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**THE NORTH ATLANTIC ALLIANCE AND THE SECURITY
CHALLENGES IN
THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION. PRESENT AND FUTURE**

Ioan Codruţ LUCINESCU, PhD

"Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract:

As a strategic intersection connecting the Middle East, Eurasia and Europe, the Black Sea Region appears to be one of the world's critical crossroads.

The Ukrainian crisis has prompted deep concerns among Atlantic community, shedding a new light on the strategic relevance of the Black Sea region to Europe's security. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 has furthermore demonstrated the poor degree of readiness of the euro-Atlantic community to deal with asymmetric challenges and covert actions.

Washington, whose interests have been defined by State Secretary Hillary Clinton, as turned toward the Pacific, aimed to operate a historical shift from the focus on the defense of the Old Continent to the competition with China over the Asia-Pacific stage. The Ukrainian crisis and the subsequent worsening of Russia-West relations is nevertheless likely to re attract Washington in the region.

The study aims to address the core issues of security in the Wider Black Sea Region, by focusing on the regional changes determined by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Also, the use of hard power as a defining instrument of the Russian foreign policy imposes the need for NATO, and implicitly Romania, to adapt its security policies in accordance with the new security challenges.

Key words: The Wider Black Sea Region, NATO, Russia, security challenges.

1. Introduction

Recent historical experience has shown that sustainable development of societies and the consolidation of democracy have direct, positive effects in terms of reducing centrifugal tendencies and separatist movements. In this context, the Euro-Atlantic institutions thought until recently that due to the interconnection between security issues in today's world, stability and lasting security in the Wider Black Sea can only be achieved through a multi – faceted approach, by building security institutions and, especially, by involving non - military instruments.

In just a few months, however, this perception of the future of the region dramatically collapsed, once the offensive reaction of the Russian Federation towards the establishment in Ukraine of civic protests entitled *euromaidan* that resulted in the overthrow of the regime of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. By the annexation of the Crimean peninsula

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(part of the Ukrainian state) in March of the same year, Russian Federation breaks, de facto, the "rules of the game". Thus, it returns to practice military strategies reminiscent of past centuries and the rule of law in force before the force of law.

If, by 2008, Moscow seemed to avoid public ownership of the role of aggressor in relations with former Soviet countries, the situation changes with military action against Georgia in August of the same year. Since then, the Russian Federation intentions are clear and, very importantly, they show that it does not hesitate to trigger a war in order to achieve its objectives.

With the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, treating Russia as a reliable partner with whom they can establish rules followed by all parties involved it is now considered as a major strategic error. Notable in this regard are the words of US General Philip Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe in the moment of opening of the Ukrainian crisis, saying the alliance was wrong when, in the last 12- 14 years, thought the Russian Federation is a partner of NATO[1].

2. Romania and regional security regarding the Wider Black Sea Region

Although Romania, through its membership in the Euro-Atlantic community is not threatened in terms of military security, on the horizon are looming a variety of other risks and asymmetric threats, in a state more or less latent in large areas of the Black Sea in recent decades.

The National Defence Strategy - *A strong Romania in Europe and the world* - (current security strategy of Romania) [2], as well as other documents defining the terms of the conceptual framework of national security, analyzes the risks and threats to national security perceived from the perspective of a member of the North - Atlantic Alliance and the European Union.

So, the main risks and threats - political , economic, social and military likely to endanger the security of Romania and also to NATO and the EU are regional conflicts, transnational organized crime, international terrorism structured in cross-border networks, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and misuse.

Ukraine crisis, that can't be solved on the medium term, generate regional instability, thus limiting „Romania's capacity to promote its strategic interests, especially those concerning support for Moldova's European path, settling frozen conflicts, assuring energy security , protecting the rights of Romanian communities and economic activities undertaken in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Romania on the Black Sea"[3].

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“Frozen” conflicts in the Wider Black Sea Region



Fig 1. Source: <http://eurasiangeopolitics.com/2014/10/30/ukraine-lessons-learned-from-other-frozen-conflicts-in-the-soviet-successor-states/>

This issue is amplified by the fact that, at present, it is not clear what Russia's real purpose in the Ukrainian space is. The ambiguity of Kremlin policy is highlighted by Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, the former commander of NATO forces in Europe, who said: „We have no reason to believe that Putin's ambitions are limited to eastern Ukraine”[4].

The situation is complicated by the accelerated militarization of eastern proximity of our country, as both Ukraine (supported by the United States) and Donetsk and Lugansk separatist authorities, backed by the Russian Federation accumulate arms and ammunition with great destructive power. After signing the agreements Minsk II (11 to 12 February 2015), Moscow seeks to create in the Ukrainian territories - which they hold control over - a proper “army” through training and professionalization of a large number of people, mercenaries from the ex - Soviet space, Russians, volunteers etc. It is estimated that the separatist regions of eastern Ukraine and military personnel is around 40,000 (in the fall of 2015 , Kiev appreciate to 9,000

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the number of soldiers in the Russian army), being approximately equal to the Romanian Land Forces[5].

Moreover, Vadym Prystaiko, Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine said in late April this year that „Donbass separatist forces are now better equipped than many NATO armies”, featuring nearly 500 modern tanks and 1,000 infantry fighting vehicle, plus hundreds of artillery and air defense systems etc. .

This reality can be both a valuable asset and a potential security challenge for President Putin. Although keeping under control a large part of the Ukrainian territory, paralysing the Kiev politics of getting closer to NATO and the EU, Russia - dealing with a severe economic crisis - will not be able to maintain a large-scale financial flow necessary for the survival of the separatist “republics“. Especially considering that, with the increased involvement in the escalating conflict in Syria, Russia is unlikely to resume hostilities on a large scale. Political analysts believe that the degree of involvement in the separatist regions in the next period will be a strong indicator regarding Kremlin intentions and the ultimate goal in relations with Ukraine.

The geopolitical implications of the new long-term existing situation in the Black Sea area are emphasized by the well-known political analyst and specialist in International Relations, George Friedman. He say, in respect to the Ukrainian crisis:"Whatever they thought at the beginning, America now realizes that Russia remains a permanent threat to Ukraine and that the crisis will have repercussions on the countries in the region, such as RomaniaRussia needs Ukraine. Romania can not be occupied ... But Russia can maneuver, can undermine, can handle. Russia wants to undermine Romania's partnership with the United States and can do so through political manipulation"[6].

A new geopolitical situation derives from the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation that generates the possibility that Romania may have practically a common border with the Russian Federation in the Black Sea. Compared to this reality, the central issue for authorities from Bucharest is to know where the exploitation of subsoil resources by Romania in the Black Sea may be in certain ways jeopardized de jure or de facto.

3. The North Atlantic Alliance and the security challenges in the Wider Black Sea Region

From a geostrategic point of view, the Wider Black Sea Region is extremely important for the Euro-Atlantic community because, along with the Mediterranean Sea, it can form a “safety zone” to protect the European pillar of the Alliance from the major conflict outbreaks in Maghreb, the Middle East and the Caucasus area. At the same time, the western shore of the Black Sea has provided, in the last years, excellent bases of projection of military forces in the Middle East war zone, where NATO was actively involved in the last decade.

NATO’s policy in this area came together in 1993, when the idea of expansion was first brought up, taking action in three ways, as it follows [7]:

-intensifying the cooperation in several domains of regional security in Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, and Georgia;

-counteracting the Russian offensive in the region by enhancing cooperation with Ukraine, in order to maintain a balance of forces in the Black Sea Basin;

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-intensifying the military collaboration in the Middle Eastern region, primarily through the acts of the Partnership for Peace (PfP)

The first references to the Black Sea in a precise statement of a NATO summit were made at the Summit in Istanbul in 2004. The meeting highlighted the importance of „the Black Sea region for Euro-Atlantic security” and expressed NATO’s willingness to identify ways to support the regional efforts to strengthen security and stability, by using existing mechanisms of cooperation of states in the region.

The declarations adopted at the following summits, Riga (2006), Bucharest (2008) [8] and Strasbourg-/Kehl (2009), Chicago (2012) [9] or Wales (2014) [10] have also reflected the importance given by the Alliance to the Wider Black Sea Region.

The Alliance’s Summit in Bucharest was enlightening in terms of ideological differences within the Euro-Atlantic partnership regarding the NATO expansion in the Eastern Black Sea basin, even if, officially speaking, it had a consistent message. To be taken in consideration is the very diplomatically expressed commitment in regards to the Membership Action Plan (MAP), as a first step in the long and complicated path to NATO membership of the two ex-Soviet partners: Ukraine and Georgia.

Germany and France’s special interests regarding the Russian Federation, where economic relations are above other major aspects of life such as human rights or Russia’s policy in the Eastern part of the continent stopped the Euro-Atlantic dreams of the two states where “orange revolutions” took place.

In the complex regional context, the guarantor of security in the Euro - Atlantic structures - NATO is has to maintain its credibility by adapting to the new security situation in which Russia is acting as an geopolitical opponent. In full military Ukrainian crisis, the commander of the allied forces in Europe, General Philip M. Breedlove - declared in this sense, that the Alliance will prepare the partner countries that have on their territory a large number of Russians to counter a potential "hybrid war", whose features have been revealed by Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

Not long ago, the main debate regarding the Alliance was focused on the traditional missions that were taking place outside the area covered by the Washington Treaty the so-called operations *out of area* (Balkans, Afghanistan, Libya etc.). Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 reminded the Eastern states that the old policy of Russia - spheres of influence, limited sovereignty, diffuse aggression and destabilization or territorial revisionism were left behind. In this context, NATO is expected to act after the summit in Wales in September 2014, regarding to the principles that consecrated it in April 1949 as a collective defense alliance: *"The existence of NATO is to be protect its member states and their territories. We must take steps to assure NATO presence throughout the Alliance territory"* said Toomas Ilves Hendrik, president of Estonia, in an editorial published in March 2014 [11].

It is a message meant to solve one of the structural problems of the Alliance, because the organization’s enlargement was achieved without the defense infrastructure being implemented on the territories of the new members.. As a result, in recent years there was an the impression of "divisible" security, detached from the old hard core of NATO and existence of some "second class" members perpetuating the vulnerability to the Eastern flank.

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The "new allies" (Baltic States, Poland, Romania or Bulgaria) are trying to correct this aspect by initiatives and lobbying, primarily in Washington; in the last year, the Baltic States and Poland expressed their wish that at the Alliance's summit in Warsaw (8 to 9 July 2016), clear decisions should be adopted regarding installing permanent NATO bases in Eastern flank of the organization.

Allies also decided in Poland's capital to boost security on NATO's eastern flank by deploying four battalions (each with up to 1,000 soldiers) in the three Baltic States, as well as in Poland and the creation of a multinational brigade in Romania. Through the deployment of such multinational forces (with the Europeans occupy the largest share), the Alliance aims to reduce fears of Central and Eastern Europeans on potentially destabilizing actions initiated by the Russian Federation.

Moreover, the United States take seriously into account the potential Russian threat, as witnessed by the budgetary allocations for 2017, \$ 3.4 billion , an amount four times higher than currently allocated (789 million dollars) [12]. The funds will be used to finance heavy weapons, armored vehicles and other military equipment, and for building infrastructure in the Eastern flank of the Alliance.

According to the US officials „it is a long-term response to the changing security environment in Europe. It also reflects the new realities, as Russia has become an actor with unpredictable actions" [13]. This decisive US involvement in Eastern Europe is in contradiction with the structural weaknesses of the Western European powers, whose rapid reaction military capability is, in many cases, limited.

Reports and inquiries to German[14], French or Italian Parliaments made by various commissions of military analysis shows serious shortcomings in terms of possibilities to counter a possible Russian surprise attack. Serious shortcomings in electronic surveillance, weapons of high precision or strategic airlift make the participation hardly feasible in the short term and in a manner considerably Germany [15], France or Italy in highly specialized units of the NATO rapid reaction component.

Russia's hybrid warfare is challenging the U.S. and allies in Ukraine and on NATO's four flanks. This type of combat includes a combination of cyber activities of unclear origin, irregular forces, conventional weapons and traditional forces applied in coordinated fashion. Russia purposely holds these activities below the threshold that the U.S. would normally consider conflict to limit response options and to challenge the norms usually guiding regional security [16].

Russia's hybrid warfare and anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities have caused great concern among neighboring nations. Moscow's aggressiveness is viewed as seeking to weaken the NATO alliance and European partnerships. As a result, many European countries view Russia as a threat, and have decided to boost their defenses to protect themselves.

The alliance should consider developing A2/AD capabilities of its own even though they are considered offensive in nature. General Philip Breedlove, former supreme allied commander for Europe, noted that NATO needs more long range, survivable precision strike capabilities on the ground such as the Army Tactical Missile System, Multiple Launch Rocket System or High Mobility Artillery Rocket System. Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance have also become a higher priority when taking into account Russian A2/AD capabilities. NATO isn't

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especially proficient sharing intelligence during peacetime, and this must be improved. Understanding the security landscape is crucial to developing indications and warnings, bringing concerns to decision-makers, and taking early action [17].

NATO has begun to work at a comprehensive assessment of what is needed to deter Russia for the next decade.

A more robust deterrence in the form of a larger and more capable multilateral presence in the near term will allow for more detailed military and political analysis of Russia's capabilities and intentions. A shared NATO understanding will also increase the willingness of allies to fill the force rotations. The ultimate shape of that force – its size, the length of rotations, and the type of forces – will remain open, but its necessity is beyond question, given Russia's more threatening posture and enhanced capabilities. The United States and its allies need to work now to begin redressing the conventional imbalance before this imbalance fosters instability and heightens risks for NATO and Europe as a whole [18].

4. Conclusion

One of the key elements of the Russian strategy in the former Soviet area during the past two and half decades is the use of breakaway regions (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and, more recently, the Crimea and eastern Ukraine) as the "Trojan horse" in within the states to which they belong de jure .

By generating territorial conflicts, Russia ensures that these states will not be never admitted into NATO or any other military alliance, since no organization would not accept that a member state is in a continuous territorial dispute with Russia, in its quality of nuclear power and member of the UN Security Council .

Asserting its rule in the former Soviet space is, in fact, an essential step in strengthening Russia's place in the international system of the XXI century. Both the Russian elite and society consider that the *"normal position of Russia is a global player and not essentially regional power, second-hand, as the leading European nations"* [19] whose security is ensured by the United States. According to Kremlin, Russia's nuclear arsenal provides sufficient room for maneuver on the international stage and is an essential tool in ensuring its strategic independence, which was strongly reaffirmed by President Vladimir Putin in all his interventions in the recent years.

Therefore, Moscow pleads vehemently against "the US missile shield", which has an operational base in Romania, Deveselu, officially declared "fully operational" on 12 May 2016 [20].

In this context of regional and international security, political decision-making is a complex process; the interdependence and speed with which the "operational" situation develops determines the need for a comprehensive approach to risks and security threats, and the need to increase capacity for cooperation and interaction between the component institutions of the national security both internally and externally with Euro-Atlantic allies.

While Russian military action beyond the non-NATO post-Soviet periphery is not imminent, it cannot be ruled out. The situation today differs fundamentally from that of the Cold War – Russia now has the advantage of geographic proximity to the potential frontline, and can move fast and without warning, unlike Europe. To counter this, Europe must be united in its

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response, ensure credible deterrence, and prepare to respond to hybrid warfare. It will also need the support of the US [21].

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