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Militarization of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres. A new challenge to NATO

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New Strategy Center & Centro Studi Internazionali

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Abstract

The paper aims to improve and reinforce the awareness of the target audience that there are no separate fronts for NATO, such as East vs South, but only one single common front for the Alliance.

For example, the area of the Black Sea should not be considered as a minor theatre of operations, but as a region whose political and military developments can have not only a local impact, but consequences of strategic importance - for example - also for the whole Mediterranean region.

Thus, threats to NATO countries should be considered with a holistic approach and synergies between all NATO members, especially Eastern and Southern ones, should be enhanced. This would allow the development of common solutions aimed at avoiding strategic imbalances, which in turn could be leveraged by malicious subjects with a "divide et impera" approach.

Structure

1. Introduction to the topic (by NSC)
2. The relevance of the Black Sea in the Russian military strategy (by NSC)
1. The NATO new military posture in the Black Sea (by Ce.S.I.)
2. The Russian approach in the Eastern Mediterranean (by Ce.S.I.)
3. Conclusions (by Ce.S.I. and NSC)

Introductory remarks

The initial idea for this joint paper was to offer a scholarly survey of the evolving military-strategic situation in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean from the perspective of two different leading think tanks in Italy and Romania. As we exchanged preliminary views and compared notes on the structure and content of the report it soon became obvious that our respective conceptual approaches and analytical tools are strikingly similar, supplementing and reinforcing each other's arguments. Indeed, the two organizations agreed on the strategic importance of the area and on the consequences that the increasingly growing military presence in that territory could have in the current and future international security scenario.

The fact that both Romania and Italy are active members of NATO and the European Union with a real stake in the decision-making processes of the two organisations and in the implementation of agreed policies is, of course, of crucial importance but it is only part of the explanation. It is also reasonable to consider that the historical experiences of our two nations in good and bad times have shaped a certain set of minds that helps us assess and prioritize the looming dangers and produce survival strategies for coping with adversity while preserving the essential attributes of national identity and sovereign statehood. That accumulated wisdom has a particular significance for the Romanians, who celebrated in 2018 the centennial of the union of their lands in one state. The recognition of this precious heritage can serve us well as we seek to make sense of the accelerating pace and amplitude of change in regions of special

interest to us as well as in Europe and worldwide. On the Italian side, Rome has always called for an approach within NATO and the EU that embraces all regions of strategic importance and ensures tailored made policies.

Only two or three years ago, we would have hardly been able to venture an educated guess about the kind of interrelated challenges that we are facing today, not least in our immediate and shared neighbourhoods. Surprising developments have become the norm while the timeframes for reasoned reaction are shrinking. More than ever before, we keenly feel the imperative to take a comprehensive, holistic view and always keep the bigger picture in focus as we try to find rational answers and to devise workable solutions in a shifting geopolitical environment.

This paper is about some military aspects of regional security that affect the greater Mediterranean space spreading from active or latent theatres of war in the Black Sea basin and the Levant, threatening to reignite residual sources of instability in the Balkans and producing destabilising reverberations throughout North Africa and the Sahel. A complex array of new threats from crude acts of terrorism to massive uncontrolled migration and cyber attacks revealed a number of vulnerabilities and security gaps that the West has not been fully aware of so far. The element of novelty in the current circumstances is that legitimate national security concerns, once confined to local hotbeds of tension and containable conflicts, tend to become interlinked in an increasingly confrontational mode with an active military component. The occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and Russia's military involvement in south-eastern Ukraine and in the Syrian civil war, coming on top of a gradual build-up of tensions, has sent an unmistakable and worrying signal: this renewed imperial assertiveness has few qualms about resorting to military means, both conventional and hybrid, in pursuit of its perceived interests and self-assigned goals with little regard for the rules of international law and established practice. Legal nihilism, particularly in international affairs, is not only dangerous in and by itself; it can also be contagious as we have seen from recent developments in Europe and elsewhere.

Source: Google Maps

It is really worrying that the process of growing militarization which we observe in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions is no longer confined to its physical dimension as expressed in the amount and sophistication of the weapons of war. It also involves wilful cultivation of a psychosis of enmity and a siege mentality, constantly suggesting that a major military confrontation is probable, almost inevitable and laying the blame exclusively on the dark machinations of the "decadent West". Clearly, the battle for hearts and minds acquires a distinctly new significance in our time. The two latest NATO summits and EU policy documents emphasized the need to enhance the deterrence and defence posture of their member states, including improved military mobility, and, equally, to face up to the more insidious dangers of hostile propaganda, disinformation, intimidation, psychological operations and cyber warfare.

Historical precedents are always instructive (and the authors of this study provide a wealth of relevant examples) but at the present juncture they are also of immediate practical value since they help us seize the difference between opportunistic tactical moves and deliberate, long-term strategic design. That is one more reason why scholarly and analytical research can and must provide additional, knowledge-based insights to decision makers and policy planners at a time of uncertainty and pervasive unpredictability. Time and again, we had persuasive confirmations of the intrinsic value of international contacts, exchanges and result-oriented cooperation among like-minded think tanks and also adversarial confrontations of opinions in offering alternative perspectives, including improbable "black swan" scenarios. The gain is always mutual and the value of intellectual contributions toward understanding where we are now and what is in store for us in the future is enhanced through the noble idea of partnership.

The relevance of the Black Sea in Russian military strategy

The Black Sea, from Tsarist to Soviet Period

The Black Sea region has acquired a privileged role in the Russian collective mentality along time. For Russians, it is a "Promised Land", or even a "Holy Grail"[1]. The very identity of Russia as a great power was partly shaped starting from her victories in the battles with the Ottomans to control "Chornoe More".

In Russia, even children books tackle this topic. For example, one such book glorifies counter admiral Feodor Ushakov, the commander whose naval squadron destroyed an Ottoman fleet in the Cape Kaliakra battle (31 July 1791). Children are told that Ushakov demonstrated not only heroism, but "true sainthood", therefore he was canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church (he has been holy patron of Russian naval forces since 2000). It is also mentioned about Ushakov that he has monuments in several cities, that streets, ships, even a celestial body were named after him and that, two centuries after his death, people still love him. "This is the legacy of the life of admiral Ushakov – the man who gave the country the Black Sea"[2].

In fact, Russians' expansion to the south and the advance to the Black Sea represented a lengthy process, whereby the tsars tried to acquire a safe natural frontier, but also gain fertile territories, lost by Kiev to the redoutable Golden Horde[3]. The goal was twofold, both security and power and prestige[4], and starting with the 18th century, Russia embraced a genuine imperial expansion ideology[5].

1 Vsevolod Samokhvalov, *Russian-European Relations in the Balkans and Black Sea Region: Great Power Identity and the Idea of Europe*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 46-47.
2 Feodor Koniuhov, *Kak admiral Uşakov Chornoe More russkim sdelal*, Moskva, Izdatelskii dom „Foma", 2013, p. 24.
3 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *O istorie a Rusiei [A History of Russia]*, Iași, European Institute, 2001, p. 280.
4 On the triad security – power – prestige in the foreign politics of the countries, see Laurențiu Constantiniu, *Uniunea Sovietică* între *obsesia securității* și *insecurității [Soviet Union between the obsession of security and insecurity]*, Bucharest, Corint, 2010, pp. 16-19.
5 Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History*, Iași, Polirom, 2015, p. 158.

In 1637, under the rule of tsar Mihail Romanov (1613-1645), Don Cossacks conquered Azov fortress, near the sea with the same name[6], and they kept it for a short period. When tsar Alexei (1645-1676) successfully annexed the Eastern Ukraine (including Kiev), it became the starting point of attacks against the northern shores of the Black Sea[7]. Beyond the need for security and access to warm waters, Russians were driven by the dream to build a Pan-Orthodox empire, with Moscow as the "Third Rome". This vision integrated the control over the Black Sea and the "liberation" of the Balkans and of the Romanian Countries[8].

In a first stage, tsar Peter the Great (1682-1725) tried to open Russia's way to the Black Sea, by conquering the harbour cities of Azov and Taganrog; however, they only provided access to the Sea of Azov[9].

Catherine II (the Great, 1762-1796) took the next step. During the first war with the Ottoman Porte (1768-1774), Russia made a surprising move. If tsar Peter had built a fleet at Voronej, on the Don, with some ships brought in pieces from the remote Moscow, Catherine sent a Russian fleet led by Aleksei Orlov, from the Baltic Sea to the Turkish territorial waters. They sank the Turkish fleet in the Çeşme Bay (the Aegean Sea), on 6 July 1770, and placed Russia among the global maritime powers[10]. Since Russia proved mighty on land as well, Turkey was forced to sue for peace. Russia obtained a coastal strip at the Black Sea, west and east of the Crimean Peninsula, which became independent. Moreover, Russians gained strategic points such as Kinburn, Enikale and Kerci in Crimea. Additionally, the Treaty of Kuciuk-Kainargi (1774) gave Russians the right to free trade and navigation on the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. The Treaty of Adrianople (1829) extended this right to the commercial vessels of other countries as well. Russia gained right of passage for its warships after a treaty signed with Turkey in 1833; however, passage of warships from other countries remained banned[11].

In 1783, Russia annexed Crimea, and at the same time built a large fleet at the Black Sea, with the main base at Sevastopol. These successes made Catherine the Great dream of the "Greek Project" or the "great plan" of conquering Constantinople and building a Christian empire on the Ottomans' European territories[12]. Although she managed to involve the Austrian emperor Joseph II, Catherine could not reach these ambitious objectives. However, after the second war with Turkey (1787–1792), the Treaty of Iași (9 January 1792) gave Russia Ochakov fortress and the northern shore of the Black Sea to the Dnister. Turkey had to recognise the annexation of Crimea[13].

Although Russia had not fully strengthened its position at the Black Sea, it aimed to expand to the Mediterranean as well. During Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, the Porte signed an alliance with Russia in 1798. An squadron of the Black Sea fleet, led by admiral Ushakov, was placed at the Straits. Further, Russian troops occupied the Ionian Islands and tried to take possession of Malta[14]. Later on, the claim lodged in Sankt-Petersburg to dominate the Black Sea and the Straits led to the failure of the alliance between Napoleon and tsar Alexander I. The Russians wanted not only the Ottoman Empire capital, but also the "annexation of Moldova and Walachia to Russia, so that the Danube became the border of the empire, and that included Bessarabia,

6 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
7 Mircea Soreanu, "Marea Neagră, «lac otoman»" [The Black Sea, An Ottoman Lake], in Mihail E. Ionescu (coord.), *Marea Neagră de la „lacul bizantin" la provocările secolului XXI [The Black sea from the Byzantine Lake to the 21st Century Challenges]*, Bucharest, Editura Militară, 2006, pp. 134-135.
8 *Ibidem*, p. 135.
9 *Ibidem*, p. 135. See also Hugh Ragsdale, "Russian foreign policy, 1725–1815", in Dominic Lieven (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russia*, Volume II, *Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 505.
10 Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Imperiul Eurasiei. O istorie a imperiului rus de la 1552 până astăzi [Eurasian Empire. A History of the Russian Empire from 1552 until Today]*, Bucharest, Orizonturi, 2008, p. 42.
11 Simona-Valentina Maleșcu, Regimul juridic al strâmtorilor Mării Negre. Regimul juridic al Dunării [The Legal Regime of the Black Sea Straits. The Legal Regime of the Danube], in Buletinul Universității Naționale de Apărare „CAROL I", nr.4 2007, p. 247.
12 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 281, Sergiu Iosipescu, „Internaționalizarea chestiunii Mării Negre și a strâmtorilor. 1774-1856" [Internationalisation of the Matter of the Black Sea and the Straits. 1774-1856], in Mihail E. Ionescu, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
13 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 281.
14 Sergiu Iosipescu, *op. cit.*,p. 159.

which is actually a strip at the sea shore and is generally considered as part of Moldova[15]". With the Bucharest Peace, in 1812, Alexander I only managed to annex Bessarabia.

In the same year, the failure of Napoleon's Russian campaign proved that, given its immense territory, Russia could not be conquered. However, the Crimean War (1853-1856) demonstrated it could be defeated[16]. The Peace Congress of Paris (1856) banned Russia and Turkey to build warships and military harbours on the Black Sea shores. Russia had to give back the three counties from the south of Bessarabia. After the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, Sankt-Petersburg won new territories in the Caucasus, and thus extended its Black Sea coastal strips and regained the three counties from the south of Bessarabia, which gave access to the Danube mouths[17].

The tsarist policy on the Black Sea remained the same until the First World War. The agreement concluded in March 1915 between Great Britain, France and Russia recognised Russia's right to occupy, at the end of the war, the Straits, Constantinople and Tenedos and Imbros Islands[18]. However, the evolution of the conflict and the events in Russia made the agreement impossible to implement.

As a brief conclusion of the above, we quote Charles King's viewpoint on Russia's ambitions, which we share:

"The Empire was to annex the former possessions of Constantine, and become a civilising agent of the backward South, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. In different versions, this strategic objective would structure the Russian foreign policy until the collapse of the Tsarist Empire and of the Ottoman Empire, in the turmoil of the First World War"[19].

Between the two world wars, the Soviet Union took action to rebuild its maritime capabilities and impose its pre-eminence at the Black Sea. The Montreux Convention (July 1936) permitted the remilitarisation of the Straits and limited the tonnage of the non-Black Sea state warships in the Black Sea to 30,000-45,000 tons, while the Soviet fleet, the largest in the region, had twice this tonnage[20]. Mention should be made that, according to this Convention, which is still in force, non-Black Sea state warships are permitted to stay in the Black Sea for no longer than 21 days.

Before the Second World War, Moscow's aim to control the Danube mouths and increase its influence in the Pontic Basin was revealed by the negotiations which led to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. After signing the pact, the USSR annexed Bessarabia and became a Danube riparian state[21]. But the Soviets yearned for more and believed they could pressure Berlin, after the latter attacked Poland, on 1 September 1939, and started the second world conflagration. During a visit to Berlin, which included discussions with Ribbentrop and Hitler (12-13 November 1940), Molotov tried to negotiate a redistribution of the spheres of influence of the Soviet Union and Germany. Stalin himself sent a telegram on 13 November, stating:

"As for the Black Sea, Hitler may be told that the issue is not only the exit from the Black Sea, but especially the access to the Black Sea, which has always been used by England and by other states to attack the USSR shores. All the events, from the Crimean War last century to the landing of foreign

15 See the "Note drafted by Count Rumianțov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, summarising Russia's claims in case of the distribution of the Ottoman Empire, 12 March 1808", in Dimitrie A. Sturdza, C. Colescu-Vartic, *Acte și documente relative la istoria renascereri României [Acts and Documents on Romania's Rebirth]*, Bucharest, Institutul de Arte Grafice, Carol Göbl, 1900, p. 822.
16 Laurențiu Constantiniu,*op. cit.*, p. 16.
17 Mihail E. Ionescu, „Regiunea Extinsă a Mării Negre: privire istorică și dinamici contemporane" [Extended Black Sea Region: Historical View and Contemporary Dynamics], in Mihail E. Ionescu (coordinator), *Regiunea extinsă a Mării Negre: Concept, evoluție perspective [Extended Black Sea Region: Concept, Evolution, Perspectives]*, Bucharest, Editura Militară, 2007, pp. 31-32.
18 *Ibidem*, p. 32.
19 Charles King, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
20 Mihail E. Ionescu, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
21 Gheorghe Vartic, „Arealul pontic în anii celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial" [Pontic Area during the Second World War], in Mihail E. Ionescu (coord.), *Marea Neagră de la „lacul bizantin" la provocările secolului XXI [The Black sea from the Byzantine Lake to the 21st Century Challenges]*, pp. 280-281.

troops in Crimea and Odessa, in 1918 and 1919, show that the security of USSR regions at the Black Sea may not be considered without regulating the Straits issue. Therefore, the USSR interest for the Black Sea is a matter of protecting the USSR shores and security"[22]. Consequently, the Kremlin claimed not only to control the Danube mouths, but also to include Bulgaria within its strategic domain or to have military bases at the Dardanelles. Despite the Soviet insistence, the Führer deferred or was evasive and, in fact, rejected the Soviet claims. On 22 June 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and focused on land military actions, which made the naval factor a secondary issue at the Black Sea. From a military perspective, it allowed the Soviet fleet to protect strategic objectives or it slowed down the offensive in Crimea; from a political perspective, Germany failed to use one of the arguments which would have convinced Turkey to enter the war. Nevertheless, the course of hostilities demonstrated the validity of the statement of Romanian historian Gheorghe Brătianu: "Whoever has Crimea may rule over the Black Sea. Those who do not, will not."[23].

After the Second World War, Moscow pressured Ankara to preclude the access of non-riparian states military to the Black Sea. Moreover, the Soviets claimed that the Caucasian frontier with Turkey be reviewed (to include Kars and Ardahan). In his memoirs, looking back, Molotov admits this was an error: "I raised the issue of control over the Straits by us and by Turkey. I believe this perspective was not entirely correct, but I had to accomplish my mission. I raised this issue in 1945, after the war ended. The Straits should be guarded by the Soviet Union and Turkey. It was an early matter, impossible to achieve. I believe Stalin is a remarkable politician, but he made his mistakes. I proposed this control to honour the victory of the Soviet troops. But it could not be accepted, I knew that. **In fact, it was not fair of us** (***our emphasis***): if Turkey were a socialist state, we could have discussed it. (...) We had claims over Turkish land. Georgian scientists spoke... It was embarrassing. Protect Bosphorus together with the Turks... Miliukov kept talking about Bosphorus. Russian generals always speak of Bosphorus... The Black Sea outlet!"[24]. In response, Washington sent to the Eastern Mediterranean naval forces consisting in the Franklin D. Roosevelt aircraft carrier, four cruisers and several torpedo boats. They joined the Missouri battleship which, in April 1946, was present nearby Istanbul. This represented a first step of the American engagement in the area[25].

To ensure its security, in 1952 Turkey became a NATO member, which increased the apprehensions of the Kremlin leaders. Nevertheless, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union undoubtedly dominated the Black Sea, where an important part of the Russian navy forces was located. Moreover, through its allies under the Warsaw Pact, Romania and Bulgaria, the Soviet Union controlled more than two thirds of the total shores[26]. The Sevastopol base was strengthened and became "the strongest fortress in the Black Sea region", as mentioned by a CIA report in 1949[27]. Other bases, like Odessa, Novorossiysk and Batumi also had their strategic importance[28].

22 *Ibidem*, p. 283.
23 *Ibidem*, p. 283 and the following.
24 Feliks Ciuev, Viaceslav Molotov, *Conversații cu Molotov. În cercul puterii comuniste [Conversations with Molotov. Within the Comminist Power Circle]*, Bucharest, Corint Books, 2017, pp. 124-125.
25 Laurențiu-Cristian Dumitru, Șerban Pavelescu, „Marea Neagră în timpul Războiului Rece" [Black Sea during the Cold War], in Mihail E. Ionescu (coord.), *op.cit.*, p. 319.
26 Mihail E. Ionescu, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
27 CIA, "Reviews State of USSR Fleet", 22 November 1949, p. 3, at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00809A000600280916-4.pdf
28 Laurențiu-Cristian Dumitru, Șerban Pavelescu, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

NATO and Warsaw Pact in 1989

NATO members
Warsaw Pact members

The Soviet Union still showed interest in the Mediterranean, especially the Eastern Mediterranean. In May 1968, Andrei Gromyko, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs (1957–1985) revealed, in diplomatic terms, the importance of the Mediterranean for Moscow. "As a Black Sea power, therefore a Mediterranean Sea power as well, the Soviet Union is interested in peace and security in the area located in the proximity of the southern borders of the USSR... The presence of Soviet ships in the Mediterranean enables safeguarding the security of the entire Mediterranean region"[29].

In 1958, Moscow set up a base in Albania, and deployed mainly submarines there. The Soviet seamen themselves were aware of the significance of their presence in the Mediterranean. Admiral Ivan Kasatonov (commander of the Black Sea fleet in the early '90s), remembered a conversation with the crew of a submarine anchored in Vlora, Albania. "Then I thought that the sailors understand the need for the presence of our naval forces in the Mediterranean Sea. «The Russian Fleet ships have been here, in the Mediterranean Sea, since the times of mother Catherine [Catherine II the Great] – said a veteran of the crew. We know how the sailors under the command of Spiridov, Ushakov, Seniavin sailed and fought here »"[30]. In 1961, after the split between the USSR and Albania the Soviet naval, units were withdrawn[31]. During the next period, the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean was significantly reduced. In 1964, the Soviets started by regularly sending four surface ships and four diesel submarines, which built up the Fifth Squadron led by a rear admiral, under the authority of the Black Sea Fleet commander[32].

The Six-Day War of 1967 (between the Arab states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, on the one hand, and Israel on the other hand) motivated Moscow to increase its presence in the Mediterranean. In 1970, David Charles Richardson, commander of the USA Sixth Fleet, complained to the media that the Fifth Squadron had become a challenge, in an area previously perceived as a "NATO lake"[33].

Moreover, the Soviets speculated on the dissensions and the vulnerabilities of the NATO Southern flank[34]. To provide just one example, in July 1976, the Soviet aircraft carrier "Kiev" passed through the Straits, with Turkey's approval. This was a violation of the Montreux Convention by Moscow. The flight deck was 14,700 square metres and it carried helicopters and 30 vertical take-off aircraft. The Soviets argued that it was not an aircraft carrier, but a large anti-submarine cruiser. It is true that this type of ships was not included among those restricted by the Convention, and Moscow was pushing the limits of international law, but Ankara did not oppose[35]. In fact, this was not the first sign of hesitation from Turkey. In 1964, during the

29 Quoted by Mohrez Mahmoud El-Hussini, *Soviet-Egyptian Relations, 1945-85*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan,1987, p. 180.
30 Lyle J. Goldstein and Yuri M. Zhukov, *A Tale of Two Fleets. A Russian Perspective on the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean*, in "Naval War College Review", Spring 2004, Vol. LVII, No. 2, pp. 30-31.
31 CIA, "The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas, Annexes A through I", 15 December 1971, p. 14, at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005563828.pdf
32 *Ibidem*, p. 14.
33 Drew Middleton, *US 6th Fleet Concerned Over Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean*, in "The New York Times", 13 May 1970, p. 3, at https://www.nytimes.com/1970/05/13/archives/us-6th-fleet-concerned-over-soviet-navy-in-the-mediterranean.html.
34 Laurențiu-Cristian Dumitru, Șerban Pavelescu, *op. cit.*, p. 352.
35 Stylianos Politis, *Evoluția istorică a regimului legal al Strâmtorilor* și *accesului* în *Marea Neagră, (Euxeinos Pontos) [Historical Evolution of the Legal Regime of the Straits and Access to the Black Sea (Euxeinos Pontos)]*, in "Revista de Istorie Militară", no. 3-4

conflict with Cypriot Greeks, Turkey relaxed the Straits regime, and the Soviets took advantage of this to send a cruiser and two warships from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean[36].

Briefly, during the Cold War, beyond the mission to ensure the strategic defence of the Soviet Union, on the assumption of a general war, the Fifth Squadron had the role to collect information on the NATO and Israel forces, to train and support Arab states which had a favourable position towards Moscow. Moreover, it demonstrated that USSR was not only a continental, but also a maritime power[37].

Without claiming to provide an exhaustive analysis, we may note an enduring similarity between the tsarist and Soviet Black Sea policies. Moscow has always attempted to turn the Black Sea into a "Russian lake"[38], not only for its own security, but for power projection reasons as well.

Post-Soviet Russia's Militarization of the Wider Black Sea Space

The political domino of the velvet and not-so-velvet revolutions of 1989 and the demise of communism as an institutionalized force, culminating with the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 produced an entirely new geopolitical situation in Europe with momentous repercussions worldwide. For about a decade the Russian Federation, as a diminished successor of the former USSR, was in political turmoil and economic decline, which also affected its military capabilities, trying to adjust to its new condition of a regional rather than world power. The only credible claim of Russia's world-power status relied for almost two decades on the continued existence of its nuclear arsenals and long-range delivery vehicles (strategic triad of land-based, airborne and submarine-launched missiles). "During the financially lean years of the 1990s, Russia focused on maintaining the core components of its strategic arsenal, preserving key defence-industrial enterprises and consolidating development and production in Russia, although the maintenance of some legacy equipment continued with the support of defence enterprises in Ukraine)."[39] In international affairs Russia followed a relatively moderate line, taking responsible positions in the UN Security Council and making declarative overtures to the West, while occasionally complaining that its specific interests were not duly considered by major western partners, notably by the US and NATO.

This all began to change with the advent of President Vladimir Putin at the helm of the Kremlin. Internal political stabilization based on concentration of authority (vertical of power) was accompanied by an

(107-108)/ 2008, p. 78, footnote 27.
36 Lyle J. Goldstein and Yuri M. Zhukov, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
37 CIA, "The Uses of Soviet Military Power", pp. 13-14.
38 Mihail E. Ionescu, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
39 -*The Military Balance 2018,* The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, UK, 2018, p.14.

economic upswing and social improvements, which were supported in no small measure by the rising oil and gas prices – the main source of government revenue. As new financial resources became available, military modernization picked up pace and expanded to include new programmes. With the increased confidence, bolstered by relentless patriotic propaganda campaigns, in Russia's own defence and power-projection capabilities came a change in political rhetoric, now famously epitomized in President Putin's Munich speech of 2007.

The next year (2008) was marked by the Russian military incursion into Georgia resulting in the *de facto* incorporation of two strategically important provinces (Abkhasia and South Ossetia, still under the sovereign jurisdiction of Georgia under international law) into the military, political and economic structures of the Russian Federation. Emboldened by the weak and noncommittal reaction of the international community, Russia proceeded with the next step: the occupation and eventual annexation of the Ukrainian province of Crimea and proven military involvement in the secessionist south-eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. The continued unlawful presence of a Russian military contingent in Transnistria, a breakaway province of the Republic of Moldova, against the will and the constitutional dispositions of the host country, is described as a national security threat in official documents of the immediate neighbours: Romania and Ukraine. The latest development occurred at the end of November 2018, when two Ukrainian artillery boats and an accompanying tugboat were attacked and seized by Russian authorities near the Kerch Strait, while transiting from the Ukrainian naval base at Odessa to the port of Mariupol. This type of activity signals Russia's war against Ukraine transitioned from hybrid-type of non-kinetic and covert kinetic conflict to overt kinetic armed conflict.[40]

Source: twitter.com, Ukrainian Military Portal

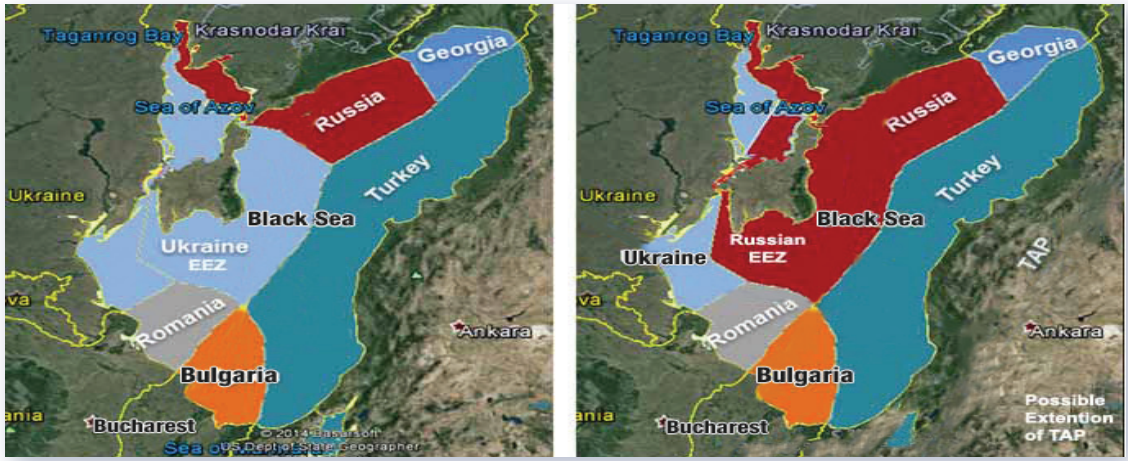
It is important to note that all this has been happening in the Black Sea region, on the Eastern Flank of the European Union and NATO. Moreover, the events in the Black Sea space over the past decade have a few things in common: they led to border and territorial changes by force of arms for the first time after World War II, they displayed actual use of hybrid, cyber and information warfare,[41] they were (and still are) kinetic in the sense of involving actual combat with heavy weapons of war between opposing forces, they produced considerable economic damage through destruction caused by military operations, and they resulted in massive loss of lives, both civilian and military (more than 10.000 casualties in Ukraine alone). As a consequence, the perceptions about security risks and political uncertainties in the Black Sea have risen.

The Russian harassment of the ships with a destination in Ukrainian ports could be replicated towards the Ukrainian, Romanian and Bulgarian offshore platforms in the Black Sea, given that following the illegal annexation of Crimea, Moscow unilaterally expanded its exclusive economic zone.

40 Sorin Ducaru, Frederick B. Hodges, Greg Melcher, Phillip Petersen, Mykhailo Samus, George Scutaru, "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears", December 2018, at https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Moscow-Does-Not-Believe-in-Tears-Policy-Paper-December-2018.pdf

41 Peter B. Doran & Donald N. Jensen, "Putin's Strategy of Chaos", in *The American Interest*, 1 March 2018, at http://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/03/01/putins-strategy-chaos.

New exclusive economic zone delimitation in the Black Sea after the occupation of Crimea, the Russian vision



Source - www.russianworldforums.com

The Russian military expedition in Syria added a significant new geopolitical dimension to these developments. It demonstrated the existence of a conceptual linkage in the minds of Russian military and political planners between the Black Sea theatre and Eastern Mediterranean, with possible further ramifications in the Balkans and Northern Africa. The Syrian operation appears to be something more than a mere show of support to a failing client regime; it is a (so far successful) attempt to secure a strategic foothold in the turbulent area of the Middle East in anticipation of more trouble to come and a testing ground for existing and new weapons, combinations of forces, command and control systems, and tactical devices for actual use on future battlefields. The link between the two regions is further highlighted by the fact that in December 2018, the Black Sea Fleet frigate Admiral Essen has arrived in Sevastopol after performing tasks in the Mediterranean Sea.[42] Also, the Black Sea frigate Admiral Makarov call at the port of Limassol in Cyprus while being on a Mediterranean mission provides further evidence of the integrated Russian vision in the unified Southern Military District.[43]

It is becoming obvious that we have to do not with opportunistic moves on the regional chessboard but with a deliberate, coherent strategic design harking back to old imperial traditions. The western world is facing a serious situation which requires serious consideration and an adequate response.

It is gratifying to see that appropriate answers to such new challenges are being actively sought and actually implemented in a transatlantic format. US President Donald Trump unequivocally confirmed, after some initial hesitations, the American commitment to the defence of European allies, including the application of Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. In addition, the United States decided to augment funding for the European Reassurance Initiative, to continue rotational troop deployments in NATO's Eastern states and to re-establish the Atlantic Second Fleet.[44] The three most recent NATO summits clearly showed an increasing awareness about the potential danger of Russian strategic assertiveness and adopted a set of practical measures to deter and, if need be, counter further risky behaviour. Those challenges are now better understood in Europe, as reflected in current opinion polls, and have materialized in the rising defence allocations in some European member states to meet the agreed NATO target of 2% of GDP, in their readiness to assume greater responsibilities for collective defence and for closer EU-NATO cooperation, and in such measures as the development of an integrated air and missile defence system and improved movement of allied

42 *Black Sea Fleet frigate Admiral Essen arrives in Sevastopol after performing tasks in the Mediterranean Sea,* Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 26 December 2018, at http://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/okruga/south/news/more.htm?id=12209761@egNews
43 *Black Sea frigate Admiral Makarov calls at the port of Limassol*, Cyprus, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 28 December 2018, at http://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/okruga/south/news/more.htm?id=12210006@egNews
44 *US Navy resurrects Second Fleet in Atlantic to counter Russia*, BBC, 6 May 2018, at hhtp://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44014761

military forces across Europe. The specific security needs on the southern and eastern flanks are also gaining prominence in NATO and EU adaptation debates and strategic planning.[45]

This being said, Russia's accelerated development of military capabilities and attendant infrastructure in the Black Sea, particularly after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, remains a cause of serious concern for the littoral states, be they NATO members (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey) or partners (Georgia, Ukraine). The rapid transformation of the Crimean Peninsula into an almost impregnable bastion and launching pad for asymmetric defensive/offensive operations in the form of an anti-access-area- denial (A2/AD) complex enables Russia to carry out strikes against land, air and naval targets throughout the Black Sea basin and way beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Among the five Russian naval formations (Northern, Baltic, Black Sea and Pacific fleets plus the Caspian flotilla), the Black Sea fleet has undergone the most remarkable changes since 2010, providing it with enhanced multirole capabilities and allowing it to engage routinely in more than flag-showing operations in the Mediterranean and, sporadically, beyond the Suez Canal and the Gibraltar Straits.

45 *The Military Balance 2018,* pp. 65-70.

KALIBR Cruise Missile – range 2500 km (1553 miles)

ISKANDER Ballistic Missile- range 500 km (310 miles)

With the exception of three frigates (delayed because the Ukrainian-made engines were no longer available), the modernisation programme for the Black Sea forces, including the navy, coastal and air defences, air force and nuclear-capable cruise missiles *(Kalibr)* is roughly on schedule, slightly in advance of the 2020 targets. Of the long list of military technological breakthroughs enumerated in President V. Putin's speech on 1 March 2018, the only one that has been produced and deployed in the Southern Military District (which covers both the Black Sea and the Syrian theatre) is the *Kinzhal* (dagger) hypersonic missile. After launch from a MIG-31 interceptor, which can fly at Mach 3 speed, the missile ignites its own engines to fly at least at twice that speed. Being a fast-flying but relatively low-precision weapon, *Kinzhal* can be usefully employed only against targets of major strategic importance such as the Deveselu airbase in southwest Romania, where a CM-3 Aegis Ashore

missile defence battery is currently deployed.[46] Since Russian military planners made it repeatedly clear that the development of hypersonic weapons is mainly aimed at defeating US missile defence deployments, it is logical to assume that they are likely to be introduced also in the Baltic region in response to the anti-missile facility in Poland as it becomes operational. The apparent objective of the Russian high command is to achieve naval supremacy by acquiring the ability to lock the area through multi-layered asymmetric capacities designed to deter and interdict NATO naval and other forces.[47]

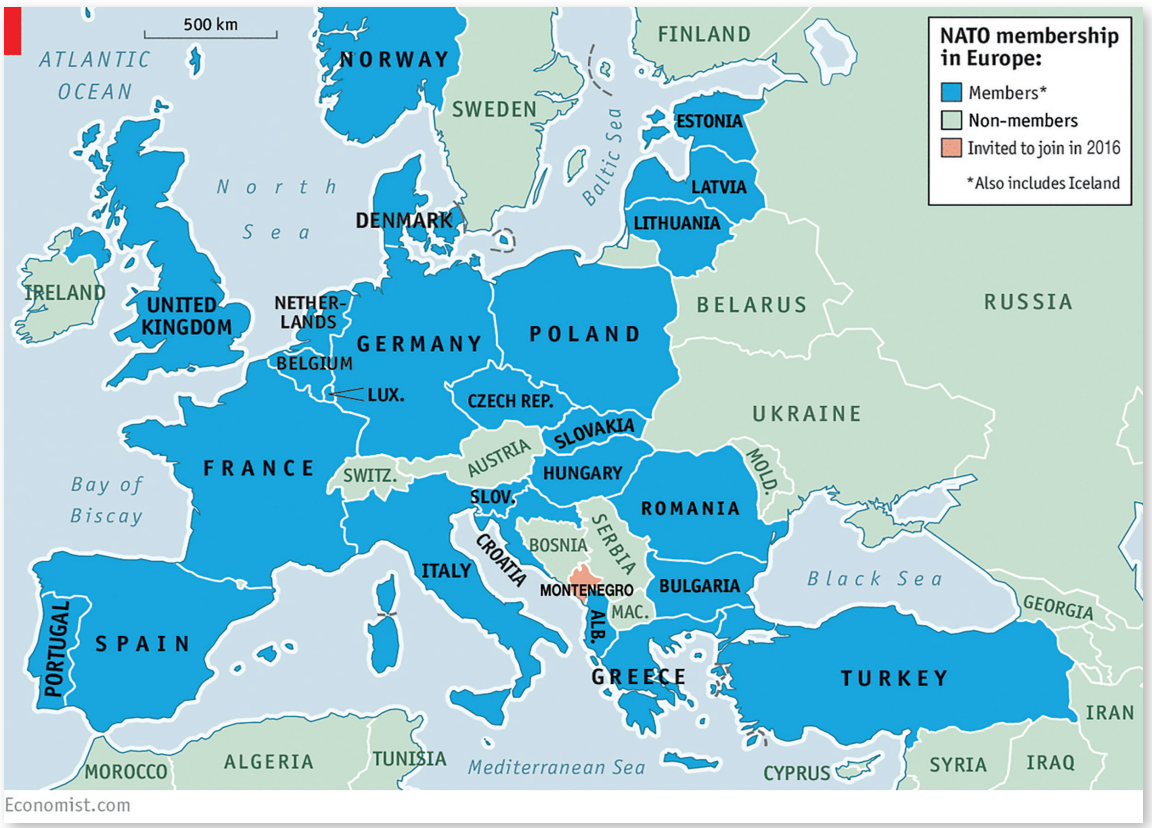
The still tense military-political situation prevailing in the Black Sea region and its wider reverberations are fraught with dangers of unintended and unforeseen escalation into actual conflict that may be hard to contain and manage. During the NATO naval exercise *Sea Shield 18* in the Black Sea, 4-11 May 2018[48], British Typhoon fighters stationed in Romania for air patrol had to be scrambled to intercept a Russian Il-20 reconnaissance aircraft.[49] Another example besides the naval altercation occurred in November 2018, about how easily things can get out of hand is the on-going harsh verbal exchange between Russia and Ukraine concerning control of their maritime space and access to the Sea of Azov and to the Danube river, respectively.[50]

46 Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia seeks total military domination over West", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor,* The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., volume 15, issue 36, 8 March 2018.
47 Igor Delanoe, "Russia has a deadly plan to defend the Black Sea", in the *National Interest*, 27 February 2018, at http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-has-deadly-plan-defend-the-black-sea-24678. For a more detailed analytical presentation of the strategic developments in the region see New Strategy Center-Bucharest & Hudson Institute. Center for American Seapower, *Why the Black Sea Matters*, Sergiu Celac Ed., Bucharest, January 2017, available at http://www.newstrategycenter.ro.
48 "Desfasurare de forte militare la Marea Neagra", *Ziarul financiar,* Bucuresti, 7 mai 2018, at http://www.zf.ro/eveniment/desfasurare-de-forte-militare-la-marea-neagra-17175722. .
49 "Avioane britanice din Romania trimise pentru interceptarea unei aeronave ruse deasupra Marii Negre", G*andul,* Bucuresti, 5 mai 2018, at http://m.gandul.info/stiri/avioane-britanice-din-romania-trimise-pentru-interceptarea-unei-aeronave-ruse-deasupra-marii-negre-17188264.
50 Paul Goble, "Ukraine threatens to block Russian shipping on the Danube", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., volume 15, issue 66, 1 May 2018.

The NATO new military posture in the Black Sea

The Black Sea region, a crucial crossroad

In the last years NATO's approach towards the current instability and security scenarios in bordering regions and areas of interest has led to the identification of two main fronts: the East and the South. The first refers to the events taking place in the Eastern area of the Alliance's territory, namely the aggressive posture of Russia that has recently materialized in the Ukrainian crisis and the consequent illegal annexation of Crimea, as already discussed in the above pages. While the southern front indicates the territory facing the Mediterranean Sea, hence the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region, whose instability is affecting the entire area and also NATO States located on the other side of the sea border. Despite this clear-cut division, the Alliance has increasingly begun to adopt a more holistic and comprehensive approach that covers the area in between the two fronts just described, in particular the territories surrounding the Black Sea and the waters of the latter as well. The Black Sea region is in a geographical position that makes it a strategic corridor linking North-Eastern Europe with its West-Southern side. Hence, it represents a critical intersection for both NATO and Russia and, as such, it has become a major theatre of mutual interest and possible confrontation.



It is worth reminding that three NATO States (Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey) and several partner countries (Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) are located in the area, making the region part of the security umbrella provided by the Alliance. As a matter of fact, the security and economic implications that a flexing of muscles in the region could have in the cited states and in the entire Euro-Atlantic theater are not to be underestimated. Russia backing the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia in 2008 or the breaking out of a hybrid war[51] in Ukraine with the more overt than covered involvement of Russia in 2014 are clear examples of the relevance that the Black Sea region has for Moscow and of the impact that its destabilization might have directly on countries bordering NATO States and indirectly on the Alliance as a whole. Indeed, with the developments of the events of 2014, especially the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Moscow has a relevant leverage power in the Black Sea region and the potential to project influence within and beyond the region.

NATO strategic framework

As awareness increased on the dynamics and possible fallouts of the developments taking place in the Black Sea region, the Alliance started shifting more decisively its attention towards the region. A confirmation of such move is traceable in the conclusions of the 2014 Wales Summit, where NATO Heads of State and Government stated: "We are also concerned by Russia's (…) behavior towards Georgia and the Republic of Moldova; (…) and its use of military and other instruments to coerce neighbors. (…) These developments may potentially have long-term effects on stability in the Black Sea region, which remains an important component of Euro-Atlantic security. (…) We will continue to support, as appropriate, regional efforts by Black Sea littoral states aimed at ensuring security and stability"[52]. If the theoretical framework asserted the importance of the Black Sea region and the risks of a more assertive Russian posture, the more operative and response scheme was also defined during the 2014 Summit. In particular, at Wales the Allies decided to review, reinforce and enhance the NATO Response Force (NRF), launched in 2002 for guaranteeing a quick reaction and deployment in case of crisis. Defined as a highly ready and technologically advanced multinational force made up of land, air, maritime and Special Operations Forces components that the Alliance can quickly deploy,[53] the NRF can count on 40.000 troops and works as both a deterrence, hence preventive measure, and defensive force. However, the ability of member States to provide troops and equipment able to generate in a short timeframe a credible and effective force ready to be deployed, soon appeared hard to achieve. As data demonstrates, in fact, the NRF could count on average on 50% of the units which would have completed the multinational force, with an operative capacity of one third of the objective set. As to confirm such condition, the NRF has been deployed in the years only in few occasions like Athens Olympic games, the presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2004, and following the Katrina hurricane in Louisiana in 2005 and the earthquake in Pakistan in 2006. The above mentioned limitations of the NATO response force explain why it underwent a process of revision, which also led to the creation within it of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The latter is made of a multinational land brigade of around 5,000 troops and air, maritime and Special Operations Forces elements. Hence it is a much more realistic and relatively simple framework to set up. The command of the VJTF alternates on a rotational basis between France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom;

51 Hybrid warfare has been defined by NATO during the Warsaw Summit of 2016 as "broad, complex, and adaptive combination of conventional and non-conventional means, and overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures (…) employed in a highly integrated design by state and non-state actors to achieve their objectives." Warsaw Summit communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, para.72, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm
52 Wales Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 2014, para.18, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm
53 NATO Response Force, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_49755.htm

these States have to duty to guarantee the readiness of the unit to quickly move within two or three days. The NRF and its 'spearhead force', the VJTF, have the purpose of providing a rapid military response to an emerging crisis,[54] whether it is emanating from the eastern or southern front, or nearby areas.

Such comprehensive strategic framework, which evidently also covers the Black Sea area, was further reinforced during the Warsaw Summit of 2016. Firstly, during the Summit it was recognized, as part of the NRF, the establishment of the Headquarters of a Multinational Division Southeast in Romania, that would have taken the command of the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) and would have provided for flexible command and control options in the region.[55] Such development is particularly relevant as the NFIU (made of 40 staff members each) supports collaboration between national forces and the NRF in times of military-political crises and provides broad defense planning to facilitate the rapid deployment of Allied forces to the eastern part of the Alliance.[56] Secondly, in Warsaw NATO leaders agreed to develop a 'tailored forward presence' in the south-east area of the Alliance territory, which consists in appropriate measures tailored to the Black Sea region.[57] This presence resulted in the establishment of the Romanian-led multinational framework brigade in Craiova, aimed at improving integrated training of Allied units under Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast. Its launch was officially made by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest in October 2017, where the brigade was declared fully operational and described as a means to counter Russia along its Eastern Flank and to check a growing Russian presence in the Black Sea following the Kremlin's aggressive actions in Ukraine.[58] The force comprises a Romanian brigade of up to 4,000 soldiers, supported by troops from eight other NATO States, and complemented by a separate deployment of 900 U.S. troops. For what concerns the air component, the new measures provided for several Allies to reinforce Romania and Bulgaria's efforts to protect NATO airspace, as part of the Alliance air policing missions.[59] In particular, in 2017 the United Kingdom deployed its Typhoon fighter aircrafts to Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base in Romania,[60] moreover Canada also patrolled Romanian air space, while Italy is supporting Bulgaria in controlling its skies. Finally, the maritime element would involve joint exercises, training and NATO naval vessels visiting the ports of Romania and Bulgaria. The sea component was further strengthened in February 2017 when NATO Defense Ministers agreed to boost the Alliance's naval presence in the Black Sea for situational awareness and a maritime coordination function for NATO Standing Naval Forces during operations with other Allied forces in the Black Sea region.[61] Nonetheless, NATO's intention to increase its naval presence in the Black Sea will have to face the related constrains set by international law, namely, the 1936 Montreaux Convention. The latter restricts deployments or international force patrols in the Black Sea and the Straits by establishing tonnage limitations (15,000 tons) on military vessels and allowing the permanence in the basin for no more than 21 days.[62] As a consequence, vessels larger than cruisers or destroyers cannot enter the Black Sea, thus limiting NATO's capacity to establish a permanent naval presence there.

Overall, the goal of the 'tailored forward presence' is to contribute to the Alliance's strengthened

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid, para.37.
56 SHAPE, The NATO Force Integration Units, available at: https://shape.nato.int/operations/nato-force-integration-units
57 Warsaw Summit communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, para.41, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm
58 'NATO launches Black Sea force as latest counter to Russia', Reuters, available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato/nato-launches-black-sea-force-as-latest-counter-to-russia-idUSKBN1CE0MJ
59 'Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast', available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm
60 Zviad Adzinbaia, 'NATO in the Black Sea: What to Expect Next?', NATO Defence College Research Paper, n.141, November 2017.
61 Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Defence Ministers, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_141340.htm?selectedLocale=en
62 1936 Montreaux Convention, available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20173/v173.pdf

deterrence and defense posture, situational awareness, interoperability and responsiveness also in the southern-eastern area of NATO. At last, during the Warsaw Summit Allies also committed to enhance dialogue and cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine in order to guarantee stability and security in the Black Sea region.

Strengthening cooperation in the Black Sea region: joint exercises

Following the provisions agreed upon during the Warsaw Summit, in 2017 and 2018 several exercises were carried out in the Black Sea region aimed at ensuring operative readiness in the area. In March 2017 Romania hosted Exercise Poseidon, the war game that was firstly carried out bilaterally between Romania and Bulgaria in 2015 and that now includes several NATO countries and assets. The ships of Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group Two participated to the naval exercise to increase the Alliance's ability to neutralize underwater hazards, such as sea mines. Moreover, more than 1,500 sailors, 17 warships from seven NATO member States, a navy helicopter, two dive boats, a coast guard vessel and two MiG 21 aircraft from the Romanian Air Forces were involved in Poseidon 2017.[63] The goal of the naval exercise was to practice NATO tactics, techniques and standard procedures, and to increase interoperability. A few months later, in June 2017 Exercise Noble Jump started in the Black Sea region to train NATO VJTF in the territory. Hosted by Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, the drill involved 2,000 troops and 500 vehicles serving with the Alliance 'spearhead force'.[64] Other seven NATO States participated with their units and equipment to Noble Jump to coordinate all the logistical aspects related to the quick movement of troops in the region. The exercise represented the first time that the VJTF was deployed in NATO's south-eastern flank. Finally, U.S. exercise Saber Guardian closed the rounds of training activities in the Black Sea region for the year 2017. Led by Bulgaria and hosted also by Hungary and Romania, the drill involved 25,000 personnel from over 20 NATO Allies, making Saber Guardian the largest U.S.-led exercise in the Black Sea region in 2017.[65] The war game was aimed at enhancing readiness and interoperability in the area.

Forcing the river crossing, specifically Borcea branch of the Danube River, in the area of Bordușani, Saber Guardian 17 - Source INQUAM Photos/Octav Ganea

The latest exercise carried out in the region was Sea Shield in May 2018. Led by Romania, naval assets from seven Allied States and NATO's Standing Maritime Group Two trained maritime capabilities, anti-submarine procedures and combat proficiency in the Black Sea. The drill was based on the simulation of a crisis response scenario and saw the participation of 21 military ships, 10 fighter aircraft, a submarine, and 2,300 servicemen.[66]

The reason for carrying numerous exercises in the Black Sea region is to send a message of deterrence,

63 'NATO Ships Increase Alliance Interoperability in Romanian Exercise', available at: https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2017/nato-ships-increase-alliance-interoperability-in-romanian-exercise.aspx
64 'Exercise Noble Jump 17 concludes in Romania, Bulgaria and Greece', available at: https://jfcnaples.nato.int/exercises/noble-jump/noble-jump-17-news/exercise-noble-jump-17-concludes-in-romania--bulgaria-and-greece-
65 'U.S., NATO Forces Train to Deter and Defend in Saber Guardian 2017', available at: https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1260953/us-nato-forces-train-to-deter-and-defend-in-saber-guardian-2017/
66 'Romania hosts NATO Allies for major Black Sea exercise', available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_154386.htm

but also to pursue interoperability growth and guarantee operative readiness. Enhancing cooperation in the area, in fact, also ensures safe and secure maritime activities.

Conclusive remarks

Apart from the by now well-known division between the East and the South fronts, NATO has in the last years also focused on the area in between, the Black Sea region. The latter, in fact, is a strategic intersection for NATO States, as well as for Russia, for projecting power and economic reasons. Therefore, the renewed Alliance's approach to the emerging challenges has led to the shaping of a 360° strategy aimed at ensuring security and defense to all borders of NATO territory. As the threat emanating from the South-East front has increased, the North Atlantic Alliance approved a new strategic framework including preventive and operative measures as well as the undertaking of joint drills. Particularly, by guaranteeing a strong and ready presence in the area, the Alliance aims at deterring and, eventually, be ready to show its muscle. Overall, the new structure NATO has defined is tailored to the Black Sea area, proportional and defensive vis-à-vis the increasing Russia interest and presence in the region. To conclude, the current NATO posture in the area is credible thanks to the specific task forces it deploys on the territory; however, it is desirable that in the near future the States located on the Alliance's Eastern border increase they self-defense capabilities in order to counter themselves the Russian threat. Indeed, also considering that some of these countries meet the 2% threshold of defence expenditure, while others are close to reach the objective, further efforts in this direction would translate in more resources and increased operative capacity, hence more overall security in the Black Sea region.

The Russian approach in the Eastern Mediterranean

History of the Russian interest for the Eastern Mediterranean

The Russian interest for the Mediterranean "warm waters" dates back to the Seventeenth Century and the Czarist Empire fought twelve wars against the Ottoman empire, between 1676 and 1878, trying to build a position of force in the Black Sea and a free access to the Aegean Sea.

The last attempt to militarily reach such objective was attempted by the Russian Empire during the First World War. During this conflict, indeed, one of the strategic aims was the possibility to eventually defeat the Ottoman Empire and be able to assure Russian control on the Dardanelles and the Bosporus.

With the October Revolution and the birth of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) the relations between Moscow and Ankara gradually changed and an international agreement regarding the status of Dardanelles and Bosporus was reached in 1936. The signature of the "Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits" between Turkey, USSR, Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia and United Kingdom generated a set of rules that are still in force today for military vessels[67].

Originally, the USSR considered the "Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits" as a sort of shield against foreign navies' presence inside the Black Sea in a moment of relatively weakness of the country, but this assumption changed as soon as the Second World War started. At that moment, the Soviet Navy understood the severe limits the Convention posed to its projection of power in the Mediterranean.

These constrains appeared far more problematic after the end of the conflict with the USSR, when the latter reached a global power status. In this new condition Moscow perceived the necessity to establish a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean not only for military reasons, but above all, as a maritime diplomatic tool to show its presence in the region and reinforce diplomatic ties with its partners.

After an appearance in 1958, the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron (5th Operational Squadron) became a tangible reality during the Sixties. In 1964 the 5th Eskadra was established as the first permanently forward-deployed Soviet naval force and as an arm of the Black Sea Fleet, which was also supported by ships dispatched from the Baltic and Northern Fleets. Normally the Soviet presence was focused on the Eastern Mediterranean with an average force of twelve vessels (warships, submarines and support units) but, the outbreak of the Six-Day War, gave

67 The principal provisions of the Convention ruling the passages of vessels of war are outlined here-below:
- Aircraft carriers whether belonging to riparian states or not, can in no way pass through the Turkish Straits.
- Only submarines belonging to riparian states can pass through the Turkish Straits, for the purpose of re-joining their base in the Black Sea for the first time after their construction or purchase, or for the purpose of repair in dockyards outside the Black Sea.
- The total number and the maximum aggregate tonnage of all foreign naval forces which may be in course of passage through the Turkish Straits are limited to 9 and 15.000 tons respectively.
- The maximum aggregate tonnage which non-riparian States may have in the Black Sea is 45.000 tons.
- In this regard, the maximum aggregate tonnage of the vessels of war that one non-riparian State may have in the Black Sea is 30.000 tons.
- Vessels of war belonging to non-riparian states cannot stay more than 21 days in the Black Sea.
- Passages through the Turkish Straits are notified to Turkey through diplomatic channels prior to intended passages. The notification time is 8 days for vessels of war belonging to riparian States, and 15 days for those of non-riparian States.

http://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa

the Soviets the possibility to increase the number of ships deployed thanks to their decision to support the Arab Armies and the consequent availability for their Armed Forces of Egyptian and Syrian ports and airbases.

The availability of the ports of Alexandria, Mersa Matruh, Port Said and Latakia allowed Moscow to bypass the bottleneck of the Montreaux Convention and expand the 5th Eskadra to a reality able to deploy in the Mediterranean a force of a daily average strength of between 50-54 ships in 1971. These numbers roughly doubled during the Yom Kippur War in 1973 to a peak of 95 ships including over a dozen destroyers and nearly two dozen submarines. An effort of this dimension was possible because, in the same period, the Soviets were able to extend their Egyptian presence well ashore creating a network of warehouses and technical facilities supported by the right of using local airbases. This whole infrastructure completely collapsed by the end of 1976 given the worsening relations between the local government and the USSR.

The loss of the Egyptian infrastructure was a huge blow for the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean because the alternative Syrian ports and bases in Latakia and Tartus were inadequately equipped and Damascus was always unfavourable to allow Moscow to establish a strong permanent onshore presence. During the end of the Seventies and the Eighties, the USSR tried to build stronger relations with Yugoslavia, Algeria, Libya and Syria hoping to be able to find a new partner favourable to allow a permanent and substantial military presence in the Mediterranean. All these efforts were unsuccessful and the 5th Eskadra was only allowed to use ports and infrastructures that strictly remained under the hosting country's national control. Consequently, during the Eighties, the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean remained forcibly limited to a strength between 10 to 18 warships (cruisers, frigates, submarines) plus between 20 and 30 auxiliary units.

The end of the Eighties coincided with the crisis of the USSR that led to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, in 1991, and the withdrawal of the 5th Eskadra from the Mediterranean. Since this moment, the Black Sea Fleet entered a critical phase of its life characterized by few resources and limited operational capability and the "new" Russian Federation seemed more focused on preserving a credible military capability in a phase of financial crisis instead of pursuing new fanciful operations in the Mediterranean. Consequently, the Russian military presence in the Mediterranean basin during the Nineties was sporadic with the exception of 1996 when, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Fleet, the Kuznetsov carrier battle group was deployed in the region.

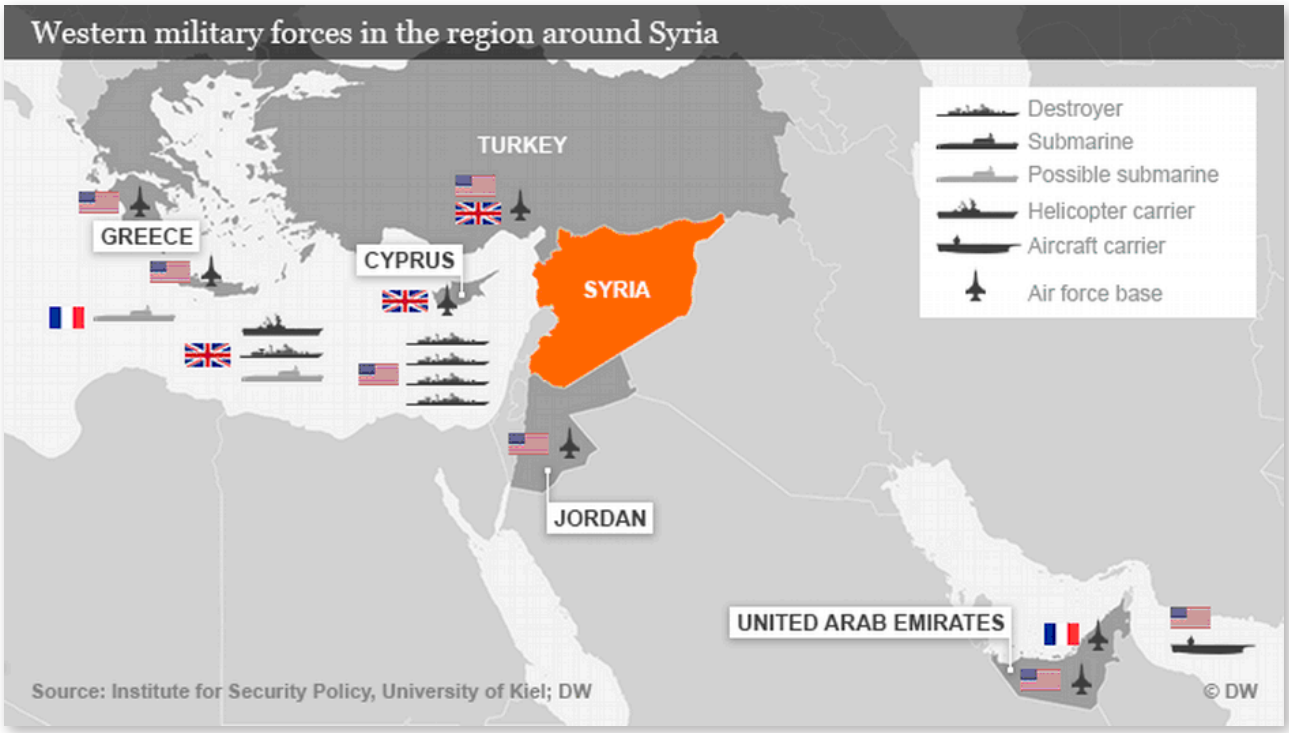
The current situation

Russia started to be interested again in the Mediterranean after the year 2000, thanks to the rise to power of President Vladimir Putin and a gradually improving economic situation. In 2001, indeed, Russia delivered a new Maritime Strategy, that stated the importance of the Mediterranean, wishing for a military and political stability of the area and a sufficient presence of its Navy. Of course, this document was far too optimistic in comparison to the actual state of the fleet after years of underfinancing, but it was the cornerstone of a political strategy that was clearly developed until 2010. During these years Russia acted to assure space of manoeuvre to its fleet in the Mediterranean with a strong diplomatic initiative towards Ukraine and Syria. With Kyiv, Moscow, in April 2010, was able to reach an agreement for extending the lease of the Sevastopol base of the Black Sea Fleet, that was due to expire in 2017, until 2042 in exchange for a subsidized gas supply. With Damascus, Russia developed a strong friendship strategy that, in the same year, culminated with the visit of then, President Medvedev to Syria (the first time for a Russian leader since 1917). In details, during that

occasion, a substantial arms deal[68] with President Assad was concluded and the two leaders discussed upgrading of the Tartus naval facility for new possible needs of the Kremlin's Navy.

The evolution of the so called "Arab Spring" and, in particular, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, in 2011, originated a new strategic environment in the Eastern Mediterranean that, eventually, created the current conditions for the new, stronger, military position of Russian Armed Forces in this area of operation since the end of the Cold War. During the first two years of the Syrian civil war, Russia was cautious about its presence in the country and Tartus remained a small naval facility operated by no more than 50 men. This situation started to change in 2014 thanks to two combined factors: the annexation of Crimea and the progressive weakening of the Syrian regime.

Moscow's annexation of Crimea sought to completely solve the precarious situation of the Black Sea Fleet that was in some ways hostage of the difficult political relations between Kyiv and Moscow thus restoring the traditional Russian position of strength in the Black Sea. At the same time, the difficult military situation of the Syrian regime, challenged not only by the rebels but also by Daesh, forced Assad to become every day more dependent on the supply of arms, munitions and technical support coming from Russia. Of course this incessant flow of material reached Syria primarily by sea and Tartus and Latakia ports became crucial in Moscow's strategy. Despite the substantial Russian efforts to keep Assad in power, at the end of the summer 2015 the regime's forces were on the brink of collapse and, for the first time, also the coastal region of Latakia was consistently threatened by the rebels. This situation put Russia in front of a dilemma: leave Assad to his own destiny risking losing the traditional longstanding strategic grip on Syria and the Tartus port or directly engage in the Syrian conflict trying to capitalize on the weakness of the regime and gaining a better position in the Mediterranean in an historic phase of American disengagement from the region.



Source: Institute for Security Policy, University of Kiel; Deutsche Welle

68 Mig-29SMT fighters, Pantsyr S1 SAM and anti-tank missiles

Source: Alastair Crooke On 'Suez' Event - Andrei Martyanov, Reminiscence of the Future, September 1, 2018

The Russian establishment opted for the second alternative and, by the end of September 2015, Russian Armed Forces started their military operations in Syria at the request of the Syrian Government. The deployment of the Russian contingent in Syria required a functioning logistical infrastructure, hence President Assad authorized Moscow's troops to use the Latakia International Airport and enlarge their foothold in the Tartus port. As the reality on the ground soon demonstrated, Russia deployed a very limited ground troops contingent (SSO Special Forces, naval infantry, sappers, military assistance units, military police) supported by a robust close air support and interdiction capability delivered by Su-24, Su-34 and Su-25 bombers and Mi-35, Mi-28 and Ka-52 attack helicopters. These forces, directly connected with the counterterrorism operations, were accompanied by a different set of units focused on force and bases protection against possible conventional threats. Indeed, in the first phase of the Russian intervention in Syria, Moscow started creating a powerful Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capability. During the first two months the air defence "umbrella" was assured by the Russian Navy guided missile cruiser Moskva (Slava Class) equipped with the S-300F (SA-N-6 Grumble) SAM[69] system. But, in November 2015, after the downing of

69 SAM: Surface to Air Missile

the RuAF Su-24 bomber by the Turkish Air Force, Moscow delivered to the new Hmeimim Air Base[70] the most powerful SAM in the Russian arsenal, the S-400[71] (SA-21 Growler), with a range of 400 km. These long-range missiles were assisted by other modern short to middle range mobile SAM like the Pantsir S1 (SA-22 Greyhound) and the Buk M2 (SA-17 Grizzly). Moreover, the RuAF contingent in Hmeimim Air Base was reinforced with the best multirole fighters in the Russian inventory (Su-27SM3, Su-30SM and Su-35S).

During 2016, also the Tartus naval base received a S-300VM (SA-23 Gladiator/Giant) battery with a range of roughly 250 km. This barrage of SAM and air superiority fighters, of course had no effect against the threat posed by the rebels to Assad's forces, but it was fundamental to achieve Moscow's strategic objective: the full control of the Syrian airspace in the coastal and central part of the country. At the same time, Russia decided to improve also the anti-ship capabilities of its Mediterranean task force by deploying K-300 Bastion-P (SS-C-5 Stooge) cruise missile batteries in the mountain region of Masyaf. These powerful missiles have a range of 350 km against maritime targets, but can also be used to hit ground target up to 450 km of distance. Trying to justify the presence of the Bastion-P in Syria, in November 2016, Russia used these missiles to hit Daesh targets in the eastern part of the country, but it is very clear that the main purpose of this system is to enlarge the defensive bubble around Latakia and Tartus ports thus protecting the Russian Navy ships and infrastructures in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the secondary land-attack capability of the Bastion-P against fixed targets is a strong message to NATO infrastructure in the region starting from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and Akrotiri RAF base in Cyprus.

If these were the steps in the air and land domains, Russia also exploited the new strong maritime position in the Eastern Mediterranean to collect significant operative experience for its Navy. From the end of 2015 to the beginning of 2018 the Russian Navy was heavily involved in the Syrian operations testing, in particular, the new ships and submarines of the Black Sea Fleet equipped with the advanced 3M14 Kalibr cruise missile. This missile has a range of more than 1.500 km and is the main strategic weapon system of the six new Improved Kilo (project 636.3) conventional submarines and the three Admiral Grigorovich class frigates that are the cornerstone of the Russian Navy combat capabilities in the Black Sea and Mediterranean region.

The Syrian conflict has also seen the participation of the new Buyan-M corvettes of the Caspian Fleet that had the possibility to launch some Kalibr missiles to target in the Eastern part of the country. The Kalibr missile testing was of paramount importance for the Russian Defence establishment because it gave the occasion to experiment the new weapon in all the possible configurations (ship launched and submarine launched) during real operations in multiple occasions. The success of the Kalibr missile in Syria signed up Russia in the exclusive club of nations able to perform conventional surgical strikes with multiple platform in different parts of the world at thousands of kilometres of distance.

Between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017 the Russian Navy deployed also its aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in the Mediterranean. This mission had little to do with the Syrian crisis and was more connected with delivering a strong political message that wanted to show Russia as a renewed maritime power in a phase of strong competition in this domain between the United States and China. Moreover, the mission was a test

70 This is the name of the Russian Air Base that has been created in one part of the Latakia International Airport.
71 The first S-400 battery has been deployed by the end of November 2015, followed by a second one during the first half of 2017 near the city of Masyaf.

to verify the Russian Navy's capability to support a sustained Mediterranean deployment of a carrier battle group taking advantage of the new logistical infrastructure in Hmeimim Air Base and Tartus port. The Admiral Kuznetsov's experience in the Mediterranean was not properly a success. During the combat operations the carrier lost two fighters (one Su-33 and one Mig-29K) due to technical failures of the arrestor cables and, generally, showed a series of deficiencies due to its old design. For these reasons, at one point the carrier wing started to operate directly from Hmeimim Air Base instead of the ship's deck.

Despite these problems, the Russian establishment can be satisfied with the Mediterranean cruise of its sole aircraft carrier. Indeed, the Russian Navy gained a lot of experience conducting air operations in a complex real environment quite different from the ocean and the "cold north". Moreover, Russian admirals collected significant amount of data on the logistic support needed to sustain the carrier battlegroup in the Mediterranean. It is not by chance that few weeks after the end of the Admiral Kuznetsov's mission in the Mediterranean, Russian and Syrian government reached an agreement[72] regarding the Tartus port and Hmeimim Air Base status. Moscow and Damascus agreed to lease the two bases to the Russian Armed Forces for 49 years with a possible (nearly automatic) extension to other 25. It is very interesting to notice that the Tartus port will be enlarged by the Russian Navy and will be able to host up to 11 ships including nuclear powered vessels or submarines and aircraft carriers. All the materials and personnel deployed to these two bases will have total immunity from the Syrian civil and administrative jurisdiction. By the end of December 2017, the formal process of establishment of these two new Russian bases abroad was concluded with President Putin's formal approval of the structure and level of forces permanently deployed in Syria.

Eventually, the Russian bet in Syria was well played. Indeed, with a relatively limited military effort, Moscow has been able to keep in power a weak friendly client like President Assad and gain an airbase and a port with a freedom of movement and a level of sovereignty that can be comparable only with the one of the "Friendship Treaty" with Egypt during the Seventies. Indeed, the new port and airbase will help Russia to partially elude the limitation of the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, thus establishing a functional logistic line of support between Crimea and Syria that can support a substantial permanent presence of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean. At the same time, the Hmeimim Air Base and its correlated formidable A2/AD bubble will put the Russian Armed Forces in the position of having a stronghold in one of the most strategic areas of the world. Of course, these two circumstances are not only relevant in terms of military strategy but, foremost, in terms of Russia's stronger weight as new essential political actor in the Near and Middle East. Looking a little bit forward, it is highly expectable that Russia will try to exploit this new Mediterranean permanent presence to further improve the political and military relations with Egypt, Algeria and, possibly, a future Libyan government, thus gaining space of manoeuvre in a historical moment in which the Western spirit of initiative appears softened and confused.

72 The agreement has been disclosed by Sputnik agency on the 20th of January 2017 and has been signed by Russia and Syria two days before.

Conclusions

From a geographical standpoint the Black Sea region connects the North-East side of Europe with its Eastern-Southern part; therefore, it represents a strategic intersection not only for many EU and NATO countries, but also for Russia, as the events in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 have clearly demonstrated. Consequentially, the more the region becomes a preeminent theatre of mutual interest, the greater are the chances of an open confrontation on its area or even the emergence of a hybrid type of conflict.

The aim of this joint paper was to analytically assess the strategic relevance of the Black Sea region and how the balance of power has evolved in the area through an overview of the past and present involvement of Russia in the basin and in neighbouring eastern Mediterranean, as well as the resultant NATO's operational response. The first section has given a detailed overview of the Russian military strategy in the Black Sea from the Tsarist period to nowadays, highlighting the historical consideration of the area as the "Promised Land" for Russians, thus willing to turn it into a "Russian lake" in order to ensure power projection in the maritime domain and to be able to control such a crucial crossroad. Moscow's military decisions that have followed over the years, in fact, delineate a path of active engagement and deep interest in the area and the territories nearby. In this regard, worth of notice is the modernization process the Russian Black Sea forces have undergone since 2010 and that will likely be concluded before the expected deadline of 2020. Apparently, Putin's strategy and ultimate goal is to achieve a solid and stable military supremacy in the basin that would not only ensure protection to Russia's offensive strike capabilities, but also deter any Allied attempt to engage more decisively in the area. Strictly linked to such military and strategic planning is Moscow's approach in the Eastern Mediterranean that, as extensively discussed in the second chapter, took a new and more solid shape in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the gradual weakening of the Syrian regime. In fact, if the events in Crimea strengthened Russia's position in the Black Sea, the deployment of the Russian contingent in Syria enabled Moscow to have access to the Latakia International Airport and to reinforce its presence in the Tartus port. This, added to the stationing in the Mediterranean of the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov between 2016 and 2017, clearly demonstrates Russia's will to increase its maritime power and of expand its sway in the Eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea. In such a context characterised by an evident and reinforced presence of Russia, NATO has delineated a new strategy that fits the current and possible future scenario. As the related chapter has outlined, the Atlantic Alliance has, since 2016, approved a number of measures aimed at guaranteeing stability in the Black Sea region. Notably, the establishment of a 'tailored forward presence' in the south-east area of NATO's territory is also a way to contribute to the strengthening of the Alliance's deterrence posture and situational awareness in the region, and operational readiness in case of crisis.

To sum up, it is evident that the Black Sea region is of strategic relevance for Moscow, while it remains, at the same time, a crucial component of the Euro-Atlantic security. Therefore, at the current stage, two actors can contribute to projecting stability in the area: the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. During the Brussels Summit of July 2018, the Heads of State and Government of NATO countries have restated their commitment to the Black Sea region and recognized that the Alliance's presence and maritime activity in the basin has substantially increased since 2016. The deterrence and defence capability of NATO, in fact, has proved

to be highly relevant and effective; nonetheless, it has to be enhanced through further steps, including improved military mobility that can facilitate the quick transit of troops across the EU's territory.

Indeed, NATO needs to establish and resource a wider and more straightforward strategy for the greater Black Sea region. The Alliance should match that strategy with a more assertive policy that seeks to take the initiative away from Russia in order to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov and which protects Allies and Partners in the region from a possible Russian aggression. Moreover, NATO should continue to hold Russia accountable to fulfil its obligations with respect to Ukrainian sovereignty, the Minsk agreements, and Georgia.[73]

The European Union, on its side, is increasingly willing to present itself as a security provider and, in order to achieve such objective, has launched a process aimed at shaping a common European Defence. The EU could plan investments in civilian infrastructure that would enhance military mobility both west-to-east and north-south (integrating the Baltic, Black, Adriatic, and Aegean Seas). For instance, the use of the Danube could be thought as an additional axis of movement for fuel and military equipment and a possible intensification of the cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria could ensure the continuous dredging operations of the Danube both in the Romanian and the Bulgarian parts.[74] Therefore, following this path, the EU should retain and enhance its solidarity in action and develop new instruments for sustaining stability in the Black Sea region and for coping with the broader security challenges its member States are facing. For instance, renewed mass migration is probable and will require adequate forward planning as the Balkan route has represented and could become once again a threat for the cohesion of the States of the area and of the Union as a whole. The threats to European security and stability arising from the hotbeds of tension and conflict and continued militarisation in the wider Black Sea area and the Levant are real and present, with slim prospects for constructive resolution any time soon. Further reverberations in the Balkans and North Africa are possible and even likely. In the prevailing circumstances the deterrence and defence capability of NATO has proved to be highly relevant and has to be enhanced through further steps, including improved military mobility.

The transatlantic link remains crucial for stability and security in Europe and neighbouring regions. Closer interaction between the European Union and NATO is desirable and possible. It is important for the EU to retain and enhance its solidarity in action and to develop new instruments for coping with new challenges facing the Union as a whole and its individual member states in the security sphere as well as in other domains. Overall, as both NATO and the EU play key roles in the Black Sea's theatre, enhanced cooperation and closer interaction between the two organizations is desirable and could bring about notable advantages.

73 Sorin Ducaru, Frederick B. Hodges, Greg Melcher, Phillip Petersen, Mykhailo Samus, George Scutaru, "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears", December 2018, at https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Moscow-Does-Not-Believe-in-Tears-Policy-Paper-December-2018.pdf
74 *Ibidem.*

To conclude, the continued militarization of the wider Black Sea area and the Levant pose a challenge to European security that cannot be underestimated, also considering its possible repercussion in the Balkans and North Africa. Indeed, Italy has always advised European States (both within the NATO and the EU framework) to embrace a comprehensive approach that looks at each front of possible instability, with a specific focus to the Black Sea region and the Southern border, and that promotes an active dialogue at all levels and with all actors involved. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the spotlight of the decision-makers on the basin in order to continue the process of delineating tailored made strategies and policies aimed at ensuring stability in the area. Not by chance, this joint report illustrates the current situation in the Black Sea region and the possible future fallouts, thus sending a very clear message about its relevance and the need for a more decisive engagement by the relevant stakeholders. Finally, it is highly recommended to keep on analysing the dynamics of events taking place in the area and to maintain the dialogue door open with the end of preventing eventual escalations and contributing to the broader security of Europe.

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