



The 14th International Scientific Conference
**“DEFENSE RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
IN THE 21st CENTURY”**
Braşov, November 7th-8th 2019



**A SEA OF TROUBLE. BLACK SEA SECURITY POLICIES
BETWEEN NATO AND THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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Abstract:

Although a nice leisure destination for summer hot days, the Black Sea is an incredible security landmark for both NATO and the EU. Situated on the eastern border of both, the waters of the Black Sea stem much trouble, when it comes to who is controlling them and who is benefiting from their resources. Being situated on the border of both NATO and the EU, this area has been the object of many strategies aiming to maximize its economic potential and enhance its role of stabilizer in the region. The Black Sea became part of the Three Seas Initiative and has its own Synergy, issued by the EU, looking forward to strengthen its position as an actor of its own within the international community. Despite a clear delineation of maritime borders, the Black Sea remains an object of dispute among the regional powers, looking forward to expand their control and influence over its waters.

The aim of the present article is double-folded. On the one hand, it aims to investigate the security-related matters surrounding the Black Sea region, while on the other, it will look at the main EU and NATO security policies concerning the Black Sea. The second part of the article shall focus on a compare and contrast perspective, intended to highlight the differences in perspective of the two organizations and their separate views in approaching the Black Sea area.

Key words: security, Black Sea, holistic approach, tailored forward presence, enhanced forward presence, NATO, EU

1. Introduction

Although a nice holiday destination, with beautiful landscapes, protected flora and wildlife, the Black Sea is more than just a collection of beaches, sand and seashells. Given the fact that it is the EU and NATO border in the east, its role is growing by the day. And recent events – starting from 2014 onwards have shown the importance of the area, beyond the traditional geopolitical approach – resources, people, interests, etc.

The Black Sea is a sea of trouble. And not only because it is the house of a tiny species of sharks that is 1 meter long, or because Ovid, once exiled here, named it black because of the dark waters incomparable to the clear ones of his Mediterranean. It is hard to establish the moment when the Black Sea began to be considered trouble. It is trouble by simply considering its geopolitical significance. “He who controls the shores, shall control the world; he who controls maritime commerce, shall control the outcome of war”, said, in a few more words, Admiral Alfred Mahan. Immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea area experienced a rise in importance, as frozen conflicts emerged and states - both littoral and non-littoral ones started making demands on

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it. This idyllic sea that is today became the centre of dispute for Great Powers. Their object of dispute: control over the Black Sea, not in terms of international law maritime delimitation, but rather in terms of spheres of influence.

The Black Sea needs to be perceived from multiple perspectives. It is both a geographical formation, as well as an area. It can be approached from the perspective of a water reservoir, with flora, fauna and underground resources that could be exploited, but it could also be perceived as an area whose significance depends on the importance allotted to it by its surrounding countries. And there are other countries besides Romania, which have access to the Black Sea – the littoral countries: Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Russia. Not to mention the non-littoral countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and the Republic of Moldova, which have interests in the area. The Black Sea is thus an open canvas for the countries interested in using its potential, especially for NATO countries which, after 2014, were forced to commit to the area, seeking to contain the expansion of Russian influence in the region.

2. NATO policy on the Black Sea

During the NATO Summit in Warsaw, in 2016, decision-makers agreed that the south – eastern flank of the Alliance needs to be consolidated. As a result, NATO officials came up with the “Tailored Forward presence” (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016) in the region, which energized politicians, because it would lead to tense relations with the eastern neighbour - Russia. However, NATO had been experiencing tensions with Russia since 2014, when the annexation of Crimea came as a shock to NATO member countries. After Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, many believed that Russia would refrain from overstepping the territorial integrity of the countries of the area, maintaining thus at least the appearance of European security balance. However, when the annexation of Crimea became a reality, NATO reacted in the best way it could – decided to enhance another sea – the Baltic as a stronghold against Russian expansion. By doing this, it once again sent Russia a frightful message, stating that it views the country’s expansion with concern.

The Warsaw communiqué (2016) highlighted the importance of the Black Sea as well as the destabilizing policies of the Russian Federation in the area. However, no clear doctrinaire action was issued afterwards, except for military build-up on both sides. Since the annexation of Crimea, an increase in military presence and exercises was registered in the Black Sea, both on the part of the United States of America, as well as on that of the Russian Federation. Ambitions on both sides to assert control of the sea lead to a security conundrum. This security conundrum was launched back in October 2011, US Secretary of Défense Leon Panetta announced the stationing in the Black Sea of four US navy destroyers for the Navy Aegis Ballistic Missile Défense (BMD) Program and other purposes (Congressional Research Service, 2018). This did not remain unnoticed by the Russians, especially since the US destroyers are a constant rotational presence in the Black Sea (Rempfer, 2018).

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A year after the annexation of 2014, in 2015, General Philip Breedlove, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe issued a warning regarding the enhancement of Russian military power in the region, which can lead to an isolation of the Black Sea – “Russia has developed a very strong A2/AD capability in the Black Sea and (...)essentially their (anti-ship) cruise missiles range over about 40 to 50 percent of the Black Sea” (Gibbons-Neff, 2015). Such a strong presence can only close the Black Sea basin to the other NATO member countries. The Kerch Strait dispute stands as a case in point of the containment and closure policy applied by the Russians in the Black Sea area.

NATO has been holding its annual multinational exercise Sea Breeze in the Black Sea since 1997, aiming to strengthen interoperability and cooperation in the Black Sea region. In 2018, Russia responded with a “snap” drill (Day, 2018) aiming to simulate and test at the same time its reaction speed towards the destruction of enemy ships. Surely such a response it not strange to the enhanced presence of NATO ships in the Black Sea.

The Black Sea is important to the North-Atlantic Alliance from several perspectives. Firstly, it is a “key strategic intersection linking NATO’s Eastern and Southern flanks and the Balkan’s role as a gateway to Europe from the Southern Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East” (Malvin, 2018). Secondly, given the sea’s presence in what was formally the Soviet Union, having the area peaceful is a requirement to help maintain the European balance and status quo after the fall of communism (NATO, 2016). In that regard, any type of interference on the Russian part is highly disapproved of and seen as a means of attempting to construct a fundament of influence into the Middle East and Northern Africa – the two most unstable regions of the world and where the presence of American forces on the one hand, and Russian ones, on the other, would probably lead to an undercover continuation of the Cold War through proxies.

Furthermore, the modernization of the Russian fleet, despite the provisions of the Montreux Convention can also be a means of projecting power towards Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, which are currently on the integration row in the European Union (at least on a declaratory level). Should one remember the influence exerted by the Soviet Union in the area during the Cold War, such power projects are meant to derail the Balkans from their European path and send them into a Russian sphere of influence, not to mention the fact that such a transition of the Balkans into the Russian area of influence, would provide the latter access to the Mediterranean and the straits.

There is an acute need of strengthened NATO air and maritime presence in the Black Sea, as Romania highlighted also repeatedly. However, international law in the field is raising bars in front of such demands. The 1936 Montreux Convention (1936 Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits, 1936) stipulates that only littoral states can have a standing naval presence in the Black Sea. Ships belonging to non-littoral states can stay for only 21 days in the Black Sea, while aircraft carriers and submarines are banned. This is an obstacle in the quest for more military security and stability at the Black Sea, especially on the part of littoral states.

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While countries such as Romania, once confronted with the back lash of Crimea, were rooting for NATO to move forward from reassurance into deterrence, NATO officials though to come up with a more concerted approach – that of the “trip wire “deterrence (The Economist, 2016) that can resort to local capabilities. A similar solution has been applied in the Baltics, where battalion-sized battle-groups, led by the US, UK, Canada and Germany can work together with national forces to combat threats. In the case of the Black Sea, such defensive actions fall within the responsibility of the multinational framework brigade training NATO forces – MN BDE-SE stationed in Romania (NATO, 2018). However, while the Enhanced forward presence in the Baltics is concrete and able to react immediately, in the case of the Black Sea, the Tailored Enhanced Presence is rather feeble, and dependable on the existing stationed capabilities in Romania. Initially, Romania called for the creation of a NATO Black Sea Fleet, but faced Bulgarian refusal and Turkish skepticism in that regard.

From a Romanian point of view, the Black Sea is both an asset, as well as an area of turmoil. From the warning issued by President Traian Băsescu back in 2005 when he claimed that the Black Sea was being treated as a Russian lake (Hotnews, 2015), to the presence of the Black Sea frozen conflicts as threats on the National Defense Strategy 2015-2019 (Romanian Presidency, 2015), Romanian officials have expressed their concern towards Black Sea evolutions in one way or another. As a result, Romania would like to see NATO move forward from reassurance to deterrence in the case of the Black Sea.

The Black Sea is a complex security environment, unpredictable just like the sea facing a storm. Anytime turbulence can strike and ruin the balance of the ecosystem, or in this case, the balance of the political system in the region. Furthermore, the key aspect in managing the area is adaptability to the existing conditions, just as NATO is currently consolidating itself through its ability to adapt and change (Ichimescu, 2019) to the requirements of the international environment, just as was discussed in February in Munich, as a necessary step in its evolution in the 21st century.

Consequently, the best option for the good management of the area is to apply a comprehensive approach by introducing the matter of the Black Sea area in the NATO crisis management process. After all, it appears to be a crisis ready to outbreak. The comprehensive approach is structured on three levels: strategic, operative and tactical (Ichimescu, 2015), all three highly applicable in the Black Sea basin. However, the manner in which the crisis management process shall be enacted as far as the Black Sea is concerned, depends very much on the extent of forces employed in the area.

3.EU policy on the Black Sea

The EU policy can, unfortunately be characterized by lack of cohesion and united vision. More likely, there are individual interests which take precedence in front of collective ones.

The European Security Strategy of 2003 (European Security Strategy, 2003), is the first EU document to mention the area indirectly, by referring to the Caucasus as a region

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requiring attention in the future, highlighting that the issue shall be handed over to the Black Sea Synergy to be issued on the matter. Unfortunately, years later, after so many negative developments, the new European Union Global Strategy of 2016 - does not provide an ampler approach to the Black Sea area, although its potential for conflict grew. Instead, it refers to the European security order, which is challenged by “Russia’s violation of international law and the destabilization of Ukraine, on top of protracted conflicts in the wider Black Sea region” (EUGS, 2016).

The Black Sea is central to several other documents, which contain more direct references and might be considered instruments of EU policy in the area: the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), the Black Sea Synergy (2007) and the Eastern Partnership Initiative (2009). It is impossible to speak of one without the other. The Black Sea is nothing but a pond, should one not integrate it in the larger geopolitical debate of the area. However, there is no recorded convergence between these three documents, although they were intended to function complementarily. This is because of the different areas of impact.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (European Neighborhood Policy, 2016) is a form of bilateral policy between the states involved (16 in number - Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, Tunisia and Ukraine), and was meant to create and maintain a fruitful framework of cooperation between ENP countries and EU ones.

The Black Sea Synergy (Black Sea Strategy, 2007), despite being the most focused of the three, focuses on regional cooperation in the area, leaving aside any other outside interests. Ever since it was enacted, no significant change was brought to its content, which is unfortunate, given the changes that the Black Sea went through in time, not just geographical ones, but also geopolitical ones. The most successful project of the Black Sea Synergy was the EU Cross-Border Cooperation Project for the Black Sea Basin, focusing on economic and social development, environmental protection and conservation and cultural and educational initiatives. This a very good example of why there should be a holistic approach to the Black Sea area.

Finally, the Eastern Partnership Initiative (Easter Partnership Initiative, 2016) is a multilateral cooperation initiative which focuses more deeply on shared interests between member states which comprise EU members, and 6 Eastern European partners such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Although the Black Sea is on the top of these interests, the strength of the Initiative is still not enough to create an impact in the region and create a whole EU policy on the Black Sea that could be autonomous and have a long-term impact.

Lately, the European Union has shown itself to be highly interested in promoting blue economy. There is an annual high-level stakeholder conference on blue economy, addressing public administrations, maritime practitioners and entrepreneurs. Also, the European Union is an observer in two regional organizations: the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Commission for the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution.

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While the European Union is fragmented in policy towards the Black Sea and NATO is undecided on how to act, one also needs to remind the challenges that arise in the area. Apart from the negative ones, such as migration and political instability, there are also the positive ones, such as the 3 Seas Initiative, which, although less political and more economically oriented, takes the debate on a whole new level – that of resources and the interdependence of regions in managing these resources. There is also the Silk Road initiative revived by China, who intend to connect the South-China Sea to the centre of Europe through the Black Sea, among others, acknowledging its strong potential to become once again, a significant transport route.

4. Conclusion

The importance of the Black Sea resides in many fields: security, commerce, transport routes, to name but a few. However, the dilemma around the efforts made by one another is to assert a Great Power status. For instance, Russia has vowed to increase its Black Sea fleet to 80 warships by 2020 (Soldatkin, 2014), to be able to engage in longer deployment around the world. Could that be interpreted as anything else but a seeking of former glory?

The issue needs to be perceived in a holistic manner, meant to lead to meaningful policies in the field. Competition in the Black Sea leads to confrontation. How to spin it around and have it lead to cooperation instead?

The Russian Federation needs to understand that any military build-up in the area, just as it was the case of the Aegis Ashore system, is not meant to enervate it or worse, challenge it. Far beyond Russia, both NATO and the European Union fear other problems: migration, ISIS, frozen conflicts, China, to name but a few. All these could access European shores easier through the Black Sea than they could through the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, failure to perceive the wrong aggressor, had Russia determined to fight the European – be they EU or NATO member, rather than put together a front against the Middle East threats tending to spill over in the near future.

Any approach to the area should be done after having completed a course on semiotics, as any policy on the Black Sea is a result of significance and perception. Perception depends very much on where you sit. Consequently, NATO is currently approaching the Black Sea as if its arch-nemesis, the Soviet Union were still in place. Of course, Russian Federation aggressive policies in Ukraine have not helped in the representation that NATO countries have built themselves of Russia after the Crimean annexation.

What NATO and EU countries fail to is build a holistic approach. While NATO is focused on military issues attempting to respond to cries for help from littoral countries who fear the expansion of Russian influence, the EU is focusing on the stimulation of blue economy. A holistic approach would have the two organizations unite in a comprehensive action, one that would send the proper message to the Russian Federation: if you stir trouble, trouble you shall get!

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