

THE BLACK SEA REGION: THE GEOSTRATEGIC AND SECURITY EVOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The article makes an analysis related to the geostrategic and security evolutions, geostrategic importance, risks and challenges in the Black Sea Region; impact of the crisis in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea for the security environment in the Black Sea Region; perspectives and role of different actors.

Keywords: *Black Sea, evolutions, cooperation, Ukraine, Russia, Crimea, security, challenges, partners, EU, NATO, BSEC*

1. Introduction

The Black Sea history knew different evolutions and fights for influence, hegemony and control. After the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea area faced radical political, military, economic and geostrategic changes; the power politics' logic of confrontation was replaced by cooperative relations, opening the perspective for the Black Sea to become an area of good neighbourhood, cooperation and understanding among riparian States. Dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty and emergence of new independent States after disintegration of USSR reduces Russia's (as its proclaimed heritor) direct control over the region.

With the end of the Cold War, Black Sea changed its status from a closed into an open sea. In this respect, an encouraging factor was the opening of the Main-Danube navigation channel (1992), establishing the direct links between Black Sea and Nordic Sea. The geostrategic position of Romania becomes obvious. Also, there was a significant change related to the foreign presence in the area, both of individual states and alliances: NATO increased its direct presence in the region, following the enlargement process and institutionalized relations with riparian States. A significant impact has also the EU enlargement process and Eastern Partnership. OSCE remains, also, an important factor in the region, given its role in conflict prevention and crisis management. At sub regional level, some initiatives have been developed, such as BSEC, BLACKSEAFOR. The EU and NATO are close strategic partners, but their influence in the Black Sea is performed in different ways¹.

Analysing the present security dynamics in the Black Sea region, the following areas of security challenges could be mentioned: conflicts in the context of post-Soviet nation-building; corruption and organized crime; institutional development and rule of law; energy security; military and weapon systems (preventing arms race); naval and maritime security.

¹ *Strategic Balance and Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region*, Position Paper. Institute for Regional and International Studies, Bucharest, 2011.

The Black Sea region encompasses not only a variety of risks and challenges, but also opportunities to solve them. The UN, EU, NATO, the CoE and OSCE are present in the region through specific mechanisms and programs. However, the resolution of the protracted conflicts is lagging behind, separatist forces are more and more active, economic difficulties and political tensions are seriously affecting democratic development.

Black Sea region is an area characterised by the collision of strategic interests, marked by fast geopolitical modifications. The geopolitical and security evolution in the region, the geographic position of it, the risks and challenges to stability in the area – are aspects attracting and justifying an increased interest of international community. The fight against terrorism remains the issue on which the main actors are still inclined to work together. Meanwhile, coping with protracted conflicts, fighting transnational organised crime and preventing the threat of Russian military intervention remain region-wide concerns.

European Union is involved in the Black Sea area, by promoting and financing national and regional projects aimed at consolidation of the reform processes in the region. However, despite a variety of approaches, instruments and agreement, the EU does not yet have a strong presence in the Black Sea area. Furthermore, the internal financial turmoil over the Euro zone and Greek crisis is not serving the EU role. Europe will be increasingly vulnerable to Russian aggression if its links to Greece are substantially loosened. Greece is a crucial gateway to and from several seaboard. Along with crisis in Ukraine, it might seriously affect Europe's geopolitical position towards Russia.

2. Boosting Regional Cooperation

In their own self-interest, states along the Black Sea coast need to develop a common security strategy stressed by regular military cooperation. To foster cooperation, several lingering disputes need to be resolved – for instance, between Romania and Ukraine regarding the exclusive economic area in the Black Sea and the Bystroye Channel. SEEBRIG, the multinational South East European Brigade, can be a model for regional, political and military cooperation in the area. NATO partner countries, particularly Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, need to be engaged in the process. The latter two states can offer harbouring capabilities for NATO forces. Engagement with Moldova could include constant air patrolling of the Romanian-Moldovan frontier, common training with Moldovan military forces and the mobilization of Romanian-Moldovan task forces trained to tackle outside-inspired insurgencies in regions bordering Romania. Beyond the immediate Black Sea region, Romania can further develop the Bucharest Format ministerial meetings with the Vishegrad states and Bulgaria to focus more systematically on common security dangers.

3. Enhancing Soft Security Instruments

NATO states must strengthen their internal institutions to combat corrosive and destabilizing Russian influences. This includes combating official corruption, countering blatant misinformation, protecting against security service infiltration and guarding against politically tainted economic influences. The diversification of energy sources and supplies would also decrease dependence on Moscow and curtail its political interference. Economic development is crucial among NATO states in the Black Sea as this would help shield each society against

Russia's disinformation, political penetration and populist appeals to sectors of society that have not benefitted significantly from EU membership.

Russia's military and political assertiveness in the Black Sea region is generating uncertainty and insecurity among all littoral states. Moscow seeks supremacy in the Black Sea in order to restore its Eurasian domination and to project power toward the Mediterranean and Middle East. Its offensives in and around the Black Sea are part of a larger anti-NATO strategy in which naval forces play a significant and growing role.

Russia also seeks to foster mistrust and division among Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey in order to preclude them from acting in concert or forging a stronger NATO flank. Bulgaria and Turkey, in particular, remain dependent on Russian oil and gas supplies, making them susceptible to outside pressures. Moscow has intimidated Sofia from joining regional security organizations and forging any effective regional agreements, thus undercutting efforts for maritime coordination in the Black Sea²

Greater investments should be allocated to cyber security, taking advantage of Romanian and Bulgarian technological progress. More resources are needed for cybernetic military activities.

Within the EU, a revised Eastern Partnership (EaP) needs to be promoted that would strengthen the prospect of eventual EU integration for Ukraine and Moldova, and enhance stability by stimulating regional economic development. Romania should assume a stronger role in supporting an EaP that would intensify economic and political ties between its eastern neighbours and the EU. A modernized and updated EaP can also include mechanisms to address Russia's disinformation offensive and other forms of propaganda that exploit social, ethnic and religious tensions throughout the region. Such soft power defences can help neutralize Russia's soft power offensives.³

4. The Ukrainian crisis and its security impact for the region

The current crisis in Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia clearly show that the end of the Cold War did not lead to a single security order based on commonly shared norms and principles. The evolutions in the Black Sea region highlight increasing economic competition, cultural challenges, shifting power relations and geopolitical evolutions. The very basis of international society and basic principles of international relations such as sovereignty and independence are at stake⁴. From a security perspective, Russia has demonstrated once again its ability to gradually use its hard power to promote and protect its interests in its so-called „sphere of influence”. Moscow has stepped up its maritime power in the Black Sea. The annexation of Crimea by Russia affects three main areas of the Black Sea security architecture: maritime security, energy security and the ability of the main stakeholders to contribute to the stability of the region⁵. The Black Sea maritime landscape has been reshaped, and Russia's Black Sea maritime power and naval potential are set to increase. Also, the Black Sea is likely

² Vladimir Socor, “The Black Sea Region: NATO's Exposed Sector on the Eastern Flank”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 24, 2016, Volume 13, Issue 114.

³ *Black Sea Defended. NATO Responses to Russia's Black Sea Offensive*. CEPA'S Strategic Report No.2 – Janusz Bugajski and Peter Doran.

⁴ *Reshaping the International Order – Power, Conflict and change in the Black Sea Region*, - Dr.Erik Heine.

⁵ *The Ukrainian Crisis and Security in the Black Sea Area*, - by Dr. Igor Delanoë, Atlantic Voices, vol.4, issue 4.

to face an enhanced Russian-Turkish security condominium over the region. Turkey fears that an increased US or NATO military presence in the Black Sea could increase tensions with Russia.

The annexation of Crimea has shifted the military balance in the Black Sea region more strongly in Russia's favour and significantly increased Russia's strategic footprint in the region. In addition to acquiring Sevastopol, Russia also acquired the former Crimean Ukrainian naval bases⁶. The expansion of the Black Sea Fleet will strengthen Russia's ability to project power in the region and enable Moscow to exert influence over the Eastern Mediterranean, Balkans and Middle East. An important question is how Russia will use that power; there are worries that Russia will increase its pressure and influence in the region. Among the Black Sea riparian States, only Turkey is in the position to contest the maritime superiority of the Russian fleet. However, Turkey's relations with Russia have improved markedly, especially in the economic field, and its view on maritime security in the Black Sea area are closer to Russia's than to those of the US⁷. Turkey also is worried that NATO initiatives could lead to the erosion of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates access to Bosphorus and Dardanelles and is a cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy. Ankara is strongly opposed to any initiative that might imply a change in the status of the Convention in the Black Sea region⁸.

The military challenges in this complex European security environment will require the development of creative approaches and investment strategies.

Because of the crisis in Crimea, it has become clear that Russian troops will not be withdrawn from Transnistria. On the contrary. Russia will maintain its military presence in the region even with more insistence.

5. The West's influence

The west's influence has been diminishing in the Black Sea region since 2008. The Ukraine crisis galvanized NATO into boosting defences along its eastern edge. NATO has enlarged its multinational response force, created a new force that can be mobilized quickly and established a chain of outposts in the Eastern Balkans called „force integration units”, which could serve as a command centres during a conflict⁹.

At the same time, fighting in Ukraine prompted the EU to prioritize its Southern Corridor natural gas project, which would bypass Russian energy giant Gazprom in the European energy market and reduce Europe's reliance on Russia. In addition, the West strongly discouraged Bulgaria from participating in Russia's South Stream project. When Bulgaria opted out, Russia cancelled the project in December 2014.

Initially, Russia did not see the EU as a threat to its interests. Most of its attention was devoted to trying to block the NATO enlargement. However, Russia's attitude began to change with the development of the EU's Eastern Partnership, designed to increase cooperation with six states in the ex-soviet space: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

⁶ *The Future of the Black Sea Fleet*, John C.K.Daly, Jameston Foundation, May 22, 2014.

⁷ *Turkey's New Geopolitics*, F.Stephen Larrabee, *Survival*, vol.52, no.2.

⁸ *No Change Wanted on Turk Straits Convention*, Umit Enginsoy, *Turkish Daily News/Istanbul*, August 28, 2008.

⁹ *The Problems Foreign Powers Find in the Balkans*, Stratford, May, 19, 2015.

However, the Eastern Partnership never had the full support of the strongest EU member states, particularly Germany, which feared that the initiative could have a negative impact on its intention to deepen relations with Russia. One could say that the European Union is suffering from the lack of ambition of its Eastern Partnership, as well as from doubts about further enlargement. The EU should regain the initiative and contribute to shaping a security environment. For the EU, two important interests are at stake: first, the stabilization of a zone of instability and turmoil on its Eastern periphery, and second, respect for the principle that European borders cannot be changed by force. This has been a core principle of EU policy since the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, and it was violated by Russia's annexation of Crimea. Thus, the EU's credibility as a united and important international actor is on the line. Black Sea area is a region combining various interests of considerable importance for EU. In defining EU policy in the area, main goals has to be ensuring peace, democracy, security, stability, regional cooperation and sustainable prosperity.

A key component to enhancing security is the intensification of regional cooperation. Currently, there is little regional integration and infrequent interaction among NATO's Black Sea States, and an absence of well-defined contingency plans in case of a Russian military assault. Romania and Bulgaria conduct no bilateral naval exercises, no common surveillance or early warning capabilities, no collective defence plan. There is plenty of room for these two countries to cooperate extensively at the regional level and to lobby within NATO for building stronger defence capabilities by shifting the alliance's focus toward the Black Sea. Military cooperation in the Black Sea requires reconfiguration, going beyond the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), that focuses on humanitarian emergencies and which Russia's participation can simply neutralize. Romania and Bulgaria could develop broader agenda for cooperation, by strengthening naval collaboration, working jointly to counter cyber attacks and other forms of subversion, coordinating their diplomatic approaches, and cooperating to diversify energy supply routes and energy sources to reduce Russia's export primacy.

The Strategic Report No.2 –“Black Sea Defended. NATO Responses to Russia's Black Sea Offensive”, produced under the auspices of the Centre for European Policy Analysis' (CEPA) reflects an ongoing effort to analyze the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea region. In its final part are some preliminary recommendations on enhancing security for NATO's Black Sea flank, divided into five main clusters:

- Developing NATO Contingency Plans;
- Intensifying the NATO Presence;
- Improving Military Capabilities
- Boosting Regional Cooperation
- Enhancing Soft Security Instruments

A realistic goal for Euro-Atlantic community could be to launch a comprehensive process of regional stabilisation including: conflict management and resolution, economic development and consolidation of democratic institutions, strong assertion of the rule of law, based on the universal values, standards and principles. EU, NATO and OSCE have instruments and

structures which can and are used to increase the stability and security in the enlarged Black Sea Region.

Romania's positioning into the security equation of the extended Black Sea region is very important for its national security. It supports NATO's and EU efforts in the process of stabilization in South-East Europe and the need of encouraging the democratic option of the countries, thus contributing to the peaceful developments in the area, consolidation of democracy, security and stability.

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