

WHY THE BLACK SEA MATTERS



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History is not only about the past

For most of its ancient and mediaeval history, the Black Sea basin was the meeting place of flourishing civilizations, imperial ambitions, confrontations for domination and control, lucrative trade and cultural synergies. Greek city-states established trading colonies all along the sea shores as early as 7th century B.C., Byzantium ruled for centuries through an intricate web of alliances and selective military interventions, the Tatars of the Golden Horde supervised a vital segment of the ancient Silk Road from China to Europe, Venice and Genoa established thriving trading posts that survived until the end of the 15th century, when they were superseded by the growing might of the Ottoman Empire, only to be challenged by the imperial expansion of Russia, which reached the Black Sea shores by the middle of the 18th century. The rivalry between the two great empires resulted in frequent wars, chipping away at each other's dominions as Russia battled for control of the entire maritime space, especially the Black Sea Straits, assuming the mantle of liberator of the Christian peoples.¹

An important moment was marked by the Crimean War of 1856-59, when Britain and France sided with Ottoman forces to preserve the balance of power in the region. The defeat of Russia and the weakening of the Ottoman grip opened the way to independent statehood for the nations on the western littoral of the Black Sea (including Romania) and the Balkans.²

In the aftermath of World War I, the dissolution of the Czar's and Ottoman empires once again changed the disposition of regional forces, divided as they were into supporters and opponents of the established territorial *status quo*. The perennial dispute over the regime of the Black Sea Straits³ was eventually settled through the Montreux Convention of

1936 which, although it reflected the political and technical circumstances of that time in terms of restrictions on the tonnage and duration of sojourn for the non-riparian naval vessels, is still valid today.

World War II changed the regional geopolitical picture once again. During the war, fierce battles took place in Crimea, especially over the naval port of Sevastopol, which accounts for the special symbolic value of those places in the Russian psyche. With the exception of Turkey, which chose to join NATO in 1952, all the other political entities around the Black Sea were either part of the USSR or Soviet satellite states, members of the Warsaw Treaty. The Cold War played out in that space as well with brief spells of relative *détente*⁴ and occasional flare-ups of tension and naval incidents as the Soviet Union strived to build up its Black Sea Fleet into an instrument of military domination and power projection.

The collapse of communism and the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia brought about a more diversified regional landscape consisting of NATO and/or European Union members or aspiring candidates and a few countries that may be considering other options. Most of them went through a painful transition to functional democracy and market economy, some moved to a more authoritarian system of governance, some embraced the values and institutions of the West, others did not. The Russian Federation, after an initial decade of confusion, chose to follow a path of its own, characterized by centralization of all levers of power, accelerated militarization and declared hostility to the West, the United States in particular. One of the battlefronts of this renewed assertiveness is now the wider Black Sea.

¹ Hélène Carrère D'Encausse, *Imperiul Eurasiei: o istorie a Imperiului Rus de la 1552 până astăzi*, trad. Anca Irina Ionescu, Orizonturi, București, 2008, p. 9. [original title: Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire d'Eurasie: une histoire de l'Empire russe de 1552 à nos jours*, Fayard, Paris, 2005].

² Dominic Lieven, "Dilemmas of Empire 1850-1918. Power, territory, Identity", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 34, no. 2, April 1999, p. 172.

³ Serge Gorianow, *Le Bosphore et les Dardanelles: etude historique sur la question de Detroits*, Plon-Nourrit et Cie, Paris, 1910, pp. 1-3.

⁴ See Mircea Malita and Dan Dungaciu, *Istoria prin ochii diplomatului. Supraviețuirea prin diplomatie, "deceniul deschiderii" (1962-1972) și crizele globale*, Editura RAO, Bucharest, 2015, pp. 325-350.

In the meantime, during the early post-Cold War period and in the following years, laudable attempts were made to build frameworks for constructive cooperation regardless of the existing differences. Thus, following a Turkish initiative, a regional summit in Istanbul decided, on 25 June 1992, to establish the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) as an instrument for joint, project-oriented interaction in specifically designated areas.⁵ Although the organization has a complete institutional architecture (ministerial council, parliamentary assembly, thematic working groups, international secretariat, regional bank and research center), it has never managed to implement meaningful projects and served mainly as a meeting place for countries that would not normally talk to each other (e.g. Armenia and Azerbaijan).

NATO and the European Union also came in with initiatives and working programs tailored for the needs of the wider Black Sea region. With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to NATO (2004) and the European Union (2007) both organizations became Black Sea powers and had to face the consequences of that new status.

NATO and Warsaw Pact in 1989



■ NATO members
■ Warsaw Pact members

⁵ The Summit Statement and the Bosphorus Declaration were signed by 11 heads of state or government (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine). The BSEC was subsequently joined by Serbia and was registered as a regional organization under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. Observers included US, Germany, UK, France, Poland and other nations.

As a sequel to the adoption of the EU Security Strategy (December 2003), the European Council made public (May 2004) a comprehensive document on the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) covering both the southern and the eastern vicinities of the enlarged EU. It was followed, at the joint initiative of Poland and Sweden, by the Eastern Partnership for enhanced EU bilateral relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and by Black Sea Synergy (launched in Kiev on February 14, 2008) for cooperation in a multilateral format with the above countries plus the Russian Federation and Turkey. The NATO summit in Bucharest (April 2008) also considered the prospects for closer ties with the Black Sea region and gave assurances to Ukraine and Georgia that they may eventually be part of the Alliance, without however extending a formal invitation to start the process of accession.

It is now obvious that, all through that period of time, the leaders of the Russian Federation, based on their own interpretation of the global trends in general and regional developments in particular, became increasingly obsessed with what they saw as encroachments by the West in their area of privileged interests. An unmistakable sign of frustration and downright hostility was given it the now famous speech by president Vladimir Putin at the Security Summit in Munich, in 2007. There followed the Georgian war of August 2008, the occupation and subsequent unilateral recognition of two of its sovereign provinces as independent states. Then the illegal annexation of Crimea and the proxy, hybrid war in southeastern Ukraine. Then the incursion into Syria. The logic of strategic escalation has started, and it is rolling on.



‘Frozen’ conflicts:

The precursors of trouble to come

The protracted, post-Soviet conflicts are, unsurprisingly, located in the strategically important area of the Black Sea, within the sovereign territories of the newly independent republics of Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Republic of Moldova (Transnistria)⁶ and, more recently, Ukraine (the so-called ‘people’s republics’ of Donetsk and Lugansk). Whenever similar conflicts occur within the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation they are described as rebellions or terrorist activities and are dealt with ruthlessly, as in the case of the two Chechen wars. They are never ‘frozen’.

What we are talking about here is the kind of internal conflicts with a historical background related to ethnicity, identity or

political control that, at some point, degenerate into military confrontations. Whether it is involved from the very beginning or not, Moscow then steps in and secures a ceasefire or some other sort of interim arrangement which stops the actual hostilities for a while but leaves the root causes untouched. In some cases this presupposes a continued Russian military presence as ‘peacekeepers’ for additional leverage in pursuit of long-term geopolitical advantage.

Moscow’s interest in generating and maintaining such simmering hotbeds of tension is to control the whole (sovereign states or strategic spaces) by controlling a part (the conflict zone) in a classical story of the tail wagging the dog. That is why the description of ‘frozen conflicts’ is hardly appropriate since it suggests a state of immobility in its initial form, prior to the active phase of the hostilities. This notion is obviously false. The actual developments on the ground confirm the existence of a deliberate design behind all those conflicts that can be turned on or off at will to suit a strategic purpose.



⁶ Dan Dungaci, *Moldova ante portas* (in Romanian), Editura Tritonic, Bucharest, 2005.

In the first place, the apparently benign neglect surrounding this type of conflicts has further complicated the situation. A new generation, born since the time of the conflict (as it happened in Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh) was raised and educated under closed and isolated, separatist regimes. Those are 'citizens' of unrecognized and unaccountable entities without formal, institutional links to the 'mother country' or the rest of the world for that matter. The change of generations makes the prospects of rational conflict resolution a lot more complicated than it used to be at the time when the hostilities broke out.

Secondly, the ambiguous legal and political status of those unrecognized regimes forced them to develop survival strategies leading, paradoxically, to their domestic and external consolidation. A kind of perverse *modus vivendi* at the margins of the law and accepted international practice has taken hold and become quasi-functional. Under the ice of the ostensibly frozen conflicts there emerged a plethora of political leaders, power brokers and even transnational business networks.

Thirdly, the 'freezing' of conflicts has significantly enhanced Russia's ability to influence, manipulate and control regional developments, directly or indirectly. In fact, the unrecognized regimes have acted, wittingly or not, as effective levers of Russian geopolitical action at least in the sense of distracting attention from issues that really matter. Moreover, having successfully tested with impunity the tools provided by the existence of protracted conflicts, Moscow has been tempted to use them again in other places and has not hesitated to do so. The application of this strategy in the separatist regions of Donbas, in Ukraine, is a direct consequence of the fact that previous conflicts have remained unresolved.

It stands to reason that, so far, the ability to keep the protracted conflicts alive have served the aim of perpetuating Russian control and, in some cases, military presence in the territories of its Black Sea neighbors against the sovereign will and constitutional dispositions of the host countries. In this sense

any further procrastination in conflict resolution is a favorable outcome from the Russian point of view. And conversely, any sign of Russian intention to 'unfreeze' a conflict indicates a purposeful quest to obtain further advantages.

The Euro-Atlantic community will have to be more vigilant with regard to renewed Russian attempts to give a semblance of legitimacy to their otherwise unlawful military presence in parts of the wider Black Sea region. Taking advantage of the 'conflict fatigue' and the understandable desire to speed up the return to a relative state of normality on the part of some, mainly west European, political actors, Russian diplomacy has been actively pushing various forms of 'federalization' in the countries that are facing Moscow-sponsored separatism. This is particularly evident in the insistence to legalize a 'special status' for separatist entities through constitutional amendments or other legal dispositions that would give them *de-facto* veto power over vital matters of foreign and security policy at a national level. The cases in point are Ukraine (enclaves of Donetsk and Lugansk) and the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria).

The consequences of the continued existence of protracted conflicts may be even more far-reaching. The Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, D.C., on April 1, 2016, took note of the danger posed to the non-proliferation regime and the safety of nuclear installations or materials as a result of degraded border security and customs controls in the unaccountable separatist entities with specific references to well documented smuggling attempts originating precisely in Transnistria, Donbas, Abkhasia and South Ossetia.⁷

⁷ Richard Weitz, "Frozen Conflicts Undermine Nuclear Security", in *Eurasianet*, April 5, 2016, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78126>.

Militarization of the Black Sea

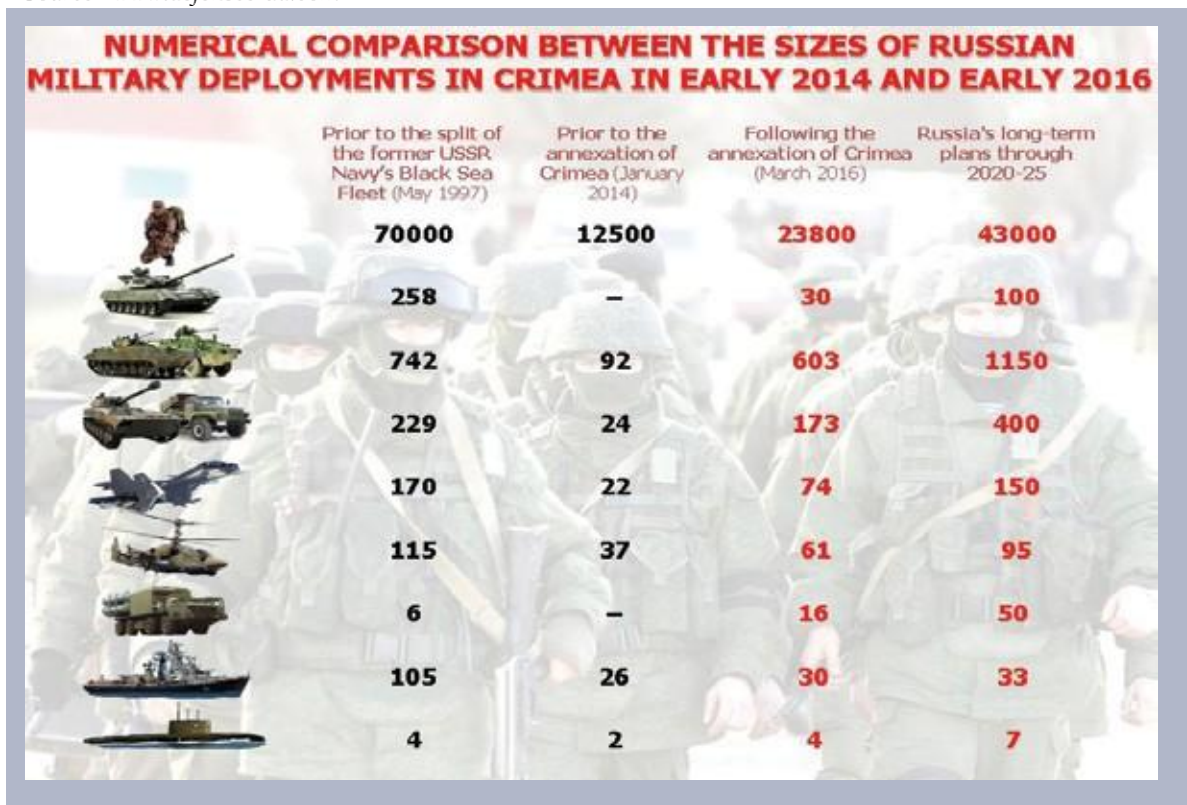
In military terms, the Russian Federation has been paying increased attention to the Black Sea especially since 2007 in a drive to re-assert itself as a world-class power to be reckoned with. In February 2007, at the Security Conference in Munich, President Vladimir Putin bluntly stated that he was no longer willing to tolerate what he described as NATO encroachments in Russia’s area of privileged interests. A few months later, Russian Air Force decided to resume long-distance flights by its strategic bombers covering also the Black Sea space. It was, in the words of Sergey Karaganov, a leading Russian analyst, the start of a new epoch of confrontation in which Russia is guided by a different set of values, based on a traditional “aspiration for justice beyond formal rules and laws”, and willingness “to defend national interests by use of force”.⁸

The Georgian war of August 2008 was, in a way, a test run for more things to come. One of the conclusions that Russian military planners drew from that operation was that they needed modern capabilities for combined naval missions. In the fall of 2008, the Russian Admiralty announced ambitious plans for the expansion of the Black Sea Fleet, including its ability to ‘show the flag’ in the Mediterranean. It was also decided to accelerate the development of the military port of Novorossiysk since at that time Russia could not bolster its naval presence at Sevastopol because of the limitations imposed under the relevant agreements with Ukraine.

The illegal annexation of Crimea, in March 2014, placed Russia at a definite geostrategic advantage. The rapid transformation of the peninsula into a naval and air force bastion fitting the description of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) system is in the process of reshaping the European security and defense landscape and presents a clear challenge that NATO can no longer ignore because of the immediate consequences for its

Defense Express, Militarization of occupiers Crimea, a threat to global security, 25 April, 2016

Source - www.defensce-ua.com



⁸ Sergey Karaganov, “Novaia ideologicheskaja borba?”, interview in *Izvestia* daily, April 23, 2016, at <http://www.izvestia.ru/news/610812>

deterrent capital.⁹ In fact, Russia seems to have acquired a strategic *place d'armes* for further incursions in its 'near abroad', seen this time in a broader sense to include the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. Available evidence suggests, in addition to threatening the sovereignty of Ukraine, Georgia and Republic of Moldova, an intent to control navigation in the Black Sea maritime space, to protect Russia's communication lines and energy transportation routes, to intimidate NATO members Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, and to interdict the access of NATO forces to the Black Sea.

No matter what the unstated Russia's strategic goals may be, the scope and speed of military transformation and modernization in Crimea over the past two years has been impressive in terms of infrastructure, emplacement of ground forces, air force and air defense units, and re-equipment of the navy. By the end of 2015, the Russian Black Sea Fleet had 9 submarines, 41 surface vessels, 34 aircraft and about 40 helicopters, plus a regiment of marine infantry. The naval force is supported by an air defense corps comprising 2 fighter regiments, i.e. 50-60 SU-27 (Flanker) and MIG-29 (Fulcrum) aircraft, and 2 regiments of surface-to-air missiles.¹⁰ The fifth Kilo-class (Project 636.6 Varshavianka according to Russian classification) was completed in March 2015 for delivery to the Black Sea Fleet, to be followed by a sixth one in 2016.¹¹ The Krivak V class frigates *Admiral Grigorovich* (Project 1135 Burevestnik), *Admiral Essen*, which underwent sea trials in November 2015, and *Admiral Makarov*, completed at the Kaliningrad shipyard in September 2015, are headed for Sevastopol in 2016.¹² Three more frigates are scheduled for delivery before 2020, provided the Russian side can find substitutes for the turbine engines, which had been supplied by Ukraine until now.¹³ A total of 15 vessels have been recently added to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, including 2 new Kilo-class submarines, 2 missile corvettes and a number of patrol boats. According to the Moscow Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 20 more missile corvettes are going to be delivered by 2020.¹⁴

⁹ George Visan and Octavian Manea, "The emerging access-denial challenge for NATO's Eastern Flank", in *Black Sea in Access Denial Age*, Romania Energy Center (ROEC), NATO-supported special report, Bucharest, January 2016, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Russian Navy Black Sea capabilities in case of conflict against NATO*, TASS-Defence, February 11, 2016, accessed at <http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/focus-analysis/naval-technology/3570-analysis-russian-navy-black-sea-fleet-capabilities-in-case-of-conflict-against-nato.html>, February 15, 2016.

¹¹ <http://www.flotprom.ru/2016/admiralteiskieVerfi4>, March 18, 2016.

¹² *Fregat 'Admiral Essen' v more*, <http://bmpd.livejournal.com/1567164.html>, November 8, 2015.

¹³ *The Russian Navy—a historic transition*, Report by the US Navy Intelligence Office, at <http://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/russia/Russia%202015print.pdf?ver=2015-12-14-082038-923>, December 14, 2015.

¹⁴ "Black Sea Rising: Rebirth of a Russian Fleet", in *The Moscow Times*, March 17, 2016, at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/black-sea-rising-rebirth-of-a-russian-fleet/562831.html>.

A complex of mobile platforms is thus being created and equipped with Kalibr missile systems that are able to hit NATO infrastructure all the way from Turkey to southern Italy, southern Germany and the whole of Central Europe. The Commander of the Black Sea Fleet, Admiral Aleksandr Vitko, specifically acknowledged the presence of 2 Kalibr-equipped corvettes under his command in December 2015.¹⁵ It is to be noted that the capability of those missiles was demonstrated when the Russian Caspian Flotilla carried out precision strikes against targets in northern Syria across the territories of Iran and Iraq. Military experts suggest the realistic possibility of bringing into Crimea more destabilizing weapons systems such as the Iskander nuclear-capable cruise missiles with a range of more than 500 kilometers in clear violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and the TU-23M3 strategic bombers.¹⁶

Of the other littoral states only Turkey has a capable navy and air force, comparable to the Russian power in the Black Sea. Ukraine, having been dispossessed of 70% of its fleet at the time of the occupation of Crimea, has been left with only 2 corvettes and 1 missile fast patrol boat.¹⁷ Georgia has just a few coast guard speed boats. NATO countries Bulgaria and Romania have largely outdated naval forces with poor striking capabilities and limited range (4 frigates, 2 corvettes and 1 missile patrol boat for Bulgaria¹⁸; 3 frigates, 4 corvettes and 3 missile patrol boats for Romania¹⁹). In 2015, the Turkish Navy was still superior in total numbers of combatants (44 surface vessels and 13 submarines versus 22 surface ships and 3 operational submarines for the Russian Black Sea Fleet), but the difference will substantially narrow down by 2020. Conversely, the Russian Black Sea Fleet is currently superior in terms of land-based and ship-to-ship striking capability and range (124-200 kilometers for Turkey versus 600 km for Russia).

¹⁵ "Russian Warships Equipped with Kalibr missiles join Black Sea Fleet", in *Sputnik News*, December 12, 2015.

¹⁶ *Black Sea rising. Russia's strategy in Southeast Europe*, Report by the Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, D.C., February 2016.

¹⁷ "Ukrainian Navy", at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/vms-modernization.htm>.

¹⁸ "Bulgaria: Major Navy equipment", at <http://www.armedforces.co.uk/europeandefence/edcountries/countrybulgaria.htm/bulgariannavy>.

¹⁹ "Romanian Naval Forces", at <http://www.navy.ro/en/>.

KALIBR Cruise Missile - range 2500 km (1553 miles)
ISKANDER Ballistic Missile - range 500 km (310 miles)



All this points to a purposeful development of a Russian offensive capability centered on Crimea and the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which tends to alter the military balance in the region and beyond. At the same time, with characteristic vehemence, Russian policy makers and opinion shapers get incensed about purely defensive measures taken in response by the NATO countries. Witness to that is their disproportionately nervous reaction to the formal inauguration of the missile defense facility at Deveselu, Romania, on May 12, 2016. Contrary to evidence, Russian propaganda depicted the event as threatening to their national security and went as far as to evoke the possibility of scrapping the INF Treaty of 1987, thus eliminating the last vestiges of arms control and opening the door to a renewed arms race.²⁰

²⁰ Pavel Felgenhauer, "INF Treaty Increasingly in Danger, as Russia Balks at New Missile Defense Base in Romania", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., vol. 13, issue 93, May 12, 2016.

Emerging energy security challenges

Most countries of the wider Black Sea region (and the Balkans for that matter) have long been experiencing serious vulnerabilities in terms of energy security because of their one-source dependence on Russian gas supplies and resulting exposure to political pressure and blackmail. Yet they learned to live with the discomforts caused by this situation and sought ways to achieve some sort of accommodation while also striving to diversify their sources and to improve their overall energy balance. The annexation of Crimea, the proxy war in Southeastern Ukraine and forceful assertiveness of Russian military power was a rude awakening for the regional actors, for Europe and the rest of the world, with far-reaching consequences that also touch upon the energy scene.²¹ In fact, a recent study documented the assumption (quoting also Russian sources), that the decision to invade and annex Crimea may have been influenced, at least in part, by additional considerations related to access to, and control of energy resources, especially in off-shore perimeters in the Black and Azov seas.²² A reaction had to be expected, and it is happening.

Market forces have not been kind to Russian energy interests either. The halving of world prices for oil and gas, the massive devaluation of the ruble, plus the sanctions imposed after the Ukrainian adventure sent the Russian budget into a tailspin and triggered a recession (minus 3.7 of GDP) in 2015, likely to continue in 2016. It has become clear that, within the space of less than a decade and especially in the past two years, Russia has been losing its good name as a dependable energy partner – an image that it was keen to cultivate even during the worst days of the Cold War. Russia's failure to persuade the oil-rich Gulf states at the Qatar conference in mid-April 2016 to reduce production in order to boost prices further dampened Moscow hopes to redress its financial position and avoid an economic downturn.²³

Having become aware of its own vulnerabilities, the European Union has adopted and is implementing a coherent set of

legislative and regulatory measures to improve its energy position and mitigate the effects of monopolistic practices: EU Energy Strategy (June 2014), Energy Union package (March 2015), (Central and South-Eastern European Gas Connectivity initiative – CESEC (July 2015). Though still slow moving and despite the political and financial uncertainties besetting the EU after the crisis of 2008-2009, these policy decisions have given the EU member states and their regional partners some confidence that they can weather the storm. Indeed, it is remarkable that Ukraine, a country at war facing innumerable difficulties, managed an almost unimaginable turnaround by drastically reducing its former almost total dependence on Russian gas supplies from about 40 billion cubic metres in 2011 to less than 5 bcm in 2015.²⁴ Turkey has also started, successfully, to diversify its sources of gas imports following the deterioration of its relations with Russia.

Looking at the broader picture, recent worldwide trends seem to confirm the notion that, on the supply side, energy availability and reliability can be realistically achieved. In spite of dire prediction, these days we have an abundance rather than a shortage of conventional energy resources, especially hydrocarbons.²⁵ The same applies to a certain extent to energy infrastructure, which appears to have become redundant in some parts of the world while remaining deficient in others. It is also true that the world energy scene has seen a host of fundamental, game-changing developments, mainly as a result of spectacular technological breakthroughs: the shale and tight oil and gas revolution in the US²⁶, the upsurge of renewable sources (wind, solar, biomass) at increasingly affordable prices, cost-effective electricity storage, smart grids and metering, clusters of energy self-sufficient local developments, 'green' buildings, and more in the pipeline. Electrification of the energy sector is well underway in transport, heating/cooling and other areas. Notably, most of the innovations in the energy sphere are mindful of ecological concerns about reducing carbon imprint and mitigating climate change. The story is no longer just about who controls the resources and the transit routes. While still strategically important, energy follows a logic of its own and the quest for energy dominance as a political weapon becomes less relevant. That era is coming to an end.

²¹ *The Ukraine War and CEE Energy Security*, Energy Intelligence Brief No. 1, Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, D.C., April 2016.

²² Eugenia Gusilov, "The Black Sea after Crimea – the energy factor", in *Black Sea in Access Denial Age*, NATO-supported Special Report produced by Romanian Energy Center (ROEC), Bucharest, January 2016, p. 47.

²³ Stephen Blank, "Moscow's appointment in Doha Goes Awry", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., vol. 13, issue 87, May 4, 2016.

²⁴ Eugenia Gusilov, *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

²⁵ Marian Radetzki, Roberto F. Aguilera, "The Age of Cheap Oil and Natural Gas Is Just Beginning", *Scientific American* online, May 3, 2016.

²⁶ Georgi Gotev, "American LNG declares price war on pipeline gas in Europe", in *EurActiv*, April 22, 2016.

The countries of the wider Black Sea region and the Balkans are, inescapably, part of this process.²⁷ Most of them still have to face daunting problems that have been largely overcome in other parts of Europe such as overdependence on a single primary source of energy, aging power production and transportation networks, poor cross-border interconnections of pipelines and electricity grids, low energy efficiency per unit of product, large pockets of energy poverty. The panoply of policies and proactive measures that are now being considered at a regional level fall into two categories: (i) upgrading the national systems of energy production, transportation, distribution and use, and (ii) promoting international cooperation primarily in those areas where a regional approach is politically feasible and makes economic sense by providing added value compared to individual country efforts.²⁸ An appropriate course of action may include such recommendations as: (i) Maintaining an investment-friendly environment conducive to timely development of new resources, (ii) Completing a comprehensive network of interconnectors, (iii) Taking sustained action to improve energy efficiency and moderate energy demand, (iv) Diversifying the energy mix in a sustainable way, compliant with environmental requirements, (v) Using regional cooperation formats.²⁹

Geography and common sense suggest that, normally, Europe and the Russian Federation should be natural partners on matters related to trade and energy for decades to come. The trouble is that present circumstances can hardly be described as normal. The incorporation of Crimea by Russia raises disturbing questions about the legal status of maritime space and the commercial interests of global companies operating in the Black Sea. Some major litigations have already been opened, and more are expected.

Recent developments have shown, however, that, whenever Russia decides to depart from the established norms of international behavior and accepted business practice, the Europeans are able to find alternative solutions, provided they act in unity and with determination. That also applies to the wider region of the Black Sea and the Balkans.

²⁷ For a detailed presentation of Romania's energy position and expectations from the Strategic Partnership with the US in this sphere, see *Romania's Energy Crossroads. Strategic Options for Improving Energy Security*, Special Report by the Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, D.C., March 2016.

²⁸ Sergiu Celac, "Energy security and environmental concerns in the wider Black Sea region", in *Balance*, publication of the Romanian Association for the Club of Rome (ARCOR), Bucharest, November 2014.

²⁹ Razvan Buzatu, Alexandru Coita, "Addressing Emerging Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region", special contribution to this project, Bucharest, April 2016.

'Outsiders' as regional actors

The interest and involvement of the **United States** in Black Sea regional affairs is relatively recent and was originally informed by geostrategic considerations. During most of the Cold War years, US policies were guided mainly by the perceived need to support Turkey as a lonely ally in an otherwise Soviet-dominated space, while gently nudging some communist countries (Yugoslavia, then Romania) to assert their relative independence from Moscow. For some time, regional military balance was preserved through targeted arms control arrangements between the two superpowers, notably the flank provisions under the Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) agreements, now unilaterally suspended by Russia.

Following the collapse of the communist system and the dissolution of the USSR, the US embraced and, after some hesitation, staunchly supported the choice of some Central and East European countries in their complicated and sometimes painful transition to functional democracy and market economy. The strategic significance of the Black Sea region moved up on Washington's agenda³⁰ in connection with the logistical and other requirements of the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. That was also an object test for the reliability and effectiveness of the new allies.

The turning point came with the renewed strategic assertiveness of the Russian Federation: occupation and immediate annexation of Crimea, hybrid warfare in Southeastern Ukraine and other instances of political interference backed by military force (all foreshadowed by the Georgian war of August 2008). All of a sudden, the geopolitical stakes for the United States in the wider Black Sea space gave gone up immeasurably. The resulting strategic imbalance, which has been produced, despite the fancy names attached to it, in an old-fashioned way harking back to 19th-century policies, needs to be corrected through dissuasion and deterrence before it gets worse and calls for more robust action.

³⁰ *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, Ronald D. Asmus et al. Editors, German Marshall Fund of the US, Washington, D.C., 2004.

In the meantime, while the international community was much more attentive to Russia's strategic moves in the wider Black Sea area, **China** has been expanding its influence in a subtler and more insidious manner. Guided by its own self-interest, Beijing saw considerable opportunities in the region as a part of the trans-Eurasian 'One Belt, One Road' concept. The first leg of this ambitious project, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TCITR) connecting China to Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and onward to Europe was inaugurated in August 2015. It provides a 4,000 kilometers rail link with a planned capacity of 13.5 million tons of goods and 300,000 TEU containers by 2020. Currently, the EU-China trade turnover exceeds Euro 1 billion a day.³¹ It is also worth noting the spectacular growth of China-Israel industrial and technological cooperation. 40% of the venture capital invested in Israel comes from China (\$1.77 b).³²

Unlike Russia, China did not regard the modernization and Euro-Atlantic integration of former Soviet republics or satellites as a threat but rather as a pragmatic business proposition with an expected win-win outcome. In 2012, at Beijing's initiative a China-Central and East European (CCEE) summit at prime-minister level took place in Warsaw to discuss practical issues of enhanced cooperation in the economic and other fields. As a first step, a \$10 billion credit line was offered to CEE countries, chiefly for infrastructure projects in the Black Sea region, the Balkans and parts of Central Europe. Irrespective of what the Chinese plans may be in its immediate neighborhood, the South China Sea in particular, Beijing distanced itself from Russian military adventures since 2008, contrary to Moscow's expectations.

Another extra-regional actor to watch is **Iran**, which has been courting most of the Black Sea and Balkan countries assiduously and has high hopes, after the nuclear accords, of returning to those markets in strength.

A shifting regional paradigm

Once an area of contention and rivalry at the respective overlapping or intersecting peripheries of great empires³³, the wider Black Sea space has recently acquired an uncomfortable centrality of its own. The changing regional environment calls for a careful reconsideration of the existing theoretical premises and analytical evaluations in order to align them with the newly emerging reality, to make sense of what is going on, to generate workable solutions to the present vulnerabilities, risks and threats, and to seize the opportunities that are likely to arise during a process of profound change.

Regional instability caused by the Russian Federation in its drive to alter the strategic balance in the region by resorting to naked military force, its actions aimed at blocking the European choice of Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia, use of energy as a tool of geopolitical pressure, constant interference in the Western Balkans and the Middle East, assault on the system of liberal values, encouragement of extreme nationalist and populist discourse – all these are as many incentives to anticipate what may come next and to deter further possible challenges to regional stability and security.

The security outlook that has been officially adopted by NATO is based on the assumption that the main challenges in Europe are likely to come from two directions. One is the Eastern Flank stretching from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, including the 'frozen' conflicts, annexation of Crimea and continued hybrid-type confrontations in Eastern Ukraine and other places. The other is the Southern Flank including massive illegal migration, failing states, military insurrections with an ethnic, identity or religious background, and terrorist activities. Some of the risks to allied security interests are similar, others are different in their substance.

³¹ Azad Garibov, in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., vol. 13, issue 75, April 18, 2016

³² "How isolation is bringing China and Israel together", in *Stratfor*, May 18, 2016.

³³ Georgetown University professor Charles King entitled, in chronological order, each chapter of his book according to the name given to the sea by the dominant powers of the time, in their respective languages. Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

At the same time, regardless of stated intentions or suggested differentiation between the two segments of NATO and EU Eastern Flank – the Northern (Baltic) and the Southern (Black Sea with extensions to Eastern Mediterranean) – their security requirements are essentially the same in terms of actual response capabilities and active deterrence. Moreover, while in the Northern tier the conflict potential is serious but unlikely at the present juncture, in the South it is kinetic and ongoing. Incidentally, the Black Sea Fleet ranks third in importance for the Russian navy, behind the Northern and Pacific fleets, but ahead of the Baltic Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla.³⁴

In the Black Sea area, the endeavors made since 1992 to build the structures of a regional cooperative framework mainly in the economic sphere, energy and infrastructure have, for all practical purposes, stagnated and have now come to a halt. The overriding concerns have abruptly moved from seeking

of constructive cooperation to facing the strategic challenges resulting from the drastic alteration of the regional military equilibrium, of naval and air forces in particular, and the foreseeable legal and territorial consequences of the Russian annexation of Crimea, including the maritime space.

Recent developments in the Balkans, further augmented by the migration crisis, also give rise to legitimate concern in this context. The Dayton Accords, which put an end to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, have served their purpose but also generated some unintended consequences that may still acquire an explosive potential. The prospect of eventual accession to the European Union that was extended to the Western Balkan nations has so far concentrated mainly on transitional aspects such as approximation of laws and building capacity for better governance, while paying less attention to the still unresolved political issues and underlying tensions.

³⁴ "Black Sea Fleet projects Russian power westwards", *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, April 15, 2016.

East and South - an Integrated Approach



It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Black Sea and Balkan spaces now harbor the vulnerabilities that NATO has identified for both the Eastern and the Southern flanks of the Alliance. The political arrangements under the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the subsequent arms control agreements that ended the Cold War are turning dysfunctional whereas – in the words of the Russian Defense Minister – a new security architecture in Europe is hard to build because of acute lack of mutual trust.³⁵ Russia's accelerated military transformation and physical actions it has undertaken since spring 2014 are actually changing the terms of reference of the Russia-NATO relationship. In a twisted logic, any reaction from the Alliance to Russian attempts to change the strategic *status quo* by force of arms is then misinterpreted as a provocation requiring 'adequate' responses in what appears to be a dangerous spiral of open-ended escalation.³⁶

Shifting circumstances call for a re-affirmation of the EU and NATO strategic resolve and interest to keep the twin areas of the Black Sea and the Balkans within a Euro-Atlantic orbit through concrete measures designed to strengthen their democratic choice, their stability and security. The strategic advance of Russia can be countered by encompassing the two areas in a consolidated regional concept to be reflected in specific policies and programs of the West, with appropriate adjustments in terms of emphasis and nuance. In a remarkable feat of foresight, US diplomatic and academic communities identified early on the strategic and moral considerations supporting an integrated vision of future developments in the wider Black Sea space in correlation with the Balkans and the Middle East.³⁷ That future is upon us now.

Traditionally, Romania's regional policies, as shaped by its geographic location and historical experience, concentrated on three main directions: the Central-European and, farther on, Western dimension (with a Danube basin component), the Eastern dimension (including Black Sea regionalism), and the Balkan dimension. By joining NATO and the European Union and sharing the common position of the Allies on

Eastern Neighborhood and Western Balkans, Romania has strengthened its national security posture and its links with the value system which is also its own, and with abiding sources of prosperity. Having thus attained its strategic objective in the Central-European and Western dimension, Romania's constructive regional action was able to concentrate on promoting cooperation in the wider Black Sea area and on gradual improvement of relations with the Balkan countries through bilateral and trilateral engagements. The changed geopolitical environment now makes it imperative for Romania to rethink its regional priorities in line with the dynamic realities of the time and to assume the resulting responsibilities alongside its friends and allies.

³⁵ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Kremlin paranoia overwhelms Russia", in *Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, volume 13, issue 83, April 28, 2016.

³⁶ Andrew Monaghan, "No going to Business as Usual for NATO and Russia", Chatham House (RIIA) online, London April 25, 2016.

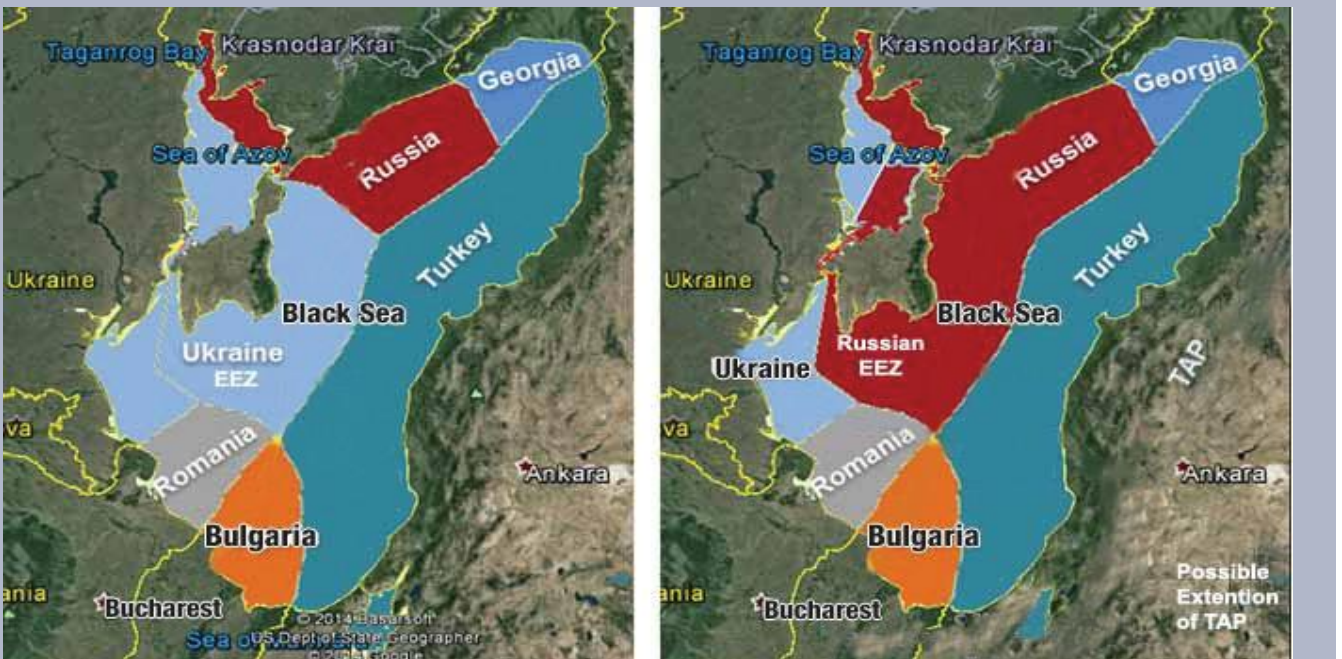
³⁷ Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce Jackson, "The Black Sea and the frontiers of freedom", in *Policy Review* No. 125, Washington, D.C., June-July 2004.

Beware the Black Swans

There have been so many surprises of late in the wider Black Sea space that any attempt to fathom what is likely to happen next is a thankless exercise. Still, here are some hypothetical developments which, though improbable, may yet come to pass, at least in theory. The order in which they are listed is not an indication of presumed likelihood. In all scenarios accident, human error or miscalculation is a possibility.

- *Resumption of military hostilities, this time state-to-state, between Russia and Ukraine.* This might happen as a result of a major offensive by either side in the separatist districts of Donbas following the failure of the Minsk I and II process. Alternatively, it might be a Russian deliberate attempt to secure a land bridge to Crimea in a partial revival of the ‘Novorossia’ conceptual design.
- *Direct, medium-intensity confrontation between Russia and Turkey.* This might happen in the event of an all-out war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh forcing Moscow and Ankara to take sides. Another trigger might be a more serious aerial or naval incident eliciting a disproportionate response. In both cases NATO would have a hard decision to make.
- *Substantial weakening of European institutions, drastic reshaping or even dissolution of the European Union as we know it.* In such an eventuality the defense commitments of some Western and Central European countries to NATO might be reduced considerably. The member states and partners on the Eastern Flank would be particularly exposed.
- *Activation of the conflict in Transnistria.* This separatist province of the Republic of Moldova is sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania but contains a Russian military presence. Ukraine might be tempted to take action in order to secure its continued control of the vital seaport of Odessa nearby. Hybrid-type action might also be taken by Russia to frustrate the EU (and, possibly, NATO) aspirations of the Republic of Moldova taking advantage of the fluid political situation.
- *Serious tensions over maritime space resulting from the incorporation of Crimea by Russia.* In the absence of formal, legal delimitation of the territorial waters and air space, continental shelf and exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea, Russia has proceeded with unilateral imposition of its claims by force and confiscation of assets. Under international law and accepted practice, the least that may happen is a series of very costly litigations and arbitration cases.

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



Source - www.russianworldforums.com

Black Sea Security: An American's Perspective

The famed “Charge of the Light Brigade,” British General Lord Cardigan’s suicidal charge into the teeth of an entrenched Russian battery, was in reality a peripheral action of the broader Battle of Balaclava, one of the early, indecisive engagements of the Crimean war. Nevertheless, Tennyson’s poem memorialized the event, in particular his sobering and famous line: “Theirs not to reason why: Theirs but to do and die.” This immortalized the sacrifice and forgot the commander who ordered it. Winston Churchill took time out of the Yalta conference during 1945 to travel to the site of the charge. Churchill understood the Black Sea’s strategic importance as a basin that drained Central Asia, Asia Minor, and Europe and fed into the Mediterranean, the inland sea that had provided commercial and military access for Europe to the Middle East and Asia since the Crusades.

Tennyson’s blood soaked fields retain strategic relevance to this day. Russian resurgence has once again made control of the Black Sea strategically critical for European security and stability. Without a direct and effective counter from Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and the U.S., Russia will gain dominance over the Black Sea-Eastern Mediterranean corridor, and directly threaten Europe’s “soft underbelly.” Both short term reengagement from the NATO alliance as a whole, and a long-term security strategy that incorporates legitimate political architecture into its framework are critical for a successful response to Russia’s expansion.

Cardigan’s charge was in reality an inconsequential portion of an indecisive battle that occurred during one of many struggles for control of the Black Sea. The Ottoman Empire’s

hold on Crimea, the Caucasus, and the Balkans ensured its grip on trade throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and Southern Europe. As Russia slowly wrested control of the Black Sea from the Ottomans, the last of the “gunpowder empires” began to fade. The Crimean War represented one of Imperial Russia’s final attempts to eject Turkey from the southern Black Sea, Caucasus, and Balkans, a goal it pursued until both empires collapsed after World War I. During World War I, the only strategically creative move, the Gallipoli campaign, was designed to reopen the Black Sea resupply route to Russia. Had the British won, the Russian Empire might have survived the war.

Conflict over the Black Sea continued in World War II, both before and after Hitler’s invasion of Russia. German forces swept through the Balkans and other surrounding states, bullying the weak and fractured ethnic states, and crushing any who stood in their way. Churchill feared that Germany would strike at the Dardanelles, or at least coerce the Turks into actively complicit neutrality. This would have threatened Britain’s position in the Middle East, along with Russia’s southern flank. During the invasion of Russia, the Black Sea was a vital strategic objective. German and Soviet forces fought for nearly a year over the same fields that Tennyson memorialized. Strategic relevance continued into the Cold War, during which the U.S. support for Turkey and Greece denied Russia regional domination. “Exercise Longstep,” one of NATO’s largest joint exercises during the Cold War, simulated an attack on the Dardanelles, the gateway to the Black Sea.

The basic impetus for competition over regional control of the Black Sea has remained the same throughout centuries of conflict. Like any maritime chokepoint, the Black Sea gives a regional hegemon control over trade passing through it. Two things make the Black Sea unique – one timeless, one modern. First, the Black Sea’s geographic proximity to Southern Europe offers a hegemon major influence in both regions. Control of the Black Sea requires land and sea power, unlike many of the other sea-lanes, which can be dominated by sea power alone. By proximity and effort, the Black Sea’s hegemon controls a substantial portions of Southern Europe. These permit significant regional clout that extends as far as Austria and Italy. Second, Russia’s dual campaigns in Syria and Ukraine make control of the Black Sea central to its wider strategy. The region is both a strategic goal and a resource conduit. Without it, Russia could not simultaneously wage two medium intensity conflicts at once. Thus, control of the Black Sea facilitates Russia’s bid for dominance in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

Russia’s focus on increasing its soft and hard power in the Black Sea demonstrates the centrality of the region to its overall strategy. Putin’s two hybrid conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, along with Russia’s often-forgotten support of Transnistria, form a wide pincer movement that surrounds the Black Sea. It is no coincidence that Russia annexed Crimea during the opening phases of its intervention in the Ukrainian revolution. Ukraine had leased Russia long-term basing rights on the peninsula, but full control over Crimea gives Russia significantly greater freedom to develop offensive and defensive capabilities, both on shore and at sea. Prior to the annexation, Russia’s Black Sea Fleet consisted of several

Soviet-era cruisers and destroyers. Intensive modernization combined with fleet expansion have drastically improve the quality of Russia’s Black Sea naval assets. The old Soviet ships have largely been modernized, and reinforced with two *Admiral Grigorovich*-class guided missile frigates.

Additionally, the Russian Navy has expanded its submarine flotilla in Sevastopol, with the addition of four to six “Improved” *Kilo*-class submarines. The “Improved” *Kilos* and the *Admiral Grigorovich* class naval combatants can all carry the long-range *kalibr* land-attack missile, which Russia used during its strikes against what Moscow dubiously claimed were Islamist groups in Syria last October and November. These surface ships and submarines combine with several amphibious warfare ships, and several coastal defense ships and minesweepers to create a potent and flexible naval force. Hardened ground installations support the revamped Black Sea fleet, including multiple anti-ship and anti-air missile units, and “Object 100,” an improved Soviet shore installation. A squadron of Su-30SM’s provides air cover, while an Su-24 detachment offers Russian commanders a long-range anti-ship and anti-ground platform.

Russia couples its naval superiority in the Black Sea with growing political and military influence in the surrounding states. Pro-Russian “separatists” remain active in Eastern Ukraine, giving Putin’s ground forces a staging point for potential future operations. Russia continues to make overtures to the Eurosceptic political elements of the Balkans, and consistently conducts joint military exercises with its longtime friend, Serbia. Increasing political power combined with a strong military position makes Russia the virtual regional hegemon at this point.

Treaty rights compound Russia's stranglehold on the Black Sea. Currently, all foreign warships may pass through the Dardanelles during peacetime. Thus, as long as Russia's conflicts remain low-intensity, Turkey remains unable to cut the link between the Dardanelles and the Eastern Mediterranean without risking a major confrontation.

Few assets are available within the Black Sea to counter Russia's bid for dominance. Turkey, the strongest regional military power aside from Russia, fields a diverse number of guided missile frigates, supplemented by aging German-built attack submarines and missile corvettes. Without external concerns, the Turkish Navy, supported by the Turkish Air Force's fleet of F-16's and F-4's, could likely hold its own against regional Russian forces. However, Turkish security concerns extend beyond the Black Sea. Thus, Russia can retain local parity with Turkey. Romania and Bulgaria have similar navies and air forces. Both possess a handful of frigates and aging submarines, with air cover provided by modernized Cold War-era fighters. Russia throttled the Ukrainian Navy during the annexation of Crimea, capturing the majority of its ships and enticing a number of high-ranking officers to defect. At present, the Ukrainian Navy is no longer an effective fighting force.

The American approach to the current situation has been one of tepid, but progressively increasing, engagement. On land, Task Force East represents the American commitment to Black Sea security. The "Task Force" is currently too small to have a major effect on a future conflict, as most deployments are restricted to battalion size. Until the past few weeks, American naval forces had not consistently operated out of the Eastern Mediterranean – with the aircraft carrier USS *Truman*'s shift to the Mediterranean remaining focused on anti-ISIS strikes. Nevertheless, the Sixth Fleet remains a glorified transitional command, with only four guided missile destroyers and a command ship on permanent station. The U.S. continues to conduct annual naval exercises with Black

Sea partner navies, and the destroyer USS *Porter* has been dispatched to the region to continue this tradition. The *Porter*'s stay is limited to 21 days by 1930's treaty obligations.

Russian military power and increasing political strength allow it to outclass its regional rivals in the Black Sea area. Combined with the persistent European refugee crisis, rising Euroscepticism, and a pervasive illicit opiate trade, it is clear that the region is vulnerable of violence, accidental or intended. The American response has been to rely on a "little entente" strategy to contain Russian expansion regionally, by slowly increasing partnership with smaller nations like Romania and Bulgaria. Much like France's "little entente" during the interwar period, the U.S. hopes to maximize limited resources by relying on those smaller nations to contain Russian expansion with U.S. assistance behind the scenes. In the 1930s, Hitler ripped the "little entente" apart, annexing and subjugating every member state throughout the course of the war. Without a changing U.S. and NATO strategy, the risk exists that a similar state is in store for Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and later the Balkans – a future of quasi-independent Russian dependency. Currently, the Black Sea is, in the words of Turkish President Recep Erdogan, "almost a Russian lake."

Considering the risks, how should the U.S. respond to the current situation? In the short-term, the U.S. would improve its own regional security interest in retaining regional influence by increasing its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. This involves rotating major formations, like Carrier Strike Groups and Expeditionary Strike Groups, in and out of the Sixth Fleet area of operations, in order to counterbalance Russia's expanding military power. Unfortunately, U.S. naval assets are already stretched thin, and previously mentioned legal restrictions deny the U.S. the ability to operate in the Black Sea for more than three weeks. However, an increase in land-based forces is an option. Aside from traditional ground forces, the Navy could deploy anti-

submarine warfare platforms like the P-8, or more likely, the P-3—given Pacific commitments—to counter Russian submarines. Using surveillance drones to monitor Russian activities is another low-cost method to increase American regional engagement.

Considering the present squeeze on American assets, one step the United States can take without adding a major financial burden is encouraging joint exercises between Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, as well as exercises amongst other Balkan states. Turkey has already made overtures to this end, conducting small-scale drills with the remainder of the Ukrainian navy this past March. Romania and Bulgaria remain active participants in large-scale NATO exercises, participating in the “Anakonda-16” drills in Poland in June. Additional regional exercises will serve to build cohesion between the two armed forces, and demonstrate resolve against Russian encroachments. A full-scale naval exercise involving Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Ukrainian units should be an immediate goal for both the United States and all four regional powers. In the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus contributes to the “Noble Dina” exercises despite not having a Navy. Thus, there are few practical barriers preventing Romania and Bulgaria from participating in regional naval exercises, as both nations actually have surface combatants.

In the long-term, a radical reassessment of the regional security architecture is necessary. Such a reassessment will likely involve long-term American presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, if not also in the Black Sea. To decrease deployment costs and further cooperation with allies, creating a permanent major American naval installation along the Israeli or Greek coastlines would be an effective first step. Increased ground force deployments to Eastern Europe should also be involved. Such a security architecture must expand

beyond the Black Sea and Southern Europe, and include states in the Eastern Mediterranean and Caucasus. Israel, Cyprus, and Azerbaijan are all potential partners. Despite the various political obstacles that impede cooperation between regional powers, the greater threat of Russian domination is a spur action throughout the Black Sea, Caucasus, Balkans, and Eastern Mediterranean

The U.S. would also benefit by encouraging the Black Sea states to expand their naval forces. Romania in particular will benefit from acquiring more frigates and destroyers to offset Russia’s current advantage. The Romanian Navy could also use long-range missiles to threaten Russia’s warships.

When the current American administration came to office nearly eight years ago it brought the untested and unwarranted notion that grand bargains with adversary states and a diminishing U.S. regional presence as well as shrinking U.S. military would encourage regional equilibriums. The administration saw U.S. soft and hard power’s presence around the world not as a preserver of stability and peace, but rather as a provocation that resulted in the opposites of stability and peace.

Facts have not been kind to this ideology. The so-called “reset” with Russia has produced no positive results. An exceptionally poor relationship between the U.S. and Israel has sent Jerusalem’s leaders looking elsewhere for more reliable partnerships and friends. The grand bargain with Iran has moderated neither its rulers’ nuclear ambitions and ballistic missile programs nor its jihadist ideologies. Instead, it has vastly increased the financial resources with which the Iranian clerics can pursue their ambitions at regional—and broader—hegemony. The so-called “pivot to Asia” is as toothless as an elderly grandmother who never visited the dentist.

Russia is building faster, quieter submarines, constructing anti-access/area denial capabilities in the Baltic and Black Seas, and constructing military bases in the Arctic. The change of regimes from communist to predatory has not moderated Russian external policy. Both the communists and their successors faced serious economic challenges. Each regime managed to rise above economic problems. Putin's success in challenging NATO is arguably more aggressive and more successful than the communist regime in whose KGB he was a senior officer. Putin's Russia is as amoral as Stalin's.

The West will either resist these challenges or succumb to them. Today, as during the Cold War, NATO's solidarity, its members' willingness to meet their defense obligations, U.S. leadership, and regional cooperation are key to this region's future peace and prosperity, and to all of Europe's.

Some conclusions and recommendations

1. The evolving strategic-military and political situation in the wider Black Sea is producing effects well beyond the confines of the region, affecting the basic security interests of the West, in particular those of the United States and its allies.
2. A re-evaluation of security threats along NATO's Southern and Eastern flanks appears to be necessary, with a clear differentiation between military and non-military challenges.
3. Equal treatment should be given to the perceived vulnerabilities on the North (Baltic) and South (Black Sea) tiers of the NATO Eastern Flank, with an emphasis on proportionate increase of the allied dissuasion and deterrence capabilities in relation to the actual disposition of forces in the two theaters.
4. A permanent NATO naval and air force presence in the Black Sea is fully justified with an aim to correct the emerging imbalance, possibly on a rotational basis in order to comply with the prescriptions of the Montreux Convention of 1936.
5. The true nature and purpose of the protracted conflicts in the Black Sea basin need to be realistically assessed with a view to developing the appropriate political and diplomatic instruments for defusing their explosive potential and facilitating eventual resolution.
6. The long-term consequences of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea need to be considered, including legal and economic implications.

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