BLACK SEA SECURITY IN NATO SPOTLIGHT

SHOTA GVINERIA

72

EXPERT OPINION

EXPERT OPINION

SHOTA GVINERIA

BLACK SEA SECURITY IN NATO SPOTLIGHT

72

2016

Translator: Ana Nemsitsveridze-Daniels

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

Euro-Atlantic Strategic Security Environment

Euro-Atlantic security is facing the most severe challenge since the end of World War II. For the first time in the history of NATO, threats simultaneously emanate from both the Eastern and Southern flanks. Meanwhile, NATO, whose primary function is to deter conventional threats, is, for the first time, compelled to deal with serious hybrid threats in addition to the threat of terrorism.

The threats arising from the south of the Alliance, largely linked with the extreme exacerbation of migration and homegrown terrorism stemming from the arduous situation in Syria, serve as a good example of just how diverse is the security environment that NATO must adapt to in handling the present challenges. The trend of negative influence exerted on internal political processes by modern threats within the NATO member states, especially elements of information war, has been clearly reflected in the increasing popularity of pro-Russian political forces challenging common Euro-Atlantic values.

On the Eastern flank, there is a significant increase in threats from revanchist Russia, which is attempting to dissolve the security system based on the inviolability of borders and state sovereignty, and regain exclusive spheres of influence in the Euro-Atlantic space. Russia has succeeded in transforming the West's restrained reaction to the former's violation of the fundamental principles of European security architecture into a strategic advantage, and proceeds to enforce its interests in the neighborhood via threats of further escalation.

In fact, Russia has successfully instituted a trend of establishing new realities and a practice of distracting attention from the problems it creates along the way to even more pressing crises. Today, the Ukraine crisis is the most acute manifestation of Russia's aggressive policies, which has on the one hand overshadowed the issues of other countries in the region, and on the other hand spurred the strengthening of the security of the Eastern flank. It is noteworthy that Russia commenced using military force to fight for its imperial status and disrupting the post-Cold War *status quo* by enhancing its influence in the Black Sea region, in particular through aggression perpetrated against Georgia in 2008. In turn, by means of its contribution to the escalation of current circumstances in Syria, Russia is

attempting to shift NATO's attention from the needs of the Eastern flank to the South and thus stir divisions within the Alliance in terms of approaches to security challenges.

Despite the fact that, at the rhetorical level, Russia does not shy away from escalating tensions with NATO, given the apparent advantage of the collective military capabilities of NATO member states it is unlikely that Russia will risk engaging in a direct military confrontation or launching an assault on any member-state. Although, at the expense of the advantages gained in applying means of hybrid warfare, Russia still poses an equally realistic threat to the Alliance's security. By using political infiltration, economic pressure, cyber attacks, information war and other non-conventional means, Russia is capable of constituting a serious challenge without crossing the red line necessary for NATO to apply Article 5[1].

Moreover, in non-NATO neighboring states, Russia generates the hotbeds of destabilization and conflicts in order to impede the democratic development and Euro-Atlantic integration of these states. Russia actively endeavors to transform destabilization into a foreign policy instrument to distance NATO and the European Union from its neighborhood and increase its influence over the region.

Naturally, such a complex environment raises certain issues in terms of the common assessment of challenges by the 28 NATO member states and the development of joint approaches to respond to these challenges. Nevertheless, at the Warsaw Summit held in July 2016, the allies succeeded in identifying tangible progress in several significant areas: firstly, the annexation of Crimea and the destructive interference in Syria ultimately constituted a wakeup call leading the Alliance to unequivocally recognize the real threats emerging from Russia. Secondly, the Alliance shifted from applying reassurance measures, which entailed political declarations that NATO is willing and able to defend its member states, to practicing deterrence via enhancing its military presence in the countries of the Eastern flank. Thirdly, the Alliance made key political decisions with regard to emphasizing collective defense, as well as projecting stability together with partners beyond NATO's borders.

The Allied decision on NATO's active engagement in enhancing Black Sea security is essential for Georgia. The Summit Declaration also stipulated that Georgia, as a valuable partner, will engage in the strategic dialogue on

Black Sea security. Moreover, at the meeting of NATO Defense Ministers on 27 October, six member-states (Canada, US, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey) expressed readiness to contribute to strengthening NATO's presence in the Black Sea region not only at sea, but also on land and in the air[2].

At the current stage, the Alliance's specific plans in terms of practical implementation of these crucial political decisions are still being developed. Accordingly, the present article aims to facilitate answers to questions arising after the Warsaw Summit around the security of the Black Sea region: *why is it significant for NATO to strengthen Black Sea security and what role does Georgia hold in this process?*

The Security of the Black Sea Region

In geopolitical terms, the broader Black Sea region serves as a link between the Caspian, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean basins and constitutes a lucrative corridor to the Middle East. Therefore, historically, establishing control over principal trade routes crossing the Black Sea has always been the interest of global powers. Following the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea region found itself encompassed within the United States' interests due to three key factors: the extension of democracy, security cooperation, and diversification of energy resources. In terms of democratic reforms, combating terrorism in the Middle East and within the key energy infrastructure component, Georgia constitutes a significant stronghold for the United States in the region.

The democratic development of the countries in the region, as well as their close military cooperation with NATO member states is fundamentally contradictory to Russia's interests. The development of alternative projects for the transport of oil and gas to Europe via the region is no less unacceptable for Russia. Accordingly, in order to increase its influence over the countries in the region and obstruct their rapprochement with the West, Russia generates and maintains control over the conflicts in the region. At first glance, despite the dissimilar nature of conflicts in the region, it is Russia's interests and full control that the conflict regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali, Transnistria and Donbas have in common.

Following the annexation of Crimea, the unprecedented militarization carried out by the Russian Federation has shifted the military balance in the Black Sea region in Russia's favor. The latter has enhanced the Black Sea Fleet, as well as air defense facilities and long-range guided missile systems in Crimea, by which Russia can easily reach the mainland territories of all of the Black Sea countries[3]. Given that three littoral states in the region are members of NATO, the Alliance perceives Russia's significant military advantage and its aggressive policies in the region as an alarming threat to the Black Sea region and as a challenge for the Euro-Atlantic security as a whole.

Moreover, the Black Sea region is a stage where NATO and Russian military forces interact most closely, which is a source of constant tension[4]. Circumstances are further aggravated by the fact that Russia's Anti-access/ Area denial (A2/AD) systems have essentially fully covered the Black Sea region. A visible demonstration of the severity of the situation was the recent escalation ensuing from the altercation between the USS Ross destroyer and the Russian SU-24 aircraft, during which the Russian aviation inflicted significant damage to the US ship using electronic warfare[5]. One of the most evident manifestations of the fragility of the security environment in the Black Sea region is the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey, which served to further escalate tensions between NATO and Russia. Turkish President Erdoğan indirectly confirmed the culmination of the tensions by stating to the NATO Secretary General: "You [NATO] are absent in the Black Sea and that is why it has nearly become a Russian lake"[6].

The three littoral NATO member states (Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria) and two significant strategic partners of the Alliance (Ukraine, Georgia) expressly agree that Russia constitutes a challenge for the security of the region and individual countries. However, it should be stressed that, in many cases, even in the case of common interests, the Black Sea states favor a different approach in terms of overcoming existing challenges and applying containment tactics.

The above statement issued by the Turkish president is particularly interesting given that longstanding Turkish policy is one of the key reasons NATO's presence in the Black Sea is so scarce. In order to decrease NATO's influence in the region, in 2001 Turkey initiated the establishment of a multinational naval operations group "BLACKSEAFOR", which was later

enhanced via the maritime surveillance Operation "Black Sea Harmony". These initiatives forged the illusion that cooperation among the littoral states will, to an extent, manage to ensure regional security, which has led to the fact that the Black Sea is currently the most exposed and least protected segment of NATO's Eastern flank. At this stage, the operation of and future prospects for both initiatives are largely limited against the background of Russian military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine.

One of the principal reasons behind Turkish interest to strengthen the role of the region's littoral states in the provision of Black Sea security as much as possible is the 1936 Montreux Convention. It should be emphasized that Turkey has traditionally considered the significant privileges and advantages granted to it under the Convention in terms of controlling the Bosporus Strait as the cornerstone of its national security. However, today, given Russia's aggressive politics and considerable military advantage, it will be difficult for Turkey to continue its traditional policy towards the Black Sea. Furthermore, given the difficult situation at the border with Syria, Turkey's security is largely dependent on the continued deployment of NATO's "Patriot" surface-to-air missile defense systems. Accordingly, Turkey will need to find a balance in its cooperation with Russia and NATO in the context of Black Sea security. Limiting NATO's role in the Black Sea constitutes a rare exception of Russian and Turkish common interests in the region. In general, the role of the two big regional players are contradictory, which is well reflected in the constant and unpredictable fluctuation in their relations.

Bulgaria maintains a relatively modest position and is wary of irritating Russia by actively engaging new Black Sea security formats and allies beyond the coastline. Consequently, like Turkey, Bulgaria supports the intensification of existing cooperation mechanisms and the enhancement of the military capabilities of the littoral states. It is noteworthy that prior to the November 2016 presidential elections in Bulgaria, there was no unified government position with regard to this issue, and thus Sofia's official stance following the election of a new president will be of utmost interest.

Romania is one of the principal advocates for NATO's increased engagement in the Black Sea and is gradually becoming a key foothold for the Alliance in the region. In preparing for the Warsaw Summit, Romania voiced an initiative to establish a NATO Black Sea Fleet. The idea to install

a regular naval presence in the Black Sea resonated positively with NATO headquarters, as well as in Washington, Berlin and Rome. It should be noted that following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defense in October 2016, the Secretary General made only a general reference to an Allied agreement on specific measures to be applied to boost NATO's military presence in the naval and aerial components in the Black Sea region[7]. Naturally, as per the Montreux Convention, the 21-day stay restriction in the Black Sea waters for all Allied states except littoral countries creates certain problems in terms of implementing the above initiative. In the land and sea components, Romania already hosts the NATO Multinational Division Southeast headquarters and a segment of NATO's air defense systems has already been deployed on its territory.

The events developing in the Black Sea region over recent years have shown that the ongoing regional developments directly influence Euro-Atlantic security. Due to its geopolitical location, the Black Sea region fosters the merging of the threats emanating from the South with the Russian threat and this accumulation effect further exacerbates regional security. Another widely acknowledged fact is that the provision of Black Sea security does not only suggest enhancing the security of littoral NATO member-states and calls for a more strategic approach given the region's increasingly significant role in European security matters. Thus, it is imperative for the Alliance to design an action plan as soon as possible to promote more active engagement of NATO partner countries in ensuring security in the region. At this stage, Georgia and Ukraine expect concrete propositions from the Alliance and express their readiness to fully engage in measures undertaken by NATO to ensure Black Sea security using all means available to them.

The Role of Partnership and Engagement in Ensuring Euro-Atlantic Security

Based on the analysis of the current situation, it can be concluded that an adequate response to Russia's aggressive actions in the Black Sea region will largely determine the subsequent operation of the rules-based European security architecture. By consistently pursuing a revisionist policy, Russia has repeatedly confirmed that it is in this region that it is attempting to draw the dividing line to validate its exclusive sphere of influence. Given that the Alliance's mission comprises the protection of

the security, stability and democratic values of not only its member-states but also the Euro-Atlantic region as a whole, the Black Sea region naturally falls under NATO's deterrence policy on the Eastern flank.

It is also clear that the current *status quo* in the Black Sea region is, first and foremost, in Russia's interest, as it is more or less in control of the security environment in the entire region and can further escalate at any moment. Prior to the Warsaw Summit, NATO did not hold a proactive strategic vision in terms of its role in shaping the security environment in the Black Sea[8]. At this point, it is imperative that NATO's action plans regarding the Black Sea derive from the long-term interests of the Allies and strategic partners of the Alliance, and are not based solely on the need to adapt to realities dictated by Russia, or ad-hock response measures.

The Warsaw Summit decision to enhance collective security on the Eastern flank is somewhat underpinned by NATO's contingency planning, as well as the findings put forward by international research organizations, which clearly indicate that in case of direct military conflict, NATO will find it very difficult to defend the Baltic States[9]. Naturally, the front-line states are assigned the leading role in providing security on the Eastern flank, although the above studies clearly highlight the role of cooperative security in ensuring Euro-Atlantic security. Accordingly, it is within NATO's interests to fully employ the defense potential of not only NATO member-states but also of its strategic partners. Experts agree that without the engagement of NATO's partner countries - Sweden and Finland - it is virtually impossible to ensure credible protection of the Baltic region. Similarly important is Georgia and Ukraine's role in the provision of Black Sea security.

At the Warsaw Summit, the Allies also agreed that the enhancement of the defense capabilities of partner countries is within NATO's interests and directly serves to strengthen Euro-Atlantic security. Therefore, the development of Georgia's defense capabilities is part of enhancing the security of NATO's Eastern flank so that Georgia, as the region's most reliable and tested partner, can afford to reinvest more in Euro-Atlantic security. There is little doubt that the partner's full engagement in ensuring Black Sea security is doubly advantageous in the regional context, as well as for the security of the Alliance itself.

At this stage, it is essential for Georgia to develop, in close consultation with the Alliance, specific action plans for active engagement in all possible

formats of Black Sea security enhancement. Possible formats include a full range of activities for the development of defense measures against land, sea, air, as well as hybrid threats. Based on preliminary consultations, it is obvious that NATO is interested in cooperating with Georgia in exchanging intelligence and analytical information related to Black Sea security. Moreover, relations can be expanded in the area of joint trainings, exercises and operations. In terms of tackling hybrid and asymmetrical threats, cooperation in the area of strategic communications can also be developed.

Despite the utmost significance of the development of defense capabilities and resilience, NATO's further expansion in the Black Sea region presents the only adequate response to completely deter existing threats and challenges. It is evident that the only alternative to NATO's open-door policy is the direct or indirect recognition of the spheres of influence which will have a devastating effect on Euro-Atlantic security. Consequently, it is essential to maintain the positive dynamics of Georgia's integration process and take concrete steps towards the decision rendered at the Bucharest Summit, according to which Georgia will effectively become a NATO member-state.

References

1. Janine Davidson, "Local Capacity is the First line of Defense Against the Hybrid Threats" *German Marshal Fund of the United States, Policy Brief,* September 2015.

2. Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of NATO Defence Ministers, Brussels, Belgium, October 26, 2016, *NATO website,* www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_136581.htm .

3. Vladimir Socor, "The Black Sea Region: NATO's Exposed Sector on the Eastern Flank (Part Two)", *Eurasia Daily Monitor,* June 24, 2016 - Volume 14, Issue 114.

4. Steven Horrell, "A NATO Strategy for Security in the Black Sea Region", *Atlantic Council,* October 2016.

5. *Independent,* www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russian-military-jets-and-us-destroyer-clash-in-black-sea-posing-danger-to-stability-10287303.html .

6. *Financial Times,* www.ft.com/content/1b9c24d8-1819-11e6-b197-a4af20d5575e .

7. Topics, *Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast, North Atlantic Treaty Organization,* Last Updated October 27, 2016, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm .

8. Christopher S. Chivvis et al, "beyond NATO's Eastern Border", *German Marshal Fund of the United States, Foreign and Security Policy Paper, 2016, No.26.*

9. David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank", *Rand Corporation, Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,* www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html .