

NATO's Future in the Black Sea Region

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This paper argues that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) must further securitize the Black Sea region due to Russia's bold military and economic pursuits there, along with the indispensable importance of the Black Sea as a pathway for oil and gas pipelines. NATO, an intergovernmental military alliance, celebrated its 70th anniversary just this month. While it is clear that the organization has been in existence for quite some time and has seen the formation, failures, and successes of wars around the world, its purpose and strategies in various regions are continuously discussed among scholars and leaders in international affairs. Since the alliance was originally formed in 1949 to defend against Soviet communism, it is no surprise that Russia and the countries in its surroundings are at the top of NATO's list of priorities. The Baltic states, primarily Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, are undeniably important to protect against Russian aggression due to their proximity to Russia as well as the strategic location of the Baltic Sea. While NATO recognizes this, it also acknowledges that Russia has put greater pressure on the Balkan states than on the Baltics, such as its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its ongoing encroachment on Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia.

Thus, although the Baltic Sea and its littoral states remain significant to NATO's mission of providing security and defense for Europe, the Black Sea and its littoral states are in need of more urgent attention from NATO due to Russia's audacious actions in the region. The Black Sea is also more strategically lucrative to Russia due to its geopolitical location as a crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus and its economic influence due to the number of oil and gas pipelines that crisscross it.¹ Currently there are three NATO members in the Black Sea region – Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey – that are essential to NATO's strategy of deterrence.

¹ Coffey, Luke. "Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Renewed Focus on the Black Sea Needed." *The Heritage Foundation*, 26 June 2018, www.heritage.org/defense/report/brussels-nato-summit-2018-renewed-focus-the-black-sea-needed.

NATO's battlegroups and its commitment to land, sea, and air defense forces in the region are also ways in which NATO is securitizing the Black Sea against Russia's belligerent behavior.² This paper makes the following three recommendations. NATO should further securitize the Black Sea region through: increased diplomacy and dialogue with Russia and Black Sea states as well as an open-door policy, heightened economic and energy protection of the region, and an increase in its naval, air, and ground forces in the region. Afterwards, this paper identifies key obstacles in NATO securitization of the Black Sea, such as the reluctance of Black Sea littoral states to have increased NATO presence in the region, the unclear commitment of Bulgaria and Turkey to NATO's mission, the possibility of military escalation by Russia or NATO, and the restrictions of the Montreux Convention.

First, NATO should strengthen its diplomatic ties with Russia through continued dialogue and opening its doors to new members, especially to those in the Black Sea region. According to the Center for Security Studies, "continued dialogue with Russia, at the NATO-Russia Council and other venues, can contribute to avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, and to increase transparency and predictability."³ Often in times of conflict and heightened tensions between two or more parties in international affairs, open communication and negotiations are essential to avoiding military escalation and to understanding each other's motives and projections. In regards to the Black Sea region, NATO's increase in dialogue with Russia could help prevent further aggression by Russia in the littoral states. Talks between the two could lead to legally drawn-up agreements between them, such as an ease of economic and

² Nato. "Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and Southeast." *NATO*, 21 Jan. 2019, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm?selectedLocale=en.

³ Horell, Steven. "A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region." *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security*, Sep. 2016, www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf

energy sanctions on Russia by some European NATO-member states in exchange for more cooperation by Russia in contested areas such as Ukraine and Georgia.

Aside from increasing diplomacy through direct talks with Russia, it is also crucial for NATO, and particularly the United States, to “maintain good relations with partner Black Sea countries because they have demonstrated the political will to deploy troops in support of NATO operations.”⁴ NATO’s preservation and enhancement of its diplomatic bonds with the Black Sea states, such as Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia, can push these states closer towards supporting an expansion of NATO activities in the area. By displaying itself as more of a diplomatic ally than a protector, NATO will be able to reduce the reluctance felt by some Black Sea states and instead encourage support for more NATO forces in order to hinder Russian belligerence in the area. Thus, NATO should convene more frequently with the Black Sea states in order to understand their positions and viewpoints on situations as they arise, leading to greater collaboration between the states and the military alliance in terms of defense and security actions.

On top of diplomatic discussions with Russia and the Black Sea states, NATO should also leave its doors open for enlargement. While most of the Black Sea states are already NATO members, such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, others are left out – including Ukraine, Georgia, and even Moldova. NATO’s outreach to these states will not only keep them in the loop but will also encourage them to cooperate in NATO efforts in the region, providing a possible pathway for NATO membership; “even if membership is not immediately imminent, the aspirant

⁴ Coffey, Luke. “Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Renewed Focus on the Black Sea Needed.” *The Heritage Foundation*, 26 June 2018, www.heritage.org/defense/report/brussels-nato-summit-2018-renewed-focus-the-black-sea-needed.

states' actions will promote stability and security throughout the region.”⁵ By conveying to Ukraine and Georgia that NATO is not closed off to them but rather willing to incorporate them in its efforts to combat Russian aggression in their territories, NATO is also gaining diplomatic and strategic partnerships that could possibly result in more alliance members. This would benefit everyone involved, as Ukraine and Georgia would receive defense and protection against an incredibly hostile and unyielding Russia while NATO would be able to both more directly project its power and bring the alliance closer together. There has even been a suggestion that NATO establish a Center of Excellence in Georgia, a non-NATO member, that would improve NATO-Georgia relations, ascertain that the Black Sea is imperative to NATO, and allow for dialogue in order to address challenges in achieving Black Sea security.⁶ It is clear that an overall increase in diplomacy between NATO and Russia and between NATO and the Black Sea states will provide for further securitization of the Black Sea. Additionally, an open-door policy and outreach by NATO to non-NATO Black Sea states will assuredly increase NATO influence in the area, prevent further Russian aggression, and enrich the alliance's cohesiveness.

Next, NATO should further securitize the Black Sea by providing economic and energy protection in the region. Since the Black Sea represents an important crossroads for energy resources, such as natural gas, hydrocarbons, and oil, it creates a wide economic network involving Russia, the Caucasus, and Europe. Due to the threat posed by Russia weaponizing access to energy resources in Europe, regional economic and energy security by NATO will

⁵ Horell, Steven. “A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region.” *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security*, Sep. 2016, [www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-](http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf)

[A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf](http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf)

⁶ Coffey, Luke. “Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Renewed Focus on the Black Sea Needed.” *The Heritage Foundation*, 26 June 2018, www.heritage.org/defense/report/brussels-nato-summit-2018-renewed-focus-the-black-sea-needed.

deliver stability on the continent as well as protect international access to maritime trade.⁷ Russia has already demonstrated how it can turn its energy resources into weapons in order to impact foreign policy and force eastern European states to concede to Russia's wants in its strategy of hybrid warfare.⁸ To prevent Russia from using its energy as a tool to coerce other states into submission, NATO must support energy infrastructure in the Black Sea region. Since the Black Sea's routes for gas and oil distribution impact almost all bilateral relationships in the region, NATO should work closely with energy producers in the Black Sea littoral states, such as Azerbaijan and Algeria.⁹

By coming to these states' aid in protecting their own energy production, NATO is benefitting the states as well as itself as it will be able to reduce the amount of dependence that these states have on Russian resources. NATO can do this by organizing workshops that serve as opportunities to discuss how best to protect energy infrastructure in the Black Sea region, by providing advice and support to oil and gas companies in the Black Sea littoral states, and by forming new routes in the area which bypass Russia. For instance, gas reserves were recently discovered on sovereign Romanian territory along the Black Sea; NATO can help Romania use these gas reserves to undermine Russia's monopoly on providing gas to many European countries through the creation of new pipelines and the improvement of existing energy

⁷ Horell, Steven. "A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region." *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security*, Sep. 2016, www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf

⁸ Nato. "Energy Security: a Critical Concern for Allies and Partners." *NATO Review*, 26 July 2018, www.nato.int/docu/Review/2018/Also-in-2018/energy-security-a-critical-concern-for-allies-and-partners/EN/index.htm.

⁹ Nato. "Energy Security: a Critical Concern for Allies and Partners." *NATO Review*, 26 July 2018, www.nato.int/docu/Review/2018/Also-in-2018/energy-security-a-critical-concern-for-allies-and-partners/EN/index.htm.

infrastructures in Romania.¹⁰ Therefore, due to the Black Sea's strategic geopolitical location as a hub for energy transportation and Russia's weaponization of its energy to threaten nearby states, NATO should focus on protecting energy infrastructure in the region and innovatively coming up with ways to circumvent dependence on Russian oil and natural gases by the Black Sea littoral states. Only then will the economic and energy components of the Black Sea be more secure against Russian coercion and monopolization.

In addition to diplomacy and energy protection, NATO can better securitize and defend the Black Sea by increasing its presence in the region through a more prominent naval presence, an increase in air missions, and the commitment of more ground forces. Establishing a maritime force in the Black Sea to counter Russian aggression has long been a topic of discussion in NATO; however, the Montreux Convention signed between Turkey and the Soviet Union in 1936 complicates achieving this goal. In order to truly commit to a naval presence in the Black Sea, non-littoral NATO member states must be able to commit ships and aircraft to the region, but this is still out of reach due to the Convention. However, NATO has made some progress in the maritime arena through its Tailored Forward Presence, which aims to conduct visits to Romanian and Bulgarian ports, improve training, and add conventional naval exercises.¹¹ There have also been suggestions that the Black Sea littoral states should resume Black Sea Naval Force operations in order to "build cooperation between NATO and non-NATO Black Sea states and would also serve as a confidence-building measure with Russia."¹² Including non-NATO

¹⁰ "Romania: NATO's Frail Anchor in a Turbulent Black Sea." *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, 5 Apr. 2019, www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/romania-natos-frail-anchor-in-a-turbulent-black-sea.

¹¹ "NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?" *NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?* | *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 6 Mar. 2017, www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-russia-black-sea-new-confrontation.

¹² Horell, Steven. "A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region." *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security*, Sep. 2016, www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-

states in this initiative would improve NATO's relationships in a contested region, leading to greater cooperation and a positive influence on these states' attitudes towards the alliance.

In addition to increased naval forces, NATO's Tailored Forward Presence also includes a land component based in Craiova, Romania that would consist of a brigade-sized multinational NATO force.¹³ Since NATO has a ballistic missile defense site in Deveselu, Romania, called Aegis Ashore, a growth in ground forces in the state will not only protect against Russian aggression in response to the missile site, but will also symbolize a stronger NATO commitment to the protection of the Black Sea states. NATO can also claim bilateral or multilateral military exercises in the region, as NATO exercises and can standardize the objectives, command and control, and trainings of these exercise under a NATO banner.¹⁴ Finally, NATO should allow itself to have a dominant presence in the international air space through an increase in air missions around the Black Sea. This would involve rotations of NATO air defense, air policing, and an upsurge in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance in the Black Sea.¹⁵ It is important that NATO does not allow Russia to continue using brazen hostility and its growing military strength to harass its neighbors. Russia has evidently put pressure on the Black Sea and its surrounding states by demonstrating its increased capabilities through air, sea and land operations. While the fear of a military escalation clearly exists in the region, NATO must not

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¹³ "NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?" *NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?* | Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 Mar. 2017, www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-russia-black-sea-new-confrontation.

¹⁴ Horell, Steven. "A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region." *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security*, Sep. 2016, www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf

¹⁵ Horell, Steven. "A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region." *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security*, Sep. 2016, www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-A%20NATO%20Strategy%20for%20Security%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region.pdf

shy away from its mission and commitment to defend Europe against the threat posed by Russia, and the Black Sea is one of the most important locations to reinforce this commitment.

Unfortunately, there are many obstacles standing in NATO's way that prevent the alliance from outright increasing its military forces in the Black Sea. First, it is expensive for NATO to commit more ships, aircrafts, and ground troops in the Black Sea region. The fact that a majority of NATO member states are hesitant to spend more of their budgets on NATO defense spending complicates securitizing the Black Sea and also reflects that NATO members might not all be on the same page in terms of defending the Black Sea states. Even the Black Sea littoral states, aside from Romania, have shown themselves to be more reluctant to accept a greater NATO military presence in their region, favoring instead "a lighter NATO footprint." Bulgaria specifically, while still a participant in NATO exercises, also tries to remain on good terms with Russia through economic and political capacities.¹⁶ The reluctance by some of the Black Sea states, along with the dependence of some on Russia for economic and political policies, makes it much harder for NATO to form and pursue a coherent strategy in the region.

Turkey is another example of a state that has wavered between fully supporting NATO efforts to thwart Russian aggression in the Black Sea and maintaining a positive relationship with Russia. Recently, Turkey signed a gas agreement with Russia, coordinated with Russia on military strategy in Syria, and invited Russia to "bid on a multibillion air defense contract."¹⁷ Turkey's cooperative relationship with Russia is a real concern for NATO due to Turkey's

¹⁶ "NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?" *NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?* | Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 Mar. 2017, www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-russia-black-sea-new-confrontation.

¹⁷ "NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?" *NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?* | Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 Mar. 2017, www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-russia-black-sea-new-confrontation.

positioning on the Black Sea and the source of control that it has over the sea through the Montreux Convention. The Convention, signed prior to World War II, holds that states without a Black Sea coast are restricted from having a durable naval presence in the Black Sea. Specifically, the Montreux Convention limits the “number, transit time, and tonnage of naval ships” allowed in the Black Sea.¹⁸ A maximum of nine non-Black Sea warships may pass through at one time, weighing no more than 30,000 tons total, and cannot stay longer than 21 days. Clearly, this makes it nearly impossible for NATO to create a sturdy maritime force in the Black Sea and limits the number of operations the U.S. Navy and non-Black Sea NATO member states can carry out. The Montreux Convention, which has not been revisited since its original signing, could prove incredibly important for NATO if the terms of the agreement were changed in response to recent Russian actions. Alas, Turkey’s warming up to Russia through trade and defense deals might make it even more elusive to ever change the Montreux Convention’s stipulations.

Another difficulty facing NATO in the Black Sea is none other than Russia itself. Russia has proven successful in not only its strategy of hybrid warfare but also in its anti-access and area-denial capability, which inhibits NATO’s efforts to operate in the Black Sea. While this paper argues for an increase in NATO military forces in the region, it is essential for NATO to find a balance in deterring Russia through these improvements while simultaneously avoiding a direct military confrontation. Though the risk of this remains low due to the costs that it would

¹⁸ Coffey, Luke. “Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Renewed Focus on the Black Sea Needed.” *The Heritage Foundation*, 26 June 2018, www.heritage.org/defense/report/brussels-nato-summit-2018-renewed-focus-the-black-sea-needed.

impose on both sides, NATO must still focus on reducing the possibility of a military accident by increasing dialogue and collaboration with Russia.¹⁹

This paper has argued for NATO to further securitize the Black Sea by pursuing more diplomatic routes with Russia in order to create a positive dialogue about the Black Sea. NATO should also leave its doors open for enlargement, as there are still some Black Sea littoral states that are left out from the alliance. In addition, NATO should develop programs to protect economic and energy flows and infrastructures in the Black Sea region to deliver stability to the region and decrease dependence on Russia. Most importantly, NATO needs to improve its defense of the Black Sea by increasing its naval presence, its air capabilities, and by deploying more ground forces.

In order for NATO to successfully increase securitization of the Black Sea, the alliance must also pay great attention to the hurdles standing in its way, such as the costs of increasing defense, the hesitance of many Black Sea littoral states to have an increased NATO military presence in their territories, Turkey's improvement of relations with Russia, the Montreux Convention, and lastly, Russia's hybrid warfare and anti-access/area-denial in the Black Sea region. To conclude, NATO should recognize these obstacles and continue to work towards different solutions and initiatives to combat them. Nonetheless, it is recommended that NATO increase diplomacy with Russia, leave its doors open for enlargement, protect economic and energy resources in the Black Sea, and expand its military capabilities in the region in order to securitize the Black Sea.

¹⁹ "NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?" *NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A New Confrontation?* | Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 Mar. 2017, www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-russia-black-sea-new-confrontation.

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