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Role of NATO and NATO nations in securing the Black Sea

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Authors: **Alina Frolova**, Deputy Chairwoman of the Board, Centre for Defence Strategies
Ihor Kabanenko, ret. Admiral, Ukrainian Navy; President, UA.RPA
Oleksandr Khara, Fellow, Centre of Defence Strategies

Contributors: **Yevgeniya Gaber**, Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Centre in Modern Turkish Studies, Carleton University
Julian Chifu, President of the Center for Conflict Prevention & Early Warning, Romania

Project lead: Alina Frolova, Cofounder, Deputy Chairwoman of the Board, Centre for Defence Strategies

Project expert group: Svitlana Andrushchenko, Mariia Balabina, Andriy Zagorodnyuk, Sviatoslav Kobzenko, Cameron Tisshaw, Yaroslava Shvechikova-Plavska

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula has become a challenge to the European security system. Russia gained full access to the Black Sea, which it lacked in its post-Soviet statehood up until 2014. Just as Russian Czar Peter the First gained a 'window to Europe' for the Russian Empire through the Baltics, Vladimir Putin opened the doors of the Russian Federation to the Mediterranean, one of the key geopolitical arenas in the 21st century.

The Black Sea region has been a historical intersection of many civilizations: Orthodox-Slavic, Muslim, and Western European. The actors' interest in power stability in this area has repeatedly exacerbated relations in the region. Currently, we are witnessing another phase of this counteraction, projected from the Black Sea region into the Mediterranean, as well as into the Atlantic. Russia's strategy is far-sighted and comprehensive. It is developing an aggressive line of conduct around the European continent, forming regional centers of concentration of power at sea: the Pacific, Northern, Baltic, and the Black Sea fleets. Ignoring the rules of conduct of international law, Russia forms a convenient space for the projection of its own interests around the world. These interests and means to achieve them are conflicting with the established world order, based on generally accepted rules and norms after the Second World War.

In its expansionist policy, the Russian Federation uses instruments of various natures: hybrid, military, and diplomatic. Russia has been pursuing ambitious plans to chase its own interests since the collapse of the Soviet Union, trying to surround

itself with a zone of satellite states, or at least sufficiently friendly states. The existence of such a zone of influence meant maintaining the status of great power, allowed to accumulate resources for further expansion. As part of this strategy, the Russian Federation operated in the Crimea through securing the deployment of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol and by interactions with Ukrainian government authorities loyal to Russia .

Acting in the framework of the same strategy, the Russian Federation inspires and supports conflicts in the territories of other Black Sea countries: Moldova and Georgia. Even without using open annexation, as in the case of Crimea, Russia has supported separatist sentiments by creating conflict situations that not only prevent states from successfully advancing membership in European and Euro-Atlantic organizations but also undermine their capabilities as maritime powers in the region.

During the crisis of the non-proliferation regime, Russia adopted new "Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Restraint". This placed nuclear weapons delivery facilities on the



Crimean Peninsula, restored nuclear infrastructure, and turned the region of peaceful coexistence into a potential arena of nuclear confrontation. The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Crimea makes European states vulnerable, and the possibility of equipping submarines with missiles greatly complicates the situation in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Atlantic Ocean. This configuration of forces in the region makes this space dangerous for all members of the international community.

Current geopolitical trends indicate the fragmentation of international relations, and thus reinforce the importance of regional cooperation. To prevent Russia's transformation of the Black Sea into a 'Russian lake', to compensate for the American turn towards China and to account for the indirect effects of the Afghan crisis- the regional countries and NATO must create strategic conditions for cooperation and evolution of the favorable security landscape in the region.

Maintaining a democratic world order based on equality, liberal values, and common rules for all actors now depends on

the ability to restrain and limit the aggressive behavior of the states that are not afraid to use military force to achieve their own geopolitical interests.

Therefore, in order to maintain a balance of power in the Black and Mediterranean Seas, NATO nations have to focus on developing a strategy to deter and counter Russia's aggressive intentions. A shared vision and joint actions can restore stability in the region, protect international maritime law and ultimately preserve the legacy of recent decades- European peace and security.

The ultimate global goal of today's civilized world should be to prevent precedents of aggressive behavior and violation of international law. The policy of non-recognition of the illegal annexation of Crimea is only part of the deterrence. Prevention of violations of international law, immediate response to incidents provoked not only by Russia but also by other actors who are inspired by the aggressor's behavior, should become part of a joint strategy of the world's leading democracies where states are equal not by size, military, or economic power.

CURRENT POSITIONS OF KEY COUNTRIES OF INFLUENCE AND NATO IN THE BLACK AND AZOV SEAS

In order to form a realistic common policy of containment and stabilization of the Black and Azov Seas Region and to define prospects for Ukraine's actions, it is necessary to analyze the current and potential opportunities and intentions of key influencers and countries of the Black Sea region. A brief description of the positions is given below.

The Black Sea region in the US security strategy: rely on allies and support partners

After Russia's occupation of Crimea, Washington faced the need to rethink its views on the place and role of the Black Sea region in the US Mediterranean security strategy. The vision of the security situation in the region and a set of coordination steps have been developed over recent years.

In April 2019, US Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison announced that Washington had developed a package of measures aimed at supporting the monitoring and deployment of NATO ships in the Black Sea. According to

the diplomat, these measures will guarantee "safe transit" of Ukrainian ships through the Kerch Strait². According to information available to the CDS experts, this strategy is still under development and work on this strategy is currently ongoing.

After he was elected President of the United States, President Joe Biden said that America's alliances were its greatest asset and that the administration would provide significant benefits to NATO's eastern flank, especially the Black Sea members. These countries are directly affected by the Kremlin's southern strategy and Russian next-generation warfare, with Moscow taking every opportunity to weaken NATO's Black Sea countries, Ukraine and Georgia- the Alliance's reliable partners in the region.^{3,4}

The large-scale increase of Russia's military presence near Ukraine's borders, in the Crimea and the Black Sea in the spring and summer of 2021 prompted Washington towards swift implementation of policy through soft and hard force strategic tools. This had the aim of deterring large-scale growth of Russian offensive groups. According to some experts, the strategic actions of the United States in April-July 2021 were a key factor in relieving tensions in the region and the return of Russian troops (forces) from the occupied Crimea to their permanent locations. These actions included:

- **New US sanctions against Russia^{5,6,7}.**
- **US naval presence in the region.** In the second half of April 2014, two American destroyers were ready to enter the Black Sea in the event of a deteriorating security situation. For some time, they maneuvered in the area of the naval base of Souda Bay (Crete) of high readiness for rapid maneuver through the Turkish Straits. According to the BlackSeaNews team, the actual presence of warships of the 6th US Navy in the Black Sea in 2019 was 127 days (compared to 104 days in 2018 and 102 days in 2020).⁸

- **Intensifying joint action with NATO partners** to strengthen the Alliance's southern flank and naval infrastructure in the region. In this context, it is important to note the deployment of a powerful NATO naval group, consisting of ships from the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France. During this deployment, the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth- one of the two largest warships ever built for the Royal Navy- led an allied group from Britain's ambitious global naval deployment, which also included the Mediterranean and Black Seas.
- **Targeted support for NATO's regional partners** (Ukraine and Georgia), to build national naval capabilities, as well as improve interoperability with NATO in the Sea Breeze 2021 annual Ukrainian-US naval exercises (June 28-July 10) framework. The Sea Breeze 2021 exercise became the most powerful in the entire history of these exercises with a record number of 32 participating countries⁹. This exercise was successfully followed by the Georgian-American AgileSpirit-2021 (July 26 - August 6)¹⁰.

It is important to note that the leadership of the US Navy in Europe considers Ukraine a "huge partner" of the United States in the Black Sea region, and also emphasizes that Ukraine has received more than \$2 billion in US defense investment since 2014¹¹. In accordance with Ukraine's Strategy for the Navy Development 2035, the US government decided to provide Ukraine with military-technical assistance in creating a mosquito fleet, with the transfer of up to 5 Island-class patrol boats and up to 16 Mark VI amphibious strike boats¹².



The United States remains a significant player in balancing Russia's current conflict strategy in the Black Sea region. At the same time, the US intention to focus on countering China's influence with the formation of the Asia-Pacific Alliance is becoming increasingly apparent¹³. Such a shift in focus requires the transfer of much

of the responsibility for the security in the European theater to NATO's Partner countries¹⁴. However, the decrease of US attention to the European space and the desire to "park" relations with Russia may be one of the factors accelerating the Kremlin's expansion and increasing risks.

Global Britain's strategy in a competitive era: a tangible Black Sea vector

The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (January 1, 2021), on the one hand, reduced the leverage of London's influence on the formation of pan-European (consensus) approaches to security. On the other hand, it opened the possibility of implementing its own vision of strategy without looking out for other European players who have different visions of security threats, challenges, strategic cultures, competing policies, and capabilities. The UK has aimed to strengthen the Euro-Atlantic orientation of its security policy, accounting for an independent role in the area of its own responsibility.

The strategy paper "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy"¹⁵ published in March 2021, sets out a foreign policy baseline and key positions on European and global security. Creating alliances and partnerships is seen as key to ensuring the ability to deter and defend against hostile countries/actors. According to this latest Integrated Review "the Euro-Atlantic region will remain critical to the UK's security and prosperity; partnerships beyond the immediate European neighborhood will also remain important. Russia will remain the most acute direct threat to the UK, and the US will continue to ask more from its allies in Europe in sharing the burden of collective security"¹⁶

Key components of the new UK strategy are enabling rapid operational action and an advanced operational presence. The UK intends to focus on security in the Euro-Atlantic area, in particular in the maritime

areas of the European continent from the far north to the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Such activities will include the involvement of naval forces to protect sea lanes and support freedom of navigation.

In order to strengthen its projection of power, the UK identifies the development of naval capabilities as critical in another strategic document 'Defense in a Competitive Age.' Key aspects of this document include the commitment that the UK "will increase our commitment to the Black Sea region, the High North, the Baltics and the Western Balkans."¹⁷ Furthermore, the UK will contribute to building the capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including land and sea components, as well as their compatibility with NATO. The UK will also work "We will work with other partners in the Black Sea region, notably Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey, to ensure freedom of navigation and security. As part of this we will continue to exercise our freedom to operate in the Black Sea, in

strict accordance with the Montreux Convention, both through NATO and on stand-alone deployments."^{18,19}

Based on the experience of the so-called hybrid war, the British military has developed the Integrated Operating Concept²⁰, which accounts for the need for action below the threshold of conventional warfare. It presupposes an operational presence where needed as determined by the UK. A clear example of this approach was the appearance in the Mediterranean in spring 2021 of the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, which led a British-Allied ambitious global naval presence. Two ships from this group, the British destroyer HMS Defender (D36) and the Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen (F805), visited the Black Sea, demonstrating interoperability with Black Sea allies and partners. During this deployment, the destroyer HMS Defender conducted an

operation to peacefully cross Ukraine's territorial waters near the Crimean Peninsula, demonstrating the ability of NATO's advanced military forces to project the support of regional security and its partners. This operation was part of the implementation of the 'Global Britain' strategy, which was perceived by Ukrainian civilian and experts and military practitioners as a message from the UK Royal Navy of its close presence²¹.

Thus, although the key documents do not directly define the UK's strategy towards the Black Sea region, this region ranks high among its foreign policy and security priorities. On the one hand, the UK is increasing its contribution to the protection of NATO's northern and southern flanks. On the other hand, it is strengthening existing alliances and developing new partnerships to create a powerful counterweight to potential adversaries.

NATO's strategic vision for the south-east flank: a balanced presence and strategic patience

At the NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016, the Alliance identified the Black Sea region as important for Euro-Atlantic security and expressed its intention to increase the Alliance's presence in the region²². The NATO meeting at the level of Ministers on 15-16 February 2017 approved maritime coordination between the NATO Standing Naval Forces and NATO Allies in the Black Sea region to strengthen NATO's cooperation and presence in the Black Sea region.²³

In Washington on 4 April 2019, NATO Foreign Ministers agreed on a package of measures to raise NATO's situational awareness in the Black Sea region and strengthen support for Georgia and Ukraine as partners²⁴. The NATO Brussels summit in June 2021 stated that "Russia's recent massive military build-up and destabilizing activities in and around Ukraine have further escalated tensions and undermined security. We call on Russia to reverse its military build-up and stop restricting navigation in parts of the Black Sea" and that the Alliance "have increased our contributions to our tailored Forward Presence on land, at sea, and in the air in the Black Sea region²⁵".

NATO's practical response to the deployment of Russia's aggressive behavior in the Black Sea consists of the following components:

- **NATO's Tailored Forward Presence** – including a land (ground) component (a multinational brigade based in

Craiova, Romania), a naval component (consisting of Allied ships deployed in the Black Sea in compliance with the Montreux Convention of 1936), and an air component²⁶ (fighter jets at Kogalniceanu Air Base, Romania, as well as base patrol aircraft and UAVs from other airfields).

- **A package of measures to raise NATO's situational awareness** in the Black Sea region, exchange information and support with Black Sea Partner countries in building defense capabilities, training personnel, and carrying out reforms aimed at future NATO membership²⁷.
- **Joint exercises** both as part of NATO's collective defense forces under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (Sea Shield, Steadfast Defender²⁸) and with NATO partners – Ukraine and Georgia (Sea Breeze, Agile Spirit) to improve their interoperability with NATO countries in responding to military crises.



Unlike the Baltic states, which support NATO's greater military presence in northern Europe, two of three NATO's Black Sea countries (except Romania) have some objections: Turkey has rejected Romania's proposal to establish a permanent NATO presence in the Black Sea region; Bulgaria opposed the increase in NATO forces in the region, citing concerns of deteriorating relations with Russia²⁹. Thus, the Alliance has real, but somewhat limited in practice, opportunities to respond to the "deteriorating security situation" in the Black Sea region due to the position of individual Black Sea member states.

Due to the above mentioned and other factors, NATO has not yet established a

clear strategy for the Black and Azov Sea Region and an action plan in case of aggravation. In such circumstances, Brussels relies on demonstrating NATO's cohesion in deterring Russia from further advancing in the region, while trying to limit the risks of military escalation. NATO's 'balanced presence' in the Black Sea is unlikely to change the balance of power in the region, but Brussels sees it as a place for dialogue and thus to deter the Kremlin in the use of further force. Describing NATO's overall position in the Black Sea, the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated "I think we need strategic patience. That was what NATO had during the Cold War and we need it also in the new security situation³⁰".

Black Sea policy of the Republic of Turkey: historical and geopolitical dualism

Turkey's interests in the Black Sea region have historically been determined, on the one hand, by the aspirations of regional leadership and, on the other, by the need to curb Russia's regional ambitions. This allowed Turkey to achieve a dual goal. On the one hand, Ankara has gained significant leverage to balance Russia's growing influence in the region, while remaining an important member of NATO and an ally of the United States.

On the other hand, the principle of "solving regional problems by regional countries", proposed by Turkey and supported by Russia, was designed to prevent the "internationalization" and "militarization" of the Black Sea and to prevent a wider presence of NATO and other global players in the region.

Turkish political scientists note that Turkey's position in the Black Sea is traditionally based on the protection of the status quo and opposes the involvement of non-Black Sea states, effectively creating a Turkish-Russian condominium in the Black Sea. The Turkish policy in the region strictly adheres to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates the passage of naval ships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.

Historically, one of Turkey's key tasks is to prevent the Black Sea from becoming a "new focal point of global rivalry and conflict" between the West and Russia³¹. Therefore, any expansion of NATO's naval

activities beyond existing initiatives is seen by Ankara as a dangerous attempt to change the status quo and to destabilize the region. Although the Turkish government has traditionally emphasized its willingness to cooperate in various multilateral platforms to promote peace and stability in the region, it strongly opposes attempts by any other non-regional state to increase the presence of its warships in the "neutral" Black Sea. The case of the veto on the extension of NATO's Operation Active Endeavor to the Black Sea was extended to "deny access" to the region to external players and became apparent during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

Given the overall dynamics of Ankara's dialogue with Brussels and Washington, the strengthening of NATO's presence on Europe's eastern borders, in the Black and Azov Seas, is seen by the Turkish authorities not as a guarantee but rather as a threat to its national security.

At the same time, the importance of Turkish-Russian cooperation as an alternative

to Turkey's membership in Euro-Atlantic security organizations is not critical. Ankara's foreign policy is very pragmatic as it is built on the promotion of its own interests through a soft balance between key players in different regions of the world. Cooperation with Russia allows Turkey to solve many tactical issues in the Black Sea region. However, it cannot become a full-fledged strategic alliance, primarily due to military and non-military threats for Turkey itself posed by the strengthening of Russia's presence in the region. The shared vision of the Black Sea as a Turkish-Russian "inland sea" makes Ankara and Moscow tactical allies. However, historically, the two countries remain rivals for supremacy at sea and currently support opposing sides in a number of regional conflicts (Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh). With the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia's growing military presence in the Azov-Black Sea basin, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East, the balance of power in the

region has changed dramatically, ending Turkey's relative naval superiority since the Cold War.

In the mid-term, Turkey's strategic interests in the region are likely to remain unchanged:

1. to prevent the militarization of the Azov-Black Sea basin by both Russia and NATO;
2. diversification of partners in the military-technical, political, energy, and other spheres;
3. solving regional problems through selective and limited involvement of NATO allies, avoiding open confrontation with Russia.

If the negative trends in Ankara's relations with Moscow and Brussels / Washington continue, a more persistent and independent Turkish policy in the region should be expected.



Romania and Bulgaria: NATO's Black Sea states amid a regional headwinds

Romania, while insisting on its dialogue with Russia, is simultaneously working hard to increase the presence of the US and non-Black Sea forces in the region. Bucharest is seeking help from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to ensure a better balance of power between the Baltic and the Black Sea regions.

Alternative multilateral groups have been developed, such as the newly created Bucharest Format, which brings together nine NATO members who share concerns about Russia's military resurgence in Crimea and advocate a further expansion of NATO's presence in the region³².

Romania is the home base of the Aegis Ashore system since August 2016 (24 SM3 Block IB missiles) in Deveselu. Although this facility is designed to counter the threat of ballistic missiles beyond the Euro-Atlantic area (excluding Russia), it is an important US contribution to NATO's missile defense, which Moscow sees as a challenge to its strategic interests.

In recent years Romania, at the level of diplomatic signals, has been actively in-

terested in deepening cooperation with Ukraine in combating the destabilization of the Black Sea region³³.

Despite joining NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, Bulgaria is considered an uncertain defense player among Allies. Its political elite maintains fairly close political and business relations with Russia. Unsurprisingly, Bulgaria held an active political dispute over the imposition of EU sanctions against Russia. It also faced domestic political debate when the United States or NATO have sought action that is perceived as anti-Russian. At the same time, despite reluctance to play a leading role in strengthening NATO's presence in the Black Sea, Bulgaria has offered to send 400 of its troops to the Multinational Brigade stationed in Romania.

Georgia's Black Sea Strategy: Counting on US and NATO Support

For a long time after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Georgia's security efforts at sea were limited to its coastline and territorial waters. Georgia has discarded the restoration of the Navy forces, lost during the war, and focused on the creation of the Georgian Coast Guard – the coastal component of the Border Police in the Ministry of Interior.

Georgia's security cooperation in the Black Sea region until 2014 included participation in joint naval exercises with the United States and NATO, the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Group BLACKSEAFOR and Operation Black Sea Harmony (at the level of information exchange).

Given the growing threats in the Black Sea from Russia after the occupation of Crimea, the Georgian leadership in 2016 decided to gradually develop NATO-standardized attributes of national maritime security and intensify cooperation with the Alliance in this area. In September 2016, Georgia established the Joint Maritime Operations Center as a national maritime analytical and informational hub and means to increase Georgia's Maritime Domain Awareness capacity. In 2017, Tbilisi officially expressed its commitment to increase its contribution to the NATO-led Maritime Operations and began training and certifying Coast Guard assets in accordance with the NATO Operational

Capability Concept. After receiving two Island-class boats from the United States under military-technical assistance programs and undergoing training and education courses, Georgia declared these vessels to the NATO Pool of Forces³⁴. As part of the NATO-Georgia Substations Package, Allies are supporting Georgia in Harbor Protection, and have significantly increased the number of warships visiting Georgian ports.

At present, Georgia's strategic vision for security in the Black Sea region is concurrent to its own positioning as a reliable partner of NATO, as well as its Euro-Atlantic integration and strategic partnership with the United States.

The Ukrainian and Georgian positions have objective similarities. Both countries have suffered from Russian aggression and are counting on US support, as well as on the prospect of participating in NATO in building their own security visions.

Black Sea Situation Assessments in Strategies of Barents and Baltic Seas countries (2Bs)

Russia's aggressive behavior in the Black Sea has raised serious concerns in northern Europe, notably Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and to some extent in Norway, Finland, and Sweden over the spread of Russia's expansion aspirations in the region.

The territories of Russia's maritime jurisdiction in the Baltic Sea are minor compared to the coastal zones of other coastal states. The air corridors used by Russian aircraft are also narrow, especially over the Gulf of Finland. This is similar to Russia's positions in the eastern Black Sea on the eve of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. That is why the NATO and EU coastal states of the Baltic Sea Region are concerned about a possible Russian military invasion of Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania, the closing of the Suwałki Gap between Poland and Lithuania, and the danger of Russian amphibious landings on the islands of Åland, Gotland or Bornholm.

Estonia and Latvia have sizable Russian minorities (in Estonia, 25 percent of the population now identify as ethnic Russians; in Latvia, 27 percent) and are considered to be the most vulnerable to Russian influence operations under the concept of the "Russian world." This notion is supported by some worrisome indicators: since 2014 the number of incidents in the air, at sea, and even on land has

been higher in the Baltic Sea region compared to the Barents or Black Seas. At the same time, unlike the Baltic and the Black Sea regions, the Barents Sea is a base for the deployment of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons³⁶.

All European countries of the Baltic and Barents Seas recognize the importance of maintaining Ukraine's territorial integrity^{37,38} and the value of lessons learned of the Black Sea. At the same time, experience proves that the security situation in Europe's east border areas depends largely on geographical and historical factors, the strategic importance of the various regions, and their model of East-West interaction. Therefore, Russia's offense against one or several European "frontline states" will not necessarily be based on the copying of Crimea or Donbas set-ups. Other scenarios are possible. The nature and extent of the potential for interstate conflict may vary to the point of a large-scale confrontation. Thus, Russia must be restrained by comprehensive, adequate, and sufficient NATO action in the region.

The Black Sea region in Japan's politics: a projection of possible scenarios

At the beginning of the 21st century, Japanese analysts and experts began to pay more attention to the Black Sea region. They recognized that the countries of the Black Sea region have problems similar to Japan's³⁹. Until 2014 Japan participated mainly in economic initiatives in the Black Sea region. Amid the Crimean crisis of 2014, Japan declared itself a reliable ally of Ukraine.

Tokyo criticized Russia for the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and imposed sanctions^{40,41}. Subsequently, Ukraine and Japan agreed on security and defense cooperation and, in October 2018, signed a memorandum between the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine and the Ministry of Defense of Japan. The purpose of this memorandum is "to create conditions for the promotion of bilateral cooperation and exchanges in the field of defense."⁴²

Thus, Japan's interest in the Black Sea region is growing, as well as its interest to expand the areas of cooperation with Ukraine. Four years after Russia's occupation of Crimea, Tokyo has extended its

cooperation to security and defense, hoping not only to exchange information on Russia's next-generation warfare but also to deepen mutual support for restoring the territorial integrity of the two countries. This is also important in the context of the formation of a strong security triangle between Ukraine, Japan, and the United States, a strategic partner for both countries. Bilateral security cooperation between Ukraine and Japan has far-sighted prospects, as relations between the two countries are based on mutual respect and trust, common democratic values, and an understanding of the importance of adhering to the principles of international law. This provides valuable opportunities for interregional defense cooperation⁴³.

Ukraine's Black Sea Security Strategy in 2014–2021: in-between of continental thinking and ambition

During the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russia seized 70% of the ships⁴⁴ belonging to the Ukrainian Navy in Crimea and all of its funds. It unlawfully appropriated all Ukrainian defense companies, located in Crimea, and gas production platforms of the Ukrainian SE "Krymnaftogaz," located on the continental shelf of Ukraine. In 2014, Kyiv decided to close the Crimean ports of Ukraine due to the occupation of the peninsula, but the coastal waters of the peninsula remained open for navigation⁴⁵.

The construction of the bridge across the Kerch Strait allowed Russia in the summer of 2018 to deploy the 'Boa Constrictor' strategy in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov in order to stifle the coastal economy of the Ukrainian Azov region⁴⁶. In response, Ukraine transferred some naval boats and vessels by land and sea to the Azov waters to unblock the Ukrainian ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol.

In 2018, the Strategy for the Development of the Ukrainian Navy 2035⁴⁷ was approved. It is a complex, comprehensive, and consistent strategy, written in the style of NATO documents and clear and understandable to Allies. The strategy prioritized the creation of the mosquito fleet, a large group of high-speed and powerful warships for the Ukrainian Navy by 2030.

Ukraine's partners commended the above-mentioned strategy aimed at developing Ukraine's asymmetric capabilities at sea to ensure its maritime safety, and account for available resources. The United States and the United Kingdom

offered their support in Island-class patrol boats, Mark VI amphibious strike boats (USA), and R-50 missile boats (UK). This was an unprecedented token of support for Ukraine by its two strategic partners. This opened up promising opportunities to strengthen the naval potential in the short term and to form an adequate response to threats from the sea. However, these priorities were revised with the change of leadership of the Defense Ministry of Ukraine in March 2020. The new leadership refocused its efforts to strengthen the Ukrainian Navy to the development of large-tonnage warships. In October 2020, Ukraine signed a memorandum with Turkey. The parties outlined their intentions to launch and implement joint projects for the construction of corvettes, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and turbines⁴⁸.

In April 2021, the Navy Doctrine was approved⁴⁹. It declared the intent to reach interoperability with NATO by means of building naval forces classic in composition and capabilities, consisting of cor-

vettes, amphibious, mine counter-measures vessels, submarines, and other platforms.

On August 20, 2021, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine held a meeting on the issue of building Ukrainian Navy capabilities. It was followed by the decision to ask the Ukrainian Parliament and Government for an additional allocation of UAH 960 million and additional funding to produce the anti-ship missile system 'Neptune'^{50,51,52,53}.

During President Zelensky's official visit to the United States in the summer of 2021, a number of bilateral documents were signed, including the Framework Agreement on the Strategic Foundations of the Defense Partnership between the Ministries of Defense of Ukraine and the United States⁵⁴. A Joint Statement on the Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and the United States emphasized the deepening of strategic cooperation in the field of defense, in particular cooperation in the field of Black Sea security. The document states that "Ukraine and the United States have completed the preparation of the Strategic Defense Framework Agreement, which provides a basis for strengthening strategic cooperation between Ukraine and the United States in the field of defense and security."⁵⁵

The expert community has recently escalated the issue of the immediate threats from the sea to the attention of the top political leadership and stressed the need for finding urgent but comprehensive solutions. At the same time, Ukraine is constrained in the development of naval capabilities and effective maritime security mechanisms by the lack of a consistent naval representation in its central defense institution and the inconsistency of its strategic documents. Kyiv has not yet developed a comprehensive strategy to adequately counter Russian force expansion at sea, despite the fact that it has already lost control of about 100 thousand out of 137 thousand square km of its sovereign marine waters as well as having its sea flanks and several key chokepoints open to threats from the sea. It has also underestimated the move forward in the direction of establishing regional maritime unions (cooperation) as one of the capabilities to effectively curb the expansionist intentions of the Russian Federation.

The expert community invests its expectations in reconsidering and strengthening Ukraine's role as a maritime state, which should be reflected in the new Maritime Strategy of Ukraine. Its development was initiated by the National Security and Defense Council in September 2021⁵⁶.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Black and Azov Seas Region is at the center of turbulence of the world security order. The interests of many regional and global players are intertwined in this region. Russia's aggressive policies and open disregard for international law are undermining the world order and setting a negative precedent potentially attractive to revisionist states. Russia not only neglects international law but also violates the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the fundamental base of the modern world order. Such actions pose many challenges and require the development of new strategies from regional and world leaders, in addition to presenting significant pressure for smaller impacted nations to equally create their own counter strategies.

Under the conditions of developing such a strategy as the one above, Ukraine has the potential to become a leader in containment of Russia's attempts at changing the structure of the regional security order. Ukraine's key objective in this context is to stabilize the security situation in the region. To this end, efforts should be directed in the following key areas:

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- Vector 1** Strengthening of regional ties and formation of situational alliances, formats of bilateral cooperation between the Black Sea countries and other leading countries, in particular in the economic sphere. Creating a network of "distributed collective responsibility" for the regional security system.
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- Vector 2** The launch of individual initiatives by NATO which have no restrictions on the participation of non-NATO member countries such as Ukraine.
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- Vector 3** A coalition to advocate for the Black and Azov Seas Region issues in NATO, including the 2030 Development Strategy, with a protocol for joint action in crisis situations.
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- Vector 4** Identifying international law stipulations used by Russia in the context of its behavior in the Black and Azov Seas. Consequences of this behavior by Russia are the violation of legal frameworks at the international level, which sets a potentially dangerous precedent for other revisionist states in the future.

Recommended initiatives within these vectors:

- New regional formats of naval cooperation and multilateral consultative mechanisms aimed at strengthening confidence and security-building in the Black Sea region, with the participation of Black Sea countries and NATO partners. These formats would have different configurations, depending on the tasks: Ukraine - Turkey - Romania, Ukraine - Turkey - Georgia (joint naval exercises, operational information exchange systems, coast guard cooperation, sectoral forums on security and border issues); Ukraine - Turkey - Georgia - Azerbaijan (transport and energy projects), Ukraine - Turkey - Georgia - Moldova (unconventional security, migration, countering organized crime).
- Elaboration and further approval of an acceptable format of Romania's initiative to establish a NATO Permanent Regional Naval Force (subject to the limitations of the Montreux Convention).
- New networks of coordination centers, located in allied countries in the region and responsible for various aspects of awareness, planning, and joint response (following the example of the Northeast multinational corps in Szczecin (Poland), a regional center for collective defense planning and regional cooperation). These coordination and training centers could be responsible for the application of resilience practices, in particular information and cybersecurity, protection of critical infrastructure and ensuring the safety of cabotage in the region.
- Military exercises with NATO countries and partners, with particular focus on the forms and methods of adequate response to the hybrid activity of the Russian Federation in the naval space. In this context, particular attention should be paid to the protection of critical infrastructure by special units that combine infrastructure, energy, and military components (navigation and surveillance systems on annexed gas platforms in the Black Sea, data from which are used for military operations; so-called protection of energy facilities and areas of laying transatlantic submarine communication cables by special units⁵⁷, etc.)⁵⁸.
- Given the limited capabilities of individual countries in the region, special attention should be paid to the development of naval connections with allied countries, targeted infrastructure development (ports, supply chains, etc.) and a common defense capacity building initiative. Such projects can be developed based on regional alliances and/or NATO.

Recommended initiatives within these vectors:

- Special attention to be paid to cooperation in the field of coast guard security with allied countries: mutual port visits of ships (boats), tactical maneuvering of ships in single warrants, exchange of operational information.
- Special attention to be paid to the development of a common situational awareness system of the coastal countries (NATO members/partners). Therefore, providing for systematic cooperation on this issue by regional actors (Ukraine, Romania, Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria), close partners (the United States, the United Kingdom), and other NATO countries (possibly in the form of a NATO-Navy contact point⁵⁹).
- Initiate the involvement of Ukraine and Georgia as NATO aspirant countries in NATO's operational planning in the Black and Azov Sea Region and across the Eastern Flank for joint threat assessment and greater operational integration of the regional forces.
- Formation of capabilities resistant to Russian electronic hybrid warfare⁶⁰. A possible response includes amendments to the SOLAS Convention, adopted in 1974, which still lacks regulations for liability for interference in GNSS and GSM spoofing. It also includes collective appeals to relevant international organizations, such as the IMO in case of interference in the work of SOLAS, and to the UN in case of violation of UNCLOS standards.
- Consolidate the efforts of the Black Sea and Baltic countries to counter the practice of other states taking ownership of unreasonably large areas of the sea and prohibiting navigation.

Recommended initiatives within these vectors:

- Initiate the development of a comprehensive Black Sea Charter on Freedom of Navigation, focusing on the obstruction of freedom of navigation, economic losses due to delays of commercial vessels, and the practice of unjustified declaration of military exercises. It should address positions of the Black and Azov Seas countries to such violations and counter them, in particular, to initiate the establishment of a separate maritime observation mission (possibly with the involvement of the EU) to record the facts of such violations.
- Update the provisions of the Montreux Convention in accordance with the modern technical characteristics of ships, as well as in terms of clarifying the regulation of Turkey's actions in the event of aggression by one of the Black Sea states against another.
- Launch a format of cooperation in the field of energy security: joint production of hydrocarbons in the Black and Azov Sea Region, transportation of liquefied gas in the event of the launch of the Canal Istanbul, formats of cooperation with green energy deals with the involvement of regional countries and the world leaders.
- Strengthen cooperation between Turkey, Ukraine, and other Bucharest Convention signatories (Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia) in preventing the Black Sea pollution and ensuring environmental security as a factor in curbing Russia's influence and expansion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATO'S STRATEGY AND ACTION IN THE REGION

NATO is in the process of developing its NATO 2030 Strategy. The decision on the strategy is to be taken at the annual NATO 2022 Summit⁶¹. The key challenges for NATO countries, in the context of the impact of the Black and Azov Sea Region security on the wider region (Baltic, Mediterranean, Caspian) are:

- Violation of the nuclear non-proliferation regime not only at the regional but also at the global level.
- The deployment of medium-range missiles, which pose a direct threat to European NATO members⁶².
- Increasing insecurity in the Caucasus and Asian regions due to the potential increase in Caspian Fleet capabilities by small warships transferring across the almost largely annexed Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait and the Volga-Don Canal. Russia is also considering the possibility of construction of an additional, shorter channel between the Caspian and Azov Seas, which will increase the speed of military response of the fleets. In the Caspian Sea, the Russian Federation is also actively using tactics to oust external actors outside the region (as it did in the Azov and partly in the Black Seas): the 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea defines the Caspian Sea as surrounded by land⁶³ and, therefore, it is excluded from the UNCLOS regulation.
- A direct threat of destabilization of the Mediterranean region, which is determined by the increase of Russia's influence and realization of its interests in Libya and Egypt, as well as easing the logistics of participation in the Syrian war⁶⁴.

Considering the strategic threats posed by the example of "bad behavior" and the use of destabilization methods tested in the Black and Azov Sea Region, which did not have an adequate international response, NATO needs to pay urgent and focused attention to the initiatives outlined above.

In addition to these initiatives, it is also important for NATO to:

- Develop tactics to combat "weaponized corruption"⁶⁵ in order to support democratic institutions and public confidence in the government in Eastern European and Black Sea NATO member countries, eventually providing a strategic guarantee of the unity of the alliance.
- Develop a strategy for NATO's operational presence and projection of interests in the Black and Azov Sea Region, including tactics for building complementary capabilities with partner countries to accelerate the presence and effectiveness of operations in the region.
- NATO currently divides its Eastern Flank member states into two groups: the **Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP)** and the **Tailored Forward Presence (TFP)**. As Moscow views the western border as a united front, there is not much logic in NATO diverting its attention in the Eastern flank. Greater investment is needed to the Black Sea TFP for it to advance to the basis of creating a NATO Joint Force of Forward Presence. In other words, NATO should consider moving from two formats on the Eastern Flank to a single one.
- Ukraine and Georgia should be considered as allied/partner countries in case of a conflict between NATO/USA and the Russian Federation with the prospect of future membership. The Ukrainian and Georgian contributions should be taken into account in the relevant contingency plans. In this context, the issue of possible deployment of US/Alliance forces and assets on the territory of Ukraine, as well as assistance with military and civilian infrastructure for possible use during the conflict, becomes relevant. This can be implemented in the framework of the European Deterrence Initiative with its five domains: 1) increased presence, 2) exercises and training, 3) enhanced prepositioning, 4) improved infrastructure, and 5) building partnership capacity⁶⁶.
- In the event of an escalation (ranging from the blockade of the Black Sea coast and the conduct of targeted hostilities to Russia's large-scale aggression), Ukraine and NATO partner countries should develop joint action and support plans to support the country under aggression. In particular, such plans should provide for the preliminary deployment (on the territory of Ukraine's neighboring countries) of equipment that can be provided to Ukraine in the case of conflict. This would allow for extensive cooperation between Ukraine and NATO and intensification of NATO forces activities (maneuvers, training, reconnaissance missions, etc.) to demonstrate strong support for Ukraine and Georgia, limit Russia's behavior, and facilitate the response of the Armed Forces at various levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON UKRAINE'S STRATEGY AND ACTIONS TO ENHANCE THE ROLE OF NATO COUNTRIES IN THE BLACK AND AZOV SEAR REGION

Ukraine has a unique window of opportunity to form an international coalition to contain Russia in the region. The successful launch of the Crimean Platform resulted in increased attention from the world community to the problem of the annexation of Crimea.

Realization of this opportunity requires official or non-public leadership in shaping most of the initiatives outlined above. In addition to the above list of initiatives, the Ukrainian government should pay special attention to the following formats:

- Establishing permanent operational cooperation with Georgia at the political-military level for the joint promotion and advocacy of regional security initiatives, conducting joint training and other military activities, as well as involving other actors in these initiatives.
- Romania – insisting on its dialogue with Russia, Romania is working hard to increase the presence of US and NATO non-Black Sea forces in the region. Ukraine should make every effort to support such a vector and intensify cooperation with Romania in terms of coordination of political and military actions in the region. Priority should be given to the development of complementary naval capabilities and joint naval activities (exchange of information between naval headquarters, mutually agreed rotation of certain forces in high readiness on the base, patrolling certain marine waters, ensuring freedom of navigation, etc.), joint training of capabilities and responses to emergency situations in the Danube Delta and the development of joint security monitoring systems in the region.

- Proposing the possible integration of the Ukrainian component into the NATO Multinational Brigade stationed in Romania (possibly by a Strategic Partnership Agreement).
- To start active involvement of Georgia and Romania in the establishment of the advocacy group on the issue of the Black and Azov Sea Region in NATO. It is possible to strengthen and intensify the work of the Bucharest format, which brings together nine NATO members who share concerns about Russia's military revival in Crimea and advocate further expansion of NATO's presence in the region⁶⁷. NATO member countries that are concerned about Russia's aggressive actions can raise the issue of formulating a clear NATO strategy on the Black and Azov Sea Region. Scandinavian countries and, possibly, Finland should also be actively involved in such initiatives, as Sweden and Norway have clearly demonstrated a willingness for closer cooperation (participation in joint exercises, etc.).
- Focusing naval military and military-technical cooperation with the United States on the development of priority capabilities on a complimentary basis (receiving naval platforms with basic armament on board under US defense assistance programs and equipping them with modern NATO-interoperable models of naval weapons at the expense of the defense budget of Ukraine (purchase of the US ASCM, C2, tactical drones, etc.).
- Continuing military links with the UK- the UK's exit from the EU, the need to reform its strategy of presence in the European region, and the announced priority to return to the role of a major maritime power, open wide opportunities for the UK's leadership in deterring Russia in the region. UK strategy and recent actions in the Black and Azov Sea Region prove that the region holds an important place in its foreign policy and security priorities. London is not going to be sidelined in the emerging new security environment, in which Russia plays the role of a destroyer of the liberal world order and poses a direct threat to the interests and security of the UK. On the one hand, as Washington shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific region, London is increasing its contribution to the protection of NATO's northern and southern flanks. On the other hand, the UK tries to strengthen existing alliances and organize new partnerships to create a powerful counterweight to the enemy. This vector should receive Ukraine's strategic support and facilitation. Building military-political relations with the UK should become one of its key priorities. Among the obvious projects for implementation: accelerating the implementation of the agreement in the framework of the memorandum on enhancing bilateral cooperation in the military and military-technical spheres⁶⁸ (currently still awaiting completion of formal procedures and implementation), increasing the number of training programs of the Ukrainian Navy in the framework of Operation Orbital, planning and conducting joint exercises (possibly with the involvement of the Black and Azov Sea region partner countries) to counter projected threats from Russia, involving the UK in economic development projects such as ports, infrastructure and energy projects. Explore additional opportunities for the development of tripartite security cooperation with Turkey and the UK, which (unlike the United States) is better perceived in Turkey due to the historical ties.

- Cooperation with Turkey in the field of the military-industrial complex can be strengthened by joint training and exercises of the Navy and / or the Coast Guard (see above).
- Propose to NATO countries (as an option - in the format of the NATO Enhanced Opportunities Program) the establishment of Joint Naval Training Centers (in mutually agreed areas) on the bases of Shirokolanivsky and other combat training grounds of the Armed Forces, located in the south of Ukraine.
- Ukraine should direct constant diplomatic efforts to highlight the impact of Russia's destructive behavior on global security: violation of freedom of navigation, illegal seizure of land and economic zone, manipulation of UNCLOS and SOLAS, etc., using all possible international platforms. In particular, it is necessary to intensify actions in the American direction: to work separately with congressmen who systematically provide bipartisan support for Ukraine. In this way, it is possible to draw the US attention to the issue of the Black and Azov Sea Region and raise its priority to the level of the Asia-Pacific. In this context, Japan and Australia, which are threatened by the spread of examples of systemic violations on their neighboring territories, can become unusual but powerful partners in shaping the international agenda.
- Ukraine should pay special attention to the development of joint energy and economic projects in the region. The participation of foreign investment in significant projects (such as gas production on the Ukrainian shelf or the development of port infrastructure) can increase the level of political and, consequently, military support for regional stability.

In addition to the above actions, Ukraine needs to carry out significant "internal work" to facilitate the legal and military aspects of security cooperation. We will not dwell on such activities in detail, as they are comprehensively described in other CDS studies^{69,70}, but here outlined are the ones that require special attention by Ukraine:

- Verify (with the balanced triangle method) the intentions and priorities of Ukraine for the development of the Navy in the light of existing issues⁷¹ regarding the implementation of the Navy Strategy until 2035, as well as the newly approved Navy Doctrine of the Armed Forces of Ukraine⁷², which, due to the classification, cannot be analyzed by the expert community and partners.
- Ukraine needs to further address legal issues regarding the possibility of a longer stay and base of the alliance's non-Black Sea naval forces in the Black Sea without violating the provisions of the Montreux Convention. The expert community expressed various opinions on the possibilities of such a stay, but the official national position should be developed, with involvement of representatives of government bodies, including specialists from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

- To study the possibility of recognizing the agreement between Ukraine and Russia on the status of the Sea of Azov of 2003 as null and void and to unilaterally establish the Ukrainian territorial waters in the Azov Sea. This position is expressed by a number of experts^{73,74}, but has not been officially supported at the state level. After the capture of Ukrainian boats and tug of the Ukrainian Navy near the Kerch Strait⁷⁵, the issue of withdrawal from these agreements with Russia and recognition of Ukraine's territorial waters is extremely relevant and potentially constrains the presence of partners in the region.
- To work out the issue of declaring Ukraine's territorial waters adjacent to the Crimea, closed to navigation in connection with the Russian occupation of the peninsula.
- To develop and implement appropriate amendments to national legislation, as well as to start practical work on concluding relevant agreements with Partner and NATO countries, in order to ensure the possibility of using Ukrainian infrastructure and deploying possible forces and means of NATO or Partner countries on the territory of Ukraine.
- To solve the problems of consolidation of the uniform system of departmental databases needed for the establishment of the situational awareness system of the sea domain. Establish a Joint Situational Awareness Center in Odesa (Ukrainian Navy and Southern Regional Department of the Border Services). This will improve the ability to detect threats to national maritime security, coordinate the actions of the defense forces, and promptly inform central authorities and partners for timely decision-making. This center can become the basis of the Black Sea Information Center with the accreditation of communication officers of NATO and Partner countries⁷⁶.

CONCLUSION

Russia actively uses its power projections provided by the partial occupation of the Black and Azov Sea Region as a significant lever to achieve its own political, military, and economic goals. The Kremlin is using this lever not only to 'contain' NATO's presence in the region but also to promote its interests around the world as part of a global strategy to 'chaotization' of international relations.

Countering these actions requires the recognition of the global nature of this challenge by Ukraine and other democratic countries, including NATO. Making decisions based solely on the importance of the region for NATO's borders security is a rather erroneous and short-sighted approach. The complexity and interdependence of threats in the Black and Azov Sea Region challenge the strategic position of defending modern democracies and the rule of law.

The Black and Azov Sea Region is the forefront of the systemic changes to the existing security system. Therefore, it is the place for a response strategy, which is possible only with the participation of all the world's leading actors, including NATO as an alliance responsible for the global security of a united Europe.

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Alina Frolova

Cofounder, Deputy Chairwoman of the Board, Centre for Defence Strategies

Expert in the field of international military cooperation. Specialist in strategic communications and countering hybrid warfare. Coordinator of the Crimea Platform Expert Network Security Track.



Ihor Kabanenko

ret. Admiral, Ukrainian Navy

Expert in the field of international security (naval component).



Oleksandr Khara

Fellow, Centre for Defence Strategies

Diplomat. Expert in foreign policy and security cooperation.

defence.org.ua

office@defence.org.ua

