So, NATO reacts by strengthening its military presence in the Black Sea area, with increased naval forces and surveillance activities. Defence spending is reaching historic levels, but risks remain high.

In this turbulent scenario, there is an increasing emphasis on naval plans and operations, where military assets play an important role in resolving political disagreements. This raises questions about how the maritime security environment can be influenced at a time when protecting sea lines of communication becomes vital to commercial activities and the global economy remains uncertain.

For example, Russia continues to block access to Ukrainian ports and restrict military assistance to Ukraine, while denying it the economic benefits of Black Sea exports.

Scenario C: *"The Black Sea swims in the ether, without a lifeline"*

In the next five years, a scenario is developing characterized by an increased number of hybrid actions conducted in the Black Sea and a low level of NATO joint funding and financial investment, below the limit of 2% of GDP for the defence budget allocated by the Allies. We are witnessing an era of digital geopolitics, where malicious cyber activity has become a recurring tactic used by certain state actors to exert influence to disrupt the security of adversaries and achieve their geopolitical goals.

Threats and risks on NATO's eastern border, especially in the Black Sea area, are increasing. States that do not share the same values as Allies exploit vulnerabilities and intensify hybrid actions in the Black Sea area, undermining regional stability and creating tensions with NATO member states. Russia considers Turkey a significant partner in military and technological cooperation. Thus, the two states will conclude partnerships in areas of common interest, namely military, nuclear and technological, a fact that will develop dissensions within NATO and weaken trust in the Turkish ally. Therefore, being accused of undermining the principles and values of NATO, Turkey will decide to leave the Alliance and start a large-scale initiative with Russia, China and North Korea, a partnership that promises to militarize the Middle East in order to maintain regional order. Moreover, this partnership will be based on the exchange of information and the strengthening of economic cooperation, including technical military collaboration. Thus, the alliance between the four state actors will serve as a deterrent to NATO, reduce its hegemonic influence and encourage the Alliance to adopt cautious decisions in the formulation of political-military policies. Diplomacy therefore becomes increasingly difficult.

The low defence budgets of NATO member states are putting pressure on available military resources. Military capabilities are reduced and military modernization, interoperability and training are slowed, increasing the Alliance's vulnerability. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict persists, and China, North Korea and Turkey are supporting the Kremlin. China's support involves state-of-the-art military equipment and technology, North Korea is helping Russia develop a new nuclear program, and Turkey is banning allied warships from passing through the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits. This situation indicates to the Allies that the war of attrition is turning into a battle of logistics.

Hybrid actions, such as disinformation, political influence and subversion, know new dimensions, become more complex and difficult to detect, and Romania is among their targets. The use of cyber threats has become a significant tool for states to influence events without triggering open conflict. The motivations behind these attacks can include stealing intellectual property, cyber espionage, destabilizing critical infrastructure, and promoting digital influence campaigns to undermine public trust in government. It becomes likely that cyber activity will persist as a means used to achieve economic, social, geopolitical and military objectives.

Regional cooperation between NATO member states and Black Sea partners is deteriorating. The loss of the Turkish ally is felt significantly. The increased pressure on security and resources is giving rise to significant dissent within NATO. At the end of five years, NATO faces the need for a major strategic shift to counter continuing threats on its eastern border. A reassessment of financial commitments is necessary. This alternative scenario highlights the need for a proactive approach to dealing with risks and threats on NATO's eastern border.

Scenario D: *"Low threats but limited resources: the Black Sea region in transition"*

In the next five years, a scenario characterized by a low number of hybrid actions conducted in the Black Sea and a low level of NATO joint funding and financial investments, well below the limit of 2% of GDP allocated to the defence budget by the Allies, is taking shape. Threats and risks on NATO's eastern border, especially in the Black Sea region, remain low, and Romania plays a special role in promoting stability and cooperation, being the initiator of annual conferences in which all Pontic states are convened. These conferences aim to discuss the problems of the Black Sea region and to offer alternatives for their solution. With reduced hybrid threats and limited defence budgets, the Black Sea region enjoys relative stability. Military activities are reduced and the states of the Black Sea region focus their resources on regional cooperation, economic development and investment in infrastructure.

Therefore, regional economic cooperation becomes a priority. States in the Black Sea region continue to resolve disputes peacefully. Romania and other states in the region are strengthening their diplomatic dialogue with their non-NATO neighbours. The states of the Black Sea region are intensifying cooperation in the energy field, reducing dependence on external suppliers, exploiting potential renewable energy sources. Therefore, the energy security of the region is strengthened. NATO member states in the region maintain close surveillance of risks but do not invest significantly in military capabilities. Crisis management remains a major concern.

At the end of the five years, NATO and the states of the Black Sea region evaluate strategies to ensure a better balance between security and economic development under conditions of limited resources. Romania and its allies in the region, despite limited resources, are intensifying their involvement in NATO structures, contributing to the promotion of collective security.

This alternative scenario emphasizes that, in a context of reduced threats and limited financial resources, the Black Sea region can develop towards greater stability and economic cooperation. However, maintaining surveillance and risk management capacity remain a priority, and diplomatic and regional dialogue efforts play a key role in maintaining peace and security on NATO's eastern border. Romania plays an important role in this dynamic, promoting regional dialogue and economic development. However, it is important to maintain adequate vigilance and continue to work with both NATO and non-NATO member states to maintain peace and stability on the Alliance's eastern border.

AFFIRMATION

Determining the most likely scenario for the next five years in the eastern flank of the Alliance, especially in the Black Sea region, is a complex assessment and depends on several factors, including geopolitical developments, political decisions and international cooperation. However, we can make some considerations: Scenario A: *"Achieving new dimensions of transatlantic cooperation"* seems to be the most optimistic and would ideally represent a desired direction for the region, with significant investment in security and regional cooperation.

However, it is important to emphasize that the most likely scenario is not always the desired one or the one that actually happens. Geopolitics can be unpredictable, and unforeseen events can influence the evolution of the situation. Therefore, it is essential to consider and plan for several possible scenarios and regularly monitor the developments in the Black Sea region to remain flexible and adaptable in defence resource management.

In conclusion, scenario A might be the most desirable and optimistic, but we cannot predict with certainty which scenario will be realized in the next five years.

CONCLUSIONS

The current security context is marked by intensified strategic competition, generalized instability and unforeseen events, which have a complex impact on it. The threats, as presented in the mentioned strategic documents as well as

in the scenarios, have a complex character and are closely related to each other, transcending national boundaries. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the ability to make predictions about imminent threats, to guarantee secure and rigorous access to strategic infrastructure and to provide protection to citizens.

The present article therefore emphasizes the plasticity and unpredictability of the current geopolitical environment and the growing concern of NATO and the EU regarding security in the Black Sea region. This fact suggests that the changes in the region are significant and require special attention. In the first stage of developing the proposed scenarios, orientation, we identified various threats in the Black Sea region, including conventional and hybrid threats. It underlines the complexity of the security situation and the need for a multifaceted approach of actors involved in maintaining a stable and prosperous environment. The resulting paper draws on a diverse range of academic sources, policy documents and security analysis, using an empirical qualitative research approach. In other words, this robust methodology enhances the credibility of the conclusions.

In conclusion, the aim of the article has been achieved by exploring future scenarios in the Black Sea region, taking into account geopolitical changes, military developments and emerging technologies. These scenarios can provide useful insights for regional security decision-making. Through the four scenarios presented in this article, we want to stimulate a deeper debate about the future of NATO and the eastern region, as well as promote an objective, forward-looking attitude in this area. In addition, the paper highlights the important role of Romania as a NATO member state in addressing risks and threats. This aspect underlines Romania's contributions to regional security initiatives.

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