

RECONFIGURING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION: THE ROMANIAN PROPOSAL FOR AN ALLIED NAVAL COOPERATION

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Abstract

The de facto annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its subsequent militarization with Russian anti-access / area denial capabilities represent a game changer for the security environment in the Wider Black Sea Region. By claiming large parts not just of Crimea's, but also of Ukraine's continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone, Russia may significantly change the balance of power in the region. Facing the probability of sharing volatile frontiers with Russia, the riparian states have responded through various initiatives that would allow the strengthening of their military positions. Such an attempt is the Romanian proposal for a Black Sea naval cooperation with Turkey and Bulgaria under the NATO umbrella. This initiative is at a standstill as of 2018 despite NATO launched a multinational Black Sea force headquartered in Craiova (Romania) last year that is expected to include additional sea assets to those already existent, namely sporadic NATO naval patrols. Indeed, Russia suggested that the aforementioned proposal may establish the premises for a permanent NATO Black Sea Fleet that infringes upon the provisions of the Montreux Convention and could constitute a veritable casus belli. This paper follows the itinerary of the Romanian initiative, analyzes the strategic and operational challenges that it is facing in the light of the Montreux Convention and not ultimately, offers possible prospects for a permanent NATO Black Sea Fleet.

Keywords: *Annexation of Crimea, Black Sea, Montreux Convention, NATO, Russia.*

Introduction

The tough competition between the two superpowers of the Cold War era – the United States and the Soviet Union – had apparently ceased after the

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fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and gave F. Fukuyama good odds for the prediction made in his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, on the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. This ultimate development will eventually lead to the accomplishment of the democratic peace theory which stipulates, in general terms, that a democracy does not engage in an armed conflict with another democracy; thus, the achievement of a perpetual global peace being assured. However, the recent military developments in the Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR) seem to give more credit to the offensive realism theory postulated by J. Mearsheimer. From the perspective of this famous representative of the neorealism school of thought, even though a Great Power does not have the means to acquire hegemony, it still acts in an offensive manner to secure as much power as possible because states are in almost all cases in a better situation when they have more power compared to when they have less. As a consequence, the current anarchic international stage is provoking a permanent security competition between states (Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, in the light of the offensive realism theory, two major strategic maneuvers of the Euro-Atlantic structures in the WBSR entered in competition with Russia's ambition to regain its Great Power status in the post-Cold War era.

Firstly, NATO's expansion beyond the borders of a reunified Germany could have made Russia "a victim of the encircling of the Eurasian heartland by thalassocratic powers" (Barna, 2014, p. 32). Assuming the loss of hegemonic influence on the Baltic states and the subsequent concessions made to these states to join NATO as a never again compromise inherent to the process of transition from the USSR, the Kremlin was confronted with a potential repetition of this scenario during the 20th NATO Summit held in Bucharest in 2008. Back then Ukraine and Georgia were expecting to be offered NATO Membership Action Plan – a prelude to full membership (Harding, 2008). However, the 23rd point of the Bucharest Summit Declaration was only assuring these countries that they were going to receive this status (NATO, 2008). The timing obtained by Russia, considered by some political analysts as "the biggest foreign policy victory of Mr Putin's presidency" (Blomfield and Kirkup, 2008), proved to be decisive in the case of Ukraine and Georgia's aspirations for NATO membership as subsequent Russian military interventions in the above mentioned countries undermined their prospects for such a geopolitical endeavor - as of 2018, Ukraine and Georgia's chances to join NATO seem to be close to zero.

Secondly, the Eastern expansion of the EU as part of its *Wider Europe* project (for details, see Commission of the European Communities, 2003) did

not take into account Russia's interests in the region, but rather dismissed them. As a consequence, it became a rival of the *Greater Europe* project (for details, see Kortunov, 2018) that envisaged a stronger Russian influence on the European continent. Indeed, as Freire (2017, p. 19) noticed, "As much as the EU project includes a stable and prosperous neighbourhood where security dynamics will positively impact the Union's security, Russia also sees security and friendship at its borders as promoting its own security. The clashing projects of the EU and Russia towards this area of common interest, but where the projection of distinct interests is clear, led to a fundamental division". The clashing projects resulted in various conflict epicenters in Eastern Europe provoked by Russia. By creating instability at the EU's doors, Russia intended to deter the advance of the former's *Wider Europe* project in Eastern Europe and to warn the affected states that they still need to consult with their hegemon when taking major decisions in terms of national security and foreign policy.

These strategic maneuvers could not be tolerated anymore in the recent years by the Kremlin. As a consequence, starting with his first presidential mandate in 2000, Putin began to amplify the nationalism of his compatriots by projecting an ideological enemy that was so well-known to most of the Russian citizens confronted with Soviet nostalgia – an expansionist west, full of immoral values and ready to divide and conquer their millennial Orthodox civilization. Based on the US denouncement of improved relations with Russia within the framework of Obama administration's initiative of 2009 known as *the Russian reset*, Putin stated very clearly in his *Crimean speech* of March 2014 that "in short, we have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They [NATO and the EU] are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything" (The Kremlin, 2014). Definitely, the geostrategic developments of the new millennium – mainly concerning NATO and the EU's expansion to the former Eastern Bloc – along with the emerging approach of the West to Russia as a regional power, crossed the limit referred to above. Indeed, it was clearly stated in the *Russian National Security Strategy* of December 2015 that "the buildup of the military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the endowment of it with global functions pursued in violation of the norms of international law, the galvanization of the bloc countries' military activity, the further expansion of the alliance, and the location of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders are creating a threat to national security" (The

Kremlin, 2015). As a consequence, from case to case, by using military force in a direct (e.g. the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008) or an indirect (e.g. military support offered to separatists in Donbass starting with early of 2014) manner, along with the use of economic pressure (e.g. Russia-Ukraine gas disputes originating in 1992, moderated from time to time by Ukraine's concessions over the lease of Sevastopol until the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 by Russia) and of other soft-power instruments (e.g. support offered to the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova and to its ideological successors such as the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova), Russia managed to maintain not only its position as the leader of the WBSR, but also reinstated its status as Great Power with global outreach.

Most of these still ongoing strategic clashes between the Euro-Atlantic structures and Russia have common scenery: the Black Sea and, by extension, the WBSR. Apart from Russia, the rest of the Black Sea riparian states are either NATO members (Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria) or partners (Georgia and Ukraine). In addition, Romania and Bulgaria are also EU members, Turkey has an uncertain EU candidate state status, Georgia and Ukraine are members of the Eastern Partnership meanwhile Russia is a contested strategic partner of the EU in the light of this country's annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the War in Donbass (European Parliament Press Releases, 2015). Being an isolated body of water, the Black Sea is connected to the international maritime routes through two narrow Turkish Straits – Bosphorus that connects it with the Sea of Marmara; and Dardanelles that further connects the latter with the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. The access of the naval vessels in or out of the Black Sea is strictly regulated under the provisions of the Montreux Convention of 1936.

The Black Sea was a relative-low stake issue in the public agenda of international politics for more than a decade after the end of the Cold War. However, the high-impact of 9/11 on the global security architecture and the two major strategic maneuvers of the Euro-Atlantic structures in the WBSR - discussed above -, doubled by Russia's repositioning on the global stage, drew the international attention to the Black Sea and made it, in recent years, probably the most visible area of on-going geostrategic experiments. On the one hand, as Lucinescu pointed out, "the Wider Black Sea Region is extremely important for the Euro-Atlantic community because, along with the Mediterranean Sea, it can form a 'safety zone' to protect the European pillar of the Alliance from the major conflict outbreaks in Maghreb, the Middle East and the Caucasus area. At the same time, the western shore of the Black Sea has provided, in the last years, excellent bases of projection of military forces in the Middle East war zone, where NATO was actively involved in the last

decade" (2016, p. 4). On the other hand, the Black Sea is very important for the EU as well because most of its members rely on energy sources originating from or at least transiting this region. In addition, the Black Sea witnessed the newly-emerged challenges to the European security – such as nuclear proliferation, frozen conflicts, terrorism or the seemingly uncontrollable waves of refugees – which coupled with the dramatic shift of the US strategic interests away from Europe for more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, put pressure on the Europeans to share in the responsibility for global security in order to ensure their own integrity. Overall, NATO and the EU have not agreed so far on a common strategic vision for the Black Sea, mainly because of their different perception on the intensity of the threats. As Lucinescu remarked, the EU aims to create a circle of friends within its Eastern neighborhood meanwhile NATO rather promotes a dual concept of bridge-barrier for the region (2011, p. 90). From another perspective, the Black Sea is a common place for Russian history, still being a stronghold of geostrategic importance for this country (see Toucas, 2017), meanwhile Crimea plays a central role within this equation (Figes, 2014). Indeed, as Renz and Smith revealed "from the point of view of Russia, the country could not be 'sovereign' under the post-Cold war consensus. In order to ensure Russian 'sovereignty' (greatpowerness), a shift in the international balance of power was seen as inevitable" (2016, p. 21).

The annexation of Crimea and its subsequent militarization with Russian A2/AD – a game changer for the WBSR

The above-mentioned shift in the international balance of power – which also represents on this particular case a veritable game changer for the security environment in the WBSR – was materialized in March 2014 through the *de facto* annexation of Crimea and its subsequent militarization with Russian anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. As indicated in my previous conference paper entitled *The Twofold Outcome of Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine*, the trigger of this outcome was the organization of an alleged referendum in Crimea on 16 March 2014 by ethnic Russians – dissatisfied with the overthrow of Yanukovych in the light of the *Ukrainian Revolution* of February 2014 – whose result cleared the way for the Russian military intervention in the region on the basis of protecting the rights of Russian nationals abroad (the Kosovo precedent was claimed as well) and subsequently lead to Putin's official approval for the incorporation of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol into the Russian Federation on 18th of March 2014 (Popa, 2018, p. 15). In addition, the same article claims

that the current strategic objectives pursued by Russia when controversially enlarging its territory by annexing Crimea are to ensure Russia's control over the Port of Sevastopol and by extension safeguard its vital strategic interests in the WBSR. In this sense, some interconnected benefits for Russia can derive from this strategic maneuver: a newly-acquired capacity of global power-projection based on the independent-control of the Port of Sevastopol; a leverage for controlling navigation and protecting its communication lines and energy transportation routes in the Black Sea maritime space; an increased capacity to impede not only the energy diversification strategy of Ukraine, but also the potential of similar projects in the Black Sea foreseen by the other riparian states; and an unofficial subsidy for the Russian criminal networks to relocate their stronghold from the Port of Odessa to the Port of Sevastopol as the latter can offer lower transit costs and new trafficking routes meanwhile being assured in terms of security by the Russian Black Sea Fleet based there (Popa, 2018, p. 16-18). In addition, the annexation of Crimea without local resistance as a result of the almost overnight Ukrainian service personnel of Crimea's defection, a masterpiece of the Kremlin's propaganda in the recent years, was used on three levels: at national level, it consolidated Putin's leadership ahead of the Russian presidential elections of 2018; at regional level, it signalled the neighbouring countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence and encompassing nowadays a considerable number of Russian ethnics that the strengthening of their connections with the Euro-Atlantic structures is immediately condemned and strictly punished by Moscow; and at global level, it demonstrated that Russia needs to be treated as an equal interlocutor by the West at least when it comes to projecting security in the WBSR.

The annexation of Crimea has also provided Russia with an exquisite military infrastructure. Indeed, by citing the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, Daly revealed that "in addition to Sevastopol, the finest natural harbor in the Black Sea, Russia also acquired the former Crimean Ukrainian naval bases of Novoozerne on Donuzlav Bay, Myrnyi (Donuzlav Lake), Saky, Balaklava and a marine infantry base at Feodosiia" (2014). In any way, the main military platform seized was the Port of Sevastopol whose control was regained in the post-Cold War era by Russia as a result of Boris Yeltsin's agreement on the 1997 Black Sea Fleet Partition Treaty that established both the sum required to be paid by Russia for stationing its Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol and the value of the compensation given to Ukraine for its part of the Soviet divided fleet; and of the update of this agreement in 2010 when Dmitry Medvedev signed the Kharkiv Pact which acknowledged the exchange of the sum of the lease for a discounted price for Ukraine's import of Russian natural gas.

Indeed, according to Alan Yuhas and Raya Jalabi, Sevastopol has been used by Russia even before the annexation of Crimea as an important hub to project Russia's naval power on a global platform as it has proved its efficiency during the Black Sea Fleet staged blockades in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and during the Syrian civil war when the Port of Sevastopol served as an alternative for the temporary inaccessibility of the Port of Tartus (2014). In this sense, the annexation of Crimea valued even more in the equation of Russia's power projection at the Black Sea as "the takeover of Crimea not only eliminates the need to pay these fees, but Russia gains an opportunity to modernise the Fleet in any way it sees fit, which so far had been limited by the Russian-Ukrainian agreement which only provided for the possibility of renovating the equipment that was already there (Olszanski et al, 2014)".

The accelerated modernisation of the newly-acquired military infrastructure of Crimea has started since 2014 under the authority of Sergey Shoigu, the current Russian Minister of Defence, and transformed the peninsula in a veritable strategic *place d'armes* in the Black Sea. There is a long list of high-end military equipments deployed by Russia in Crimea after the annexation of the peninsula. Some of these deployments are officially confirmed by the Kremlin meanwhile the others are still having a speculative status – statements launched in this sense by policymakers, military experts and scholars should be treated with caution as they can actually represent fake news used by the belligerent parties through various channels of propaganda in the light of the ongoing War in Donbass and of the unsettled legal status of Crimea. For example, Celac et al. mentioned that the Soviet ships have largely been modernized, and reinforced with two Admiral Grigorovich-class guided missile frigates. Additionally, the Russian Navy has expanded its submarine flotilla in Sevastopol, with the addition of four to six 'Improved' Kilo-class submarines (...) A squadron of Su-30SM's provides air cover, while an Su-24 detachment offers Russian commanders a long-range antiship and anti-ground platform (2016, p. 8). In addition, J. Wade of the international security blog *Conflict Observer* announced that new Podsolnukh over-the-horizon radar could be installed in Crimea enabling the detection of any foreign ship passing through the Bosphorous Strait in Turkey and as for anti-ship capabilities, the K-300P Bastion-P is already deployed around Sevastopol to protect docked warships (2017). Even more, Ukraine's Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons has recently issued a public statement announcing that, as of late September 2018, the anti-aircraft missile Systems S-400 *Triumf* have been deployed by Russia near the cities of Sevastopol, Feodosia and Yevpatoria (2018). From another perspective, the inauguration in May 2018 of the Crimean Bridge over the

Kerch Strait– an infrastructure development aimed to fully cut the Crimean Peninsula off from mainland Ukraine by creating a land connection between the former and Russia’s Krasnodar region –offers Russia control of the both sides of the Kerch Strait meanwhile allowing this country to supply with resources the newly-annexed territory.

As a result, the new Russian military developments in Crimea had a direct impact on both the efficiency of the ground force, navy, air force and air defence units and the quality of the existent infrastructure; this multifaceted capacity led to the creation of an efficient A2/AD around the Crimean Peninsula. According to Anastasov of *NATO’s Political Affairs and Security Policy Division*, “Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) is a military jargon to describe the situation when a state deploys weapons systems, often with long-range capabilities, to deny foreign forces freedom of movement in the theatre. Land-based surface-to-air missiles, surface-to-surface ballistic or cruise missiles, and anti-ship missiles are the capabilities most often used for building up A2/AD. Additional elements may be added to the system for example: advanced aircrafts, surface ships and submarines” (2018). As an extension, the A2/AD in Crimea is strengthened by a Russian-fuelled high-intensity hybrid warfare – “a form of violent conflict that combines a range of different dimensions of war (military, economic, information and cyber), tactics (regular and irregular) and actors (state and non-state)” (Scheipers, 2016, p. 47). In this sense, the operationalization of the A2/AD around the Crimean peninsula adds to the already existent Russian A2/AD system encompassing military deployments from the Arctic region down to Syria, with a high-density in the Kalinigrad Oblast. According to Jankowsky, “Russia’s A2/AD systems are important for two other reasons. First, a leaner chain of command and streamlined decision-making system mean Russia can act much faster than NATO allowing it to achieve escalation control. Second, nuclear weapons remain a crucial element of Russia’s escalation dominance strategy. In a situation when allied forces would consider breaking through Russia’s A2/AD system, Russia could threaten to use its nuclear capabilities as a deterrent (...) Through this approach, Russia can control the level of conflict escalation, dominating the mechanism and circumstance of escalations where nuclear elements play a fundamental role” (2018). The amplitude of these recent military developments in Crimea suggests that the A2/AD systems employed there have not only a defensive posture, but an offensive potential as well. Indeed, as Celac et al. remarked “Russia couples its naval superiority in the Black Sea with growing political and military influence in the surrounding states (...) Increasing political power combined with a strong military position make Russia the virtual regional hegemon at this point

(2016, p. 17)". Indeed, the potential Western perception of the Black Sea as a *Russian lake* is very dangerous as it implies long-term effects on the Eastern European countries, similar to those of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. According to Socor, "such a perception could eventually lead to: sealing the occupation of territories from Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova as permanent Russian gains; re-admitting Russia into 'regional' (i.e., limited to riparian countries) security arrangements, in which Russia would no longer be Turkey's equal but would far exceed Turkey's power; and turning Russia into an arbiter of energy markets and pipelines in a number of European destination countries far beyond the Black Sea" (2018). Therefore, as it can be seen below, the recent transformation of Crimea into a military stronghold threatening the security and stability in the WBSR could not remain without a reaction from the stakeholders of the region.

Consequences of Crimea's recent militarization and the stakeholders' reaction

According to J. Mearsheimer, the security dilemma reflects the basic logic of offensive realism. The essence of this dilemma is that measures taken by a state to increase its own security generally lead to diminishing the security of other states (2001, p. 30). From this perspective, the most affected country by Crimea's recent militarization under the *de facto* Russian authority is by default Ukraine. In addition to the loss of territory, of a series of implicit civilian and military assets and of real perspectives to join the Euro-Atlantic structures discussed above, Ukraine is also affected on two dimensions by the questionable legal status of the maritime space around the Crimean Peninsula. Firstly, in terms of trade, the militarization of Crimea coupled with the operationalization of the Crimean Bridge have a dramatic economic impact on the Ukrainian region of Donbass – this region is already impoverished since its 2014 split between the Ukrainian government and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR, respectively LPR). According to R. B. Urcosta of *The Jamestown Foundation*, "Moscow's *de facto* control of both sides of the Kerch Strait, combined with its activities that limit freedom of navigation for Ukrainian vessels there, essentially turn the Azov Sea into a 'Russian lake'. As such, Russia is progressively pushing to deprive Ukraine of its economic and political sovereignty in and around the Azov Sea" (2017). Adding insult to injury, DPR has created since 2015 its own so-called flotilla at the Azov Sea (see Ostrov, 2016). As a result of these actions, the trade turnover for example in Mariupol, Ukrainian city confronted with an already delicate social situation since 2014 and which is heavily dependent on its

ability to export Ukrainian steel to international markets, is anticipated to fall by 25–30 percent (Kabanenko, 2017). Secondly, in terms of energy – considered as both the subsoil resources of the Black and Azov Seas and the energy routes crossing this maritime space from the Caspian Sea on their way to the European continent – the loss of Crimea is synonymous with the reduction in size of Ukraine's continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). According to Olszanski et al, the loss of Crimea practically negates the possibility of Ukraine implementing projects to extract hydrocarbons from the Black Sea shelf which it had planned jointly with Western companies (2014). In addition, Russia even proposed in 2016 a new energy route through Crimea for the building of South Stream (Novinite, 2016). Even though the South Stream project is obsolete as of October 2018, this proposal reveals Russia's intention to fully-exploit the Crimean's maritime space. Indeed, the operationalisation of the TurkStream – a natural gas pipeline currently under construction from Russia to Turkey – diminishes the necessity of transiting the Russian gas to Europe via Ukraine. Even though Vladimir Putin assured in May 2018 that Russia would not halt the transit of gas through Ukraine if this remained cost-effective (Sputnik, 2018), it is almost a certitude that the operationalisation of TurkStream and Nord Stream 2 – a natural gas pipeline currently under construction from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea – will drastically reduce the current transit revenues collected by Ukraine.

The Black Sea riparian states have also been affected directly, in terms of trade and energy, by the annexation of Crimea – at a lower intensity though compared to Ukraine. As Russia's annexation of Crimea is not recognized by the rest of the Black Sea riparian states, this situation creates volatile borders. For Romania, Russia's intention over the newly-obtained EEZ around the Crimean Peninsula is highly important since it was only in 2009 that the International Court of Justice settled its dispute with Ukraine regarding the EEZ around Serpent's Island, an area on which Russia may express its interest. Therefore, Romanian's victory of 2009 can be partially invalidated by the annexation of Crimea. As Joja put it, now that Romania and Russia are maritime neighbours, bilateral disputes are far more likely. In this sense, Russia has the capacity to obstruct explorations, force the withdrawal of Romanian companies, block commercial flow from the Danube River to the Black Sea, or even attack Romanian capabilities in the Exclusive Economic Zone (2018). Bulgaria is also concerned about disruption to maritime trade routes because, as Bugajski and Doran indicate, 80% of this country's imports and exports are shipped via the Black Sea (2016, p. 3). Nevertheless, the biggest Russian threat remains the military one. Numerous incidents both in air and on sea have been periodically reported since 2014 as a result of the

questionable delimitation of the Black Sea's maritime and air space. Probably the most alarming one happened in January 2018 when an armed Russian Su-27 jet performed an unsafe intercept of a US Navy EP-3 surveillance plane, flying within 5 feet of the US military aircraft, in order to prevent the US plane from entering a claimed Russian airspace near Crimea (Browne, 2018). In addition, the potential offensive posture of the Russian A2/AD can provoke nightmares for the policymakers of the riparian states. According to some unconfirmed Ukrainian reports of this year (UNIAN, 2018), Russia has already deployed advanced nuclear-capable missiles Iskander which can easily reach the shores of the riparian states and cause devastating effects. Likewise, even though the hybrid warfare supposedly perpetrated by Russia in the WBSR has more subtle effects, it can certainly cause high damage for the Black Sea riparian states. Anastasov confirms that "the entire region, down to each individual country, is weaker, less open for integration and dangerously prone to subversion. A regular instrument of choice is the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories, many of which suggest a hidden Western agenda. More often the aim is to fuel anti-establishment grievances, including direct support for political parties with anti-NATO agendas and anti-European agendas, feeding Euro-skepticism at large" (2018). As a consequence, facing the probability of sharing volatile frontiers with Russia, the riparian states have responded through various initiatives that would allow the strengthening of their military positions. In general terms, this reaction was grouped under the frameworks of the Euro-Atlantic structures. While the EU plays a more civil role in enforcing the security of the Black Sea riparian states by promoting the rule of law and good governance, NATO remains the only viable coagulator of the military initiatives at the Black Sea aimed to strengthen the position of the riparian states as a result of Crimea's recent militarization.

NATO's main contributor, the United States, has developed military bases in the Black Sea riparian states since the Cold War – e.g, the Incirlik Air Base and Izmir Air Station, both on Turkish land. Subsequently, the United States multiplied them at the same time with NATO's formation of the Southern part of its Eastern flank, by using Romania's infrastructure such as Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base, Babadag training base, Smardan training area, Cincu training area and the recently-become operational AEGIS Ashore missile defence facility in Deveselu; and Bulgaria's Aytos Logistics Center, Novo Selo Range, Bezmer Air Base and Graf Ignatievo Air Base. However, NATO as a collective defence organization focused on the importance of the military positions of the Black Sea riparian states only after 2004 when Romania and Bulgaria joined as new members. This development was very slow and it was activated only as a reaction aimed to mitigate the effects of an existent crisis.

Indeed, two major events on the shores of the Black Sea during the post-Cold War period intensified NATO's appetite to ensure security in the region: firstly, the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 made NATO send its Standing Maritime Group One to conduct port visits and joint exercises with Romania and Bulgaria – as revealed by Kramer, this action was condemned overtly by Russia as a violation of the Montreux Convention (2008); and secondly, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 provoked NATO to consolidate its South-Eastern flank by forming a Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea (Reuters, 2017).

From another perspective, the Black Sea riparian states have also proposed initiatives to enhance the military cooperation at regional level, without a compulsory prerequisite for NATO framework. Even though some of them were operationalized – such as *Black Sea Harmony* or *BLACKSEAFOR* –, these initiatives had modest results in terms of strengthening friendship and good neighborly relations among the Black Sea riparian states, mainly because of Russia's destabilizing activities in the region – this state being a member of these military developments. However, the most promising initiative still waiting for its operationalization as of 2018 remains the Romanian proposal of 2016, discussed below, aiming to create the premises for an enhanced Black Sea naval cooperation with Turkey and Bulgaria.

The Romanian proposal for an enhanced naval cooperation with the other Black Sea riparian states NATO members

Romania has been promoting the importance of ensuring security at the Black Sea long before Russia's annexation of Crimea. It was in the interest of Bucharest to establish and consolidate the presence of the Euro-Atlantic structures within the region as a way of ensuring its own security. According to *Romania's National Defense Strategy 2015-2019*, the national security objectives pursue – among others – ensuring security in the Black Sea region; deepening cooperation with neighboring states and states of NATO's Eastern flank; and intensifying regional cooperation, including in the field of defense (2015, p. 10). As a consequence, in the light of its assumed national security objectives coupled with Russia's destabilising activities at its borders, Romania's proposal to Turkey and Bulgaria, in the preparation of the Warsaw Summit of July 2016, for a Black Sea enhanced naval cooperation under a non-compulsory NATO umbrella – i.e. the cooperation could have been conducted at trilateral level, possibly in a NATO context – came as a natural action. Mihnea Motoc, a Romanian diplomat who has served as Minister of Defence between November 2015 and January 2017, announced in April 2016 the

launch for consultation of this initiative envisaged as a platform for enhanced naval cooperation between the NATO members of the Black Sea that would allow – based on constant exercises – the existence of an almost permanent Allied naval presence in the region, in full compliance with the Montreux Convention. In addition, the high-ranking official announced that this initiative will be open for the Black Sea members of the Eastern Partnership – Georgia and Ukraine – as well as for the non-Black Sea members of NATO such as the United States (Pantazi, 2016).

A series of bilateral meetings were conducted by the mentioned Romanian defense minister and acting Romanian foreign affairs minister at the time, Lazar Comanescu, with their Bulgarian counterparts in order to reach a consensus regarding the political and military parameters of this initiative. Bulgaria's initial responses appeared to be positive since at the time Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev endorsed it publicly during his Romanian counterpart Klaus Iohannis's visit to Sofia in mid June 2016 by expressing his acknowledgement on the Bulgarian defense minister Nikolay Nenchev and Bulgarian foreign affairs minister Daniel Mitov's initial consent of the Romanian initiative (President of Romania – Press statements, 2016). However, a dramatic shift in the Bulgarian stance emerged during the same visit of Romania's president in Bulgaria. Being alarmed by a potential lack of a NATO flag for this initiative and assessing the risks of Russia's retaliation over his country as a result of the operationalisation of this trilateral initiative – i.e. with or without a NATO flag –, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov appeared at a joint press conference with Plevneliev calling for the revoke of the preliminary consent. Borisov was justifying his decision as "I always say that I want the Black Sea to see sailboats, yachts, large boats with tourists and not become an arena of military action (...) I do not need a war in the Black Sea" (cited in Reuters, 2016). Even though Plevneliev, Nenchev and Mitov moderated their opinion regarding the Romanian initiative, they were still favourable to it ahead of the Warsaw Summit as long as it was implemented in a NATO format and not as a trilateral initiative possibly seeking at an unknown date a NATO mandate (see Bulgarian News Agency, 2016). This was not the case of Borisov who maintained his position up until the Warsaw summit. Yordan Bozhilov, the President of *Sofia Security Forum* and Manager of Programs *South East Europe and Black Sea* reveals some methods of Russia's potential blackmail that might have forced the Bulgarian prime minister to reject the Romanian initiative: "A few days prior to the visit of the Romanian President in Bulgaria it became clear that Sofia will have to pay the Russian company 'Atomstroyexport' EUR 550 million for commissioned but undelivered equipment for the construction of a second nuclear power plant

in Bulgaria (...) Furthermore, Bulgaria is very much dependent on Russian supplies of oil and gas, fuel and equipment for the first nuclear power plant, as well as maintenance of military aviation, composed of Soviet MIG 29 and SU 25. Moreover, given the scheduled November Presidential elections (2016) Bulgarian politicians did not want to lose the 'Russian vote', as many Bulgarians have traditionally positive attitudes towards Russia" (2017).

Turkey has not assumed any official position in the consultation process regarding the Romanian initiative ahead or after the Warsaw summit. Kogan of *European Security & Defence* journal explains briefly the Turkish position: "Turkey remains very reserved and cautious regarding its naval force participation. Yes, Turkey supports a limited and scaled-up NATO reinforcement of the Black Sea region but as long as it does not impact its interpretation of the Montreux Convention (2017, p. 14). In this sense, during a meeting of the heads of general staff of Balkan nations in Istanbul in May 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that he asked NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to deploy more assets to the Black Sea, otherwise this area becomes a Russian lake. Erdogan also mentioned that Turkey expects concrete results in this sense from the NATO summit in Warsaw (Sputnik International, 2016a). Turkey's cautiousness can also be explained by the numerous challenges this country faced both in terms of domestic and external affairs since the end of November 2015 up until the end of 2016. Indeed, it all started on 24 November 2015 when a Turkish combat aircraft shot down a Russian aircraft close to the Turkish-Syrian border in the context of the recent launch of the Russian military intervention in support of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. Russia responded immediately through imposing sanctions on Turkey and conducting bombings in the disputed Syrian-Turkish border (Bertrand, 2015), meanwhile projecting its military power through more frequent warships sailing through Bosphorus as a way of 'enjoying the freedom of movement in peace time' under the provisions of the Montreux Convention (Pitel, 2016). The process of normalization of the Turkish-Russian relations started in June 2016 when Erdogan expressed his regret to Putin for the shooting down of the Russian aircraft. Only few days after the Warsaw summit, Erdogan was confronted with a failed *coup d'état* that deteriorated relations with the United States and strengthened those with Russia. Indeed, on 9 August 2016 Erdogan and Putin met in St. Petersburg for the first time since the incident of November 2015, being the first trip abroad of the Turkish president after the failed *coup d'état*. Even though the Turkish-Russian relations could have been deteriorated again by the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey Andrei Karlov on 19 December 2016, Erdogan and Putin managed to mitigate the effects of this event and further

consolidated their countries' bilateral relations – their most-recent developments will be discussed below.

Ukraine welcomed the Romanian initiative ahead of the Warsaw summit. Indeed, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko declared in April 2016, during his visit to his Romanian counterpart, that “we support Romania's initiative to create a NATO-supported allied fleet. I emphasize that we're ready to join it after this initiative has been approved and supported by the Alliance. This is what has been agreed with Mr. President (Iohannis), and we are set to develop that cooperation” (cited in UNIAN, 2016). In this sense, an Allied enhanced naval cooperation could have helped directly this country by conducting actions assuring the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, desperately needed by the Ukrainian vessels attempting to enter the EEZ around the Crimean Peninsula in the Black and Azov Seas. Subsequently, Ukraine had offered its Ochakiv Naval Base in Ukraine for the US-construction of a maritime center which was officialy launched on 25 July 2017 (*Sputnik International*, 2017a) and harmonised its national legislation on the admission of units of the armed forces of foreign states to the territory of the Ukrainian state in 2018 to participate in multinational exercises (Interfax-Ukraine News Agency, 2018).

Georgia has remained silent during the consultation process even though – as in the case of Ukraine – this country would definitely welcome an Allied enhanced naval cooperation assuring the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. This necessity derives from the loss of the most of Georgian fleet during the 2008 conflict with Russia and is reflected especially in the case of its port Poti where the remaining Georgian Coast Guard vessels are facing the risk of being blocked to go beyond the coastal waters, on the basis of deterring a threat to the coast of Abkhazia, by the Russian fleet. According to some speculations such as the one promoted by the Russian analytical information agency *Vestnik Kavkaza*, Georgia has also been discouraged ahead of the Warsaw summit by its last minute forced withdrawal from the NATO's military exercise 'Anakonda 2016' hosted by Poland in June 2016 on the grounds of not escalating the tensions with Russia (Kalatozishvili, 2016) – hypothesis branded by Georgia's Minister of Defence as Russian propaganda meanwhile advancing medical reasons for the last-minute withdrawal of the Georgian Infantry Company (for details, see Ministry of Defence of Georgia – Press Statements, 2016). Subsequently, following in Ukraine's footsteps, Georgia offered NATO the possibility of using its national infrastructure for training purposes and even requested NATO to create a coast guard base in the port of Poti as part of NATO's efforts to boost security in the Black Sea region (*Sputnik International*, 2017b).

Overall, as it can be seen, it is worthwhile noting the difference of position of the stakeholders involved in the Romanian initiative. There are certain national interests and risk assessments that stopped the operationalisation of an Allied enhanced naval cooperation in the Black Sea so far. As Lucinescu remarked, the cooperation in the WBSR is affected by heterogeneity (politically, economically, culturally and religiously), lack of a culture of dialogue, military incidents, exacerbation of energy competition for existing resources and, furthermore, complicated due to the Kosovo precedent which feeds separatist and nationalist-extremist aspirations” (2011, p. 91). The division among the stakeholders of this initiative is definitely fuelled as well by Russia’s actions in this sense – it could be seen in the dramatic shift of the Bulgarian position towards the Romanian proposal – as it serves its interests not to have neighbours united in a military development where Russia’s access is denied by default. Indeed, some Russian military experts such as Konstantin Sivkov threatened that the creation of such a fleet would be a violation of the Montreux Convention and it can be regarded as an act of military aggression against Russia, with all the corresponding consequences (Sputnik International, 2016b).

The (post) Warsaw Summit effects on the Romanian initiative

The Warsaw summit of 2016 represented the turning point in the perception of NATO vis-à-vis the Black Sea riparian states (NATO, 2016). Within this summit the Black Sea’s strategic importance was reiterated for the first time since the end of the Cold War while NATO signaled its anxiety regarding Russia’s destabilizing activities in the region. However, as Joja & Manea remarked, “though in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation the Alliance promised to increase readiness in Europe and consolidate defense on the Eastern flank, the 2016 Warsaw focused only on the Baltic Sea. The differentiation between the Northern (Baltic Sea) and the Southern part (Black Sea) of the Eastern flank was conceptualised as ‘enhanced’ versus ‘tailored’ forward presence and translated into four battalions of Western combat troops on the ground and the continuous rotational presence in the North, while only training and staff units, no Western framework nations and intermittent rotational presence in the South” (2018). Even though Russia’s recent destabilizing activities occurred in the Southern part of the Eastern flank, this imbalance in terms of resources allocated by NATO – favoring the Northern part of the Eastern flank – can be justified by the aforementioned lack of cohesion between the Black sea riparian states.

From another perspective, the Warsaw summit placed the Romanian initiative at a standstill rather than encompassing it under its authority – this status is maintained as of October 2018. Indeed, even though the 23rd paragraph of the Warsaw Summit Communiqué mentioned that “we [NATO] will continue to support, as appropriate, regional efforts by the Black Sea littoral states aimed at ensuring security and stability”, the 41st paragraph acknowledged that “options for a strengthened NATO air and maritime presence will be assessed” (NATO, 2016). As Bugajski and Doran (2016, p. 4) pointed out “rather than committing itself to a naval buildup, NATO is more likely to support a semi-integrated structure for the navies of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, with funding for infrastructural modernization”. This propension on NATO’s behalf to empower the Black Sea states so as to ensure their own security through regional initiatives potentially enforced by NATO is not only about avoiding escalating tensions with Russia, but also about its historical institutional relations with Turkey in terms of using the latter’s Straits. As Vladimir Socor noted, “long before the present crisis, Turkey was reluctant to accept NATO in its collective capacity to be present in the Black Sea. Instead, Turkey allowed warships of individual NATO member countries (the United States and others) to enter the Black Sea, more or less regularly, for port calls and joint exercises with riparian navies. For their part, NATO allies carefully complied with the limitations of the Montreux Convention (...) Turkey blocked NATO’s proposals to allow Operation Active Endeavor (2001-2016), an Allied naval operation, to be extended from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea. Although NATO’s proposals were compliant with the Montreux Convention, Turkey saw this operation as a collective one and blocked it, not least for that political reason. In August 2008, unilaterally interpreting the Montreux Convention, Turkey blocked the passage of an unarmed U.S. transport and hospital ship en route to Georgia during the Russian invasion of that country” (2016).

As of 2018, among the measures proposed since the Warsaw summit, the following have already been developed: the multinational brigade in Craiova, for which Romania is a framework nation, makes up the land component of the forward presence; in the air domain, some Allied states are voluntarily reinforcing Romania and Bulgaria’s efforts for air policing; in the maritime domain, standing NATO maritime forces are present with more ships and more naval exercises (under the command of the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 operating in the Mediterranean). A Black Sea functional centre, which focuses on the regional specific security issues and maintains tight links with the regional navies, has been established; last, but not least, a new enhanced training initiative aims to bring more coherence in all training

efforts (Anastasov, 2018). Not ultimately, NATO seems to reach a compromise in terms of the Southern part of the Eastern flank's requirement for reinforced security. By offering itself a wider space of maneuvering while temporize its decision on the operationalization of the Romanian initiative, NATO has recently committed to address the Russia's A2/AD in the Black Sea through its Readiness Initiative – *the Four Thirties*. In the preparation of the Brussels Summit of July 2018, NATO defence ministers held a meeting where they have set the military parameters of this development aimed to be operationalized by 2020 – 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 naval combat vessels; all ready to use within 30 days – and its scope – to enhance the readiness of existing national forces and their ability to move within Europe and across the Atlantic (see NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2018). All these (post) Warsaw developments have been indicated vaguely in the official communiqué following the most recent NATO summit organized in Brussels (11-12 July 2018), the 14th paragraph officially acknowledging the launch of the NATO Readiness Initiative and its general parameters – as set during the NATO defence ministers' meeting of June – meanwhile the 26th paragraph mentioning though that “we [the Heads of State and Government participating in the summit] welcome progress towards the full implementation of the agreed measures, and particularly in the maritime domain, while noting that further work is required” (NATO, 2018). Based on this final remark, coupled with the opinion of some military experts such as Iulia Joja who argues in the light of the launch of NATO Readiness Initiative that members on NATO's Eastern flank would potentially still have to wait weeks for military aid in the event of Russian aggression (2018), the feasibility of the Romanian proposal for an enhanced naval cooperation in the Black Sea has not yet been decided by the NATO policymakers; as a consequence, its validation is still possible in the short-term.

The Montreux Convention – strategic and operational challenges for the Romanian initiative

Understanding the limits imposed by the Montreux Convention is highly-important for assessing the feasibility of the Romanian initiative. Having been signed in 1936 and updated unilaterally twice by Turkey only in terms of its provisions concerning the safety of navigation – in 1994 and 1998 –, Montreux Convention has legitimated ever since the Turkish control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. This Convention sets the navigation rules through the Straits for both merchant vessels and warships in time of peace and in time of war (for full details regarding the provisions of the Montreux

Convention, see League of Nations, 1936). This paper analyses only the relevant provisions of the Montreux Convention for the Romanian initiative, namely those applicable to the warships in time of peace. In this sense, there are two perspectives that need to be taken into account.

Firstly, from an operational point of view, the Montreux Convention sets some restrictions depending on whether the warships belong to the Black Sea riparian states or not. Since the Romanian initiative is in full compliance with the Montreux Convention, both cases should be considered. On the one hand, as the Romanian initiative has been originally addressed to the riparian states, this convention imposed the following main restrictions on them: according to Articles 12 and 13, the submarines of these countries that are constructed, purchased or in need of being repaired outside the Black Sea are allowed to cross the Straits if they provide an eight-day notice in advance to Turkey and must travel by day, on the surface, pass singly and escorted by no more than two destroyers; even though the Convention contains no explicit prohibition on aircraft carriers, the maximum aggregate tonnage of 15.000 ton limit imposed to the foreign naval forces in course of transit through the Straits by Article 14 impedes the presence of the aircraft carriers in the Black Sea – as an exception, the Soviet Union developed its Kiev-class and Kuznetsov-class aircraft carriers as *aircraft carrying cruisers* and classified them as capital ships to comply with the Article 11 of the Montreux Convention that allows the Black Sea Powers to access the Straits with war vessels having a greater tonnage than the limit above mentioned (League of Nations, 1936, p. 221-223). The only war vessel of this type still possessed by Russia is the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrying cruisers which at the end of October 2018 was highly-damaged by a crane which fell on to it while being overhauled at a floating dock near Murmansk (Rainsford, 2018). On the other hand, apart from some general limits applicable to all, the Montreux Convention sets the following main operational restrictions for the non-riparian states when sending war vessels in time of peace through the Straits: Article 13 – a notification given 15 days in advance to the Turkish Government; Article 14 – the total number and the maximum aggregate tonnage of all foreign naval forces which may be in course of passage through the Turkish Straits are limited to 9 and 15.000 tons, respectively; Article 18 – the maximum aggregate tonnage which non-riparian States may have in the Black Sea is 45.000 tons meanwhile the maximum aggregate tonnage of the vessels of war that one non-riparian State may have in the Black Sea is 30.000 tons. In addition, vessels of war belonging to non-Black Sea Powers cannot remain in the Black Sea more than 21 days (League of Nations, 1936, pp. 223-225). As a consequence, even though the Romanian initiative would be

operationalized, the current operational provisions of the Montreux Convention are permissive only to the riparian states; meanwhile the contribution of the non-Black Sea members of NATO would be limited in terms of quantity, quality and duration of their deployable capabilities in the Black Sea.

Secondly, as the enhanced naval cooperation has been originally announced by Romania to be also opened under NATO framework to the Black Sea members of the Eastern Partnership – Georgia and Ukraine – as well as for the non-Black Sea members of NATO such as the United States, understanding the application of the Montreux Convention in the Black Sea is very important from a strategic point of view as well. The current status quo undoubtedly favours Russia and Turkey and maintains as of now the two-hegemon paradigm in the Black Sea. It is worth mentioning that the US has never ratified the Montreux Convention even though this Great Power accepts in general terms its provisions. However, the recent increase of the American focus on the Black Sea suggests its desire to reconfigure the balance of power in the region by contesting the anachronic provisions of the Montreux Convention. Lucinescu indicates that in the following period we will witness an American attempt to promote a geopolitical revisionism in the Black Sea aimed to replace the preeminence of Russia and Turkey with a cooperative regional framework (2011, pp. 23-24). Indeed, the Romanian proposal for an Allied naval cooperation in the Black Sea can be regarded as an expression of this American ambition to contest the superiority of Russia and Turkey in the region. However, the operationalisation of the Romanian proposal in the near future depends on the evolution of the relations between Turkey and Russia on one side and between Turkey and the US on the other side. As mentioned earlier, the failed *coup d'état* of July 2016 attempted to overthrow the Erdogan regime deteriorated Turkey's relations with the United States and strengthened those with Russia. Adding insult to injury, Turkey's credibility as a NATO ally diminished severely ever since due to some controversial actions taken by the Erdogan regime after the failed *coup d'état*, such as: a massive purge of the officer corps educated in the West (Emmott, 2016; Jacinto, 2017); Turkey's intention to buy Russian S-400 defence systems (Al Jazeera, 2018); and a series of bilateral disputes with the US, including the extradition process of the Turkish cleric US-based Fetullah Gülen accused of orchestrating the failed *coup d'état*, the imprisonment on terrorism charges of the American evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson, diverging interests in Syria and Turkey's presumed economic ties with North Korea. Indeed, the period August-October 2018 witnessed probably the lowest level of the US-Turkish relations, the Trump administration imposing – in an unprecedented decision for the US

to hit a NATO ally with sanctions – a two-row sanctions on Turkey, firstly based on the imprisonment of Andrew Brunson (BBC, 2018) and secondly based on illegal economic ties between a Turkish company and the North Korean regime (Harris, 2018). The US-Turkish tensions have recently shown signs of reaching a consensus as a result of the release of Andrew Brunson in the wake of Turkey's attempt to build an international case against Saudi Arabia over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in its Istanbul-based consulate, culminated with a bilateral meeting Erdogan-Trump in November 2018 in Paris during a dinner held by the French President Emmanuel Macron (Karabat, 2018).

Furthermore, as Toucas argued, “if it [Turkey] wants to remain a leading stakeholder in the region, Ankara will have to strengthen ties with Romania and Bulgaria (...) Only then, would Turkey be able to talk to Russia as an equal and positively use its peculiar relationship with Moscow as an asset to stabilize the region” (2018). Even though nowadays Turkey has some of its best relations with Russia, history proved that its national security can be highly-affected if found unprepared in assuring its own security. In other words, “there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests” as revealed by an apocryphal aphorism considered by realists as a cornerstone of international relations. The Turkish Straits crisis is a relevant example in this sense with Turkey attempting to remain neutral during the Second World War, but forced under the pressure of the Soviet Union's request to allow Soviet shipping through the Straits and its subsequent show of naval force in the Straits, to call for US protection and subsequent NATO membership at the end of the WWII. A more recent case happened on 6 December 2015, amid tensions between Ankara and Moscow as a result of the November 2015 Russian Su-24 shootdown by Turkey, after footage emerged of a serviceman aboard Russia's Caesar Kunikov landing ship apparently aiming a surface-to-air missile launcher towards Turkey's largest city Istanbul while crossing Bosphorus (Hurriyet Daily News, 2015). As a consequence, these key arguments can favour the operationalization of the Romanian initiative in the near future.

Possible prospects for a permanent NATO Black Sea Fleet

The issue of a permanent NATO Black Sea Fleet can be easily resolved by revising the anachronic provisions of the Montreux Convention. However, apart from fearing direct retaliations from Moscow, Ankara is fully aware that, as Ogutcu put it, once Pandora's box is opened, you never know where it might end up – in addition, there is unwillingness among other parties, which had

signed the Convention to avoid any potential restrictions to free passage and incur the additional cost that may be brought on for ensuring the security of the waterways (2018). Therefore, the simplest method to increase the Allied naval presence in the Black Sea proves to be the most complicated one in the current international context. However, there are three major potential developments bypassing the Montreux Convention that would allow obtaining the ultimate presumed-goal of the Romanian proposal, namely the existence of a permanent NATO Black Sea Fleet or at least credible security guarantees for the NATO members of the Southern part of its Eastern flank.

First, the construction of the Kanal Istanbul, the man-made canal sought to be operationalised by Ankara in 2023 as a celebration of the centenary of the Turkish republic. The official argument for the construction of this infrastructure is to divert the critical volume of the maritime traffic from the Straits that have become some of the world's busiest choke points. Apart from being a measure directed to ensure the safety of navigation – indeed, the Straits are notorious for maritime accidents as over 140 occurred since 2006 (Ogutcu, 2018) – the Kanal Istanbul would allow the Turkish authorities to charge the shippers a transit fee for crossing it, a limited provision in this sense being available nowadays to Turkey when managing the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits. Turkey has not adopted yet an official position regarding the inclusion of the Kanal Istanbul under the provision of the Montreux Convention; however, the Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım declared in January 2018 that Kanal Istanbul would not be subject to the Montreux Convention (cited in Franchineau, 2018). If that were the case, the deployment of naval assets in the Black Sea by NATO non-riparian states would be committed only to the jurisdiction imposed by Turkey and not to a binding international agreement as of now. However, even in the case Turkey decides to include the Kanal Istanbul under the provisions of the Montreux Convention, the revision of this Convention is compulsory as the signing parties are entitled to renegotiate its provisions taking into account this potential newly-emerged context. In any case, the operationalisation of the Kanal Istanbul forces Turkey to consult with all the other Black Sea riparian states as the Straits are the only maritime routes to the world's oceans available to them.

Second, an interesting proposal worth to be taken into account was launched by A. Cohen of *Atlantic Council* who argued in favour of reflagging some NATO naval assets under the three Black Sea members' flags in order to boost permanent Allied naval capabilities in the Black Sea (2016). Some scholars such as Bugajski and Doran sustained his proposal, adding though that NATO partner countries, particularly Ukraine and Georgia, need to be also

engaged in this process as they can offer harboring capabilities for NATO forces (2016, p. 16). Even though this initiative has not been so far officially assumed by NATO as it will be perceived undoubtedly as a provocation by Russia, some measures taken in this sense can be remarked. The most recent example is the case of the two U.S. Island-class patrol boats given, according to the Ukrainian media, to Ukraine on 27 September 2018 as free military aid from the United States (Ponomarenko, 2018).

Third, even without reinforcing its naval presence in the Black Sea with additional non-riparian states' combat vessels over the current limits imposed by the Montreux Convention, NATO can still offer credible security guarantees for its Black Sea members by creating a chain of A2/AD bubbles around the Russian bubble in Crimea. Esebua proposes the materialization of this initiative through the creation of a Black Sea Defense Coordination Center, an integrated network of all source data exchanged, and the combined capabilities of robust land-based mobile anti-ship missiles, mobile air defense systems, and sea and air surveillance radars, as well as aviation and naval assets (2017, p. V). Bugajski and Doran argue in favour of such an initiative given that a buildup of maritime capabilities is an expensive and long-term proposition meanwhile creating a robust A2/AD zone would entail lower costs for the Black Sea members of NATO than building a fleet of naval vessels (2016, p. 10). Not ultimately, according to Esebua this initiative can serve several goals such as: restriction of the freedom of action for Russia in the Black Sea; creation of robust individual defenses for littoral NATO member and partner states; enhanced regional cooperation and increased control of NATO over the region as whole (2017, p. 59).

Conclusion

Evolved as a reaction to the annexation of Crimea and its subsequent militarization by Russia, the Romanian proposal of 2016 for an enhanced naval cooperation in the Black Sea has not yet been decided by the NATO policymakers. The individual national interests and risk assessments of the Black Sea riparian states stopped its operationalisation for the time being even though the current status quo favours solely Russia and Turkey. As Celac et al. pointed out, "today, as during the Cold War, NATO's solidarity, its members' willingness to meet their defense obligations, U.S. leadership, and regional cooperation are key to this region's (WBSR) future peace and prosperity, and to all of Europe's" (2016, p. 20). On the one hand, the US is fully-aware of this equation – by recently increasing its political focus and military presence in the WBSR – and as a consequence, this region can witness

the emergence of an American-fuelled geopolitical revisionism aimed to replace the preeminence of Russia and Turkey with a cooperative regional framework such as the one proposed by Romania. Indeed, this potential development can resolve the current security requirements of this region still lacking credible security guarantees in the face of a potential Russian aggression in spite of the recently-announced ones offered by the NATO Readiness Initiative. On the other hand, Turkey's recent volatile relations with the US and Russia impedes this country to ask for a revision of the anachronic provisions of the Montreux Convention that would allow an enhanced Allied naval presence in the Black Sea. However, the potential developments bypassing the Montreux Convention coupled with Turkey's determination to become a major actor in the region increase the odds for the operationalization of the Romanian proposal in the near future.

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