ASSESSING NATO'S READINESS TO RELEASE
A BLACK SEA STRATEGY BASED ON DYNAMICS PRIOR
TO NEGOTIATIONS FOR PEACE IN UKRAINE

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Abstract:

Despite the importance of the Black Sea, a region characterised by acts of aggression, competition for resources, expansionism, and political instability, NATO does not have an official security strategy for it, even after witnessing three years of war in Ukraine. Developments of early 2025 make it even more unclear if the allies are able to come to common grounds regarding the instruments of power that will be used to defend this area. Based on the evolutions witnessed prior to negotiations for peace in Ukraine, this paper examines the likelihood that NATO will take this action, emphasising the contributions of its riparian states, Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania. Using a theoretical framework established by Dr. Harry R. Yarger for understanding strategy, but extrapolating his insights from national level to an alliance level, this paper attempts to extract the advantages, difficulties, and primary areas of focus for developing this strategy by providing an analysis of scholarly literature, official documents, and primarily perspectives from these three nations. Important conclusions include the necessity of unifying different national priorities to improve responses to Russian aggression, the need for alternative measures to assure stronger deterrence, and the necessity of strengthening regional cooperation to assist the endeavour.

Keywords*: NATO; Black Sea; strategy security; Russia.*

Introduction

The Black Sea Region includes, at first glance, the littoral states Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine. Since the 24th of February 2022 – the day that marks the start of Russia's full

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invasion of Ukraine – it has been proved again to be the front-line region for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's deterrence efforts against Russia's revisionism.

Three of these states – Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey – are NATO members. The first two, despite being former communist one-party states and former satellites of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, are now providing an example of ascension and integration in the Euro-Atlantic system and of potential to exercise a more important role in Europe. With Russia seeking to prevent the replication of this model in former Soviet territories, the security architecture of this area becomes hard to navigate. Turkey finds itself in a position of trying to balance between NATO and Russia; Romania and Bulgaria are on a path to build their military capabilities to adapt to the level of threat in the Black Sea, and the allies are still reluctant to grant membership to Ukraine and Georgia, without prospects of their position changing too soon.

Given the apparent prolongation of conflict in the region, with the war in Ukraine continuing into 2025 and territories of Moldova and Georgia still under Russian occupation or control, it appears most likely that the Black Sea area will remain a key for pushing back Russia, at least for the European part of the alliance. Especially in times of uncertainty, a clear strategy would provide guidance on how defence and deterrence can be effectively managed in the long term and will prove common pro-activeness and anticipation capability of the allies in a changing political environment. A security strategy for this region, once established, could affirm NATO's commitment to preventing the Black Sea from becoming a "Russian lake", for example, by presenting a common set of objectives considered.

Although it might seem late or even more complicated, the allies coming together and agreeing on a strategic document is still needed in treating sovereignty challenges in the region (Atlantic Council, 2020), at least as an act of signalling deterrence through the expression of a common view on how the alliance will commit to defending this area long-term. Irrespective of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, taking into account that Russia's interest in the area will most likely never diminish, the allies will always have to choose how to defend from this potential adversary. Russia most like will still engage in the Black Sea as it is a

strategic gateway to warm water ports throughout the whole year, with Sevastopol and Novorossiysk on the route to access the Mediterranean Sea, that can secure the possibility for an extended military presence in the Middle East and not only. This is indicated by Russia modernising the Black Sea Fleet and the Southern Military District through the State Armaments Program (Hodges et al., 2022) and being now in a position of power obtained by the illegal annexation of Crimea, which allows it to use this strategic point to target all the Black Sea states by utilising the capacities built in the peninsula (DSCFC of NATO PA, 2023).

Besides the risks, threats, and vulnerabilities to the security of the littoral NATO members and their allies caused by Russia's expansionism, in the long term, considering a wider interconnected Black Sea Region that includes Moldova – indirectly connected to the Black Sea through Giurgiuleşti Port, Azerbaijan, and Armenia – the allies will have to take into account the implications of Iran and China as future key players that can significantly influence the dynamics in the region. Chinese expansionism is already visible in the neighbouring areas like the Caucasus, Central Asia, or even in European states.

Aim, objectives, and theoretical framework of the research

As of early 2025, NATO does not have an official strategic document regarding the security of the Black Sea region, this article aims at assessing NATO's readiness to develop it, starting from the hypothesis that a strategy is clearly needed in a region prone to crisis, in order to reflect the common choice of the allies on how to use their power to defend from threats originating here. In pursuit of this goal, the article will identify the benefits and challenges of agreeing on such a document, the implications of NATO's presence on the regional security environment, the importance of cohesion between the littoral allied states, while also trying to contribute with policy recommendations.

The research will employ a qualitative literature review, examining scholarly works, official documents, and open-sourced data. The current research available on this topic mainly consists of articles focused on the reasons NATO states in the area are incapable of coming to strong common grounds regarding some crucial aspects of foreign affairs. This paper seeks to analyse NATO's readiness to adopt a Black Sea security

strategy, by evaluating if the allies have already built some of the premises, meaning that it would be easier to translate them into a strategy. The evaluation will take into account the progress documented before the start of negotiations for peace in Ukraine.

As a theoretical framework for assessing NATO's readiness to engage in the adoption of a security strategy for this area, this paper will analyse if statements and actions, before early 2025, are strong indicators that the alliance is already able to develop a good strategy according to the criteria put together from various theories by Dr. Harry R. Yarger in "A Conceptual Foundation for a Theory of Strategy" (Bartholomees, 2006). He identifies several key premises for building a strategy:

- a strategy should be proactive, showing how to use the power available;
- the strategist must know what is to be accomplished, meaning the end-state which is desired to be achieved;
- the strategy must identify an appropriate balance among the objectives, the methods and the resources;
- political purpose, meaning the desired end-state defined by governments in policies, must dominate all strategy;
- strategy is hierarchical, meaning that it represents the views of a leader;
- strategy is comprehensive, being influenced and influencing the environment;
- strategy is developed from a thorough analysis and knowledge of the strategic environment, by highlighting all the factors that support it or could interfere with its implementation;
- risk is inherent, and the best any strategy can offer is a favourable balance against failure (Bartholomees, 2006).

These premises were turned in research questions about NATO's behaviour in the Black Sea, after coupling them based on their interdependence, this paper will examine if the alliance could easily: define a proactive and anticipatory strategy for the Black Sea; define and end-state supported by political purpose; find a balance between objectives, methods and resources; define a strategy based on hierarchy, comprehensiveness and knowledge of the environment. An exception in building this framework is including the last premise identified by

Yarger, which is more of a description of the effects of strategizing, so it remains just something to keep in mind as to why NATO would benefit from involving in this endeavour.

Can NATO easily define a proactive approach to the Black Sea?

The Black Sea region is already an area of strategic importance, considering that even if the premises of a NATO-Russia conflict have not been established after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or after illegally occupying Crimea, because Ukraine is not a NATO member, the threat continues to persist over this part of the eastern flank. It is indicated by numerous provocative actions. Just to name some, Russia's hybrid war against the NATO coastal states Romania and Bulgaria, facing new risks of escalations with Russia's drone attacks near their borders and new warning areas in the Black Sea, and the proximal combination of invasions, territory occupations, and hybrid threats used against the Euro-Atlantic aspirant states from this region: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, since the fall of the USSR.

In this complex environment, NATO lacks a Black Sea strategy to show its views of "the smallest set of choices to optimally guide other choices" (Van den Steen, 2013, p. 1). Since 2022, NATO has had a lot of choices to make concerning this region, thus, most likely, NATO members are already capable of a proactive and anticipatory approach to the Black Sea. This is because, as they have engaged with multiple crises in this area and are engaging in deterrence efforts, they can recognise patterns and anticipate potential future ones. With this ability, the Alliance can define how it will take initiative to improve the situation or to create a new one, which is a definition of proactive behaviour (Bateman and Crant, 1993). This is a valid assumption also because the Black Sea is historically a place for increased competition between the global powers and it has been, for a long time, the barrier between the East and the West (Altin, 2024).

The region is still the barrier between NATO, a presence in this area since 1952, and Russia; the meeting point of allies' efforts to deter Russia and Russia's efforts to keep the ex-USSR states in this region as a buffer zone. Therefore, since 2014, after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, both have raised their military capacities in the area. On one

side, Russia strengthened its land-based early warning and armament systems, as well as equipped its Black Sea Fleet with long-range land and sea missiles (Altin, 2024). On the other side, NATO started air policing over the Black Sea and NATO states land territory, forming for the first time NATO battle groups in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. NATO is enhancing its presence by placing two multinational battle groups in Romania and Bulgaria and increasing air patrolling of the sea for securing oceanic routes, infrastructure denial for securing the undersea facilities in the future, by the help its members provided for Ukraine, and by establishing the NATO–Ukraine Council and coordination with regional and international partners.

NATO having this significant presence in the Black Sea Region is a clear sign of the allies being able to anticipate a need for future defence, even if its position and credibility might depend on its future actions regarding expansion and resolving the ongoing and frozen conflicts in the region. In these regards, a strategy can show how members will use their means and resources to exercise control over these challenges, proving that the alliance doesn't seek escalation in the area, but firmly engages in building the defensive capacity of the riparian states.

For example, although a possible efficient approach to build up defensive capabilities would be to plan for NATO's possible expansion and a possible continuous naval presence in the Black Sea, backed by naval infrastructure, this will most likely be seen by Russia as a threat. A strategy could show the allies vision on how the members will increase the defence capacity, without straying from a defensive nature and increasing the chances of the region turning into a perpetual zone of conflicts.

Nonetheless, agreeing on "how" to achieve defence objectives in this region seems still very difficult, as there are still questions about even the riparian allies coming to common grounds or uniting to support an initiative.

Despite intra-alliance challenges that will be reviewed in the next chapter, NATO has taken consistent steps to enhance its presence and to increase regional cooperation, which can only demonstrate that the members possess the knowledge, instruments and capacity to clarify "how" the alliance will manage defending the area, not just to make it

able to react. NATO has a decades-long track record of training on recognising early warning signs in this area, of building presence, and maintaining operational continuity, even amid diverging member interests. Thus, theoretically, the first premise of a theory of strategy – "strategy is proactive and anticipatory" – could be easily established by the alliance in such an endeavour, bringing us one step closer to a Black Sea strategy.

Can NATO easily define an end-state supported by common political purpose in the Black Sea?

Defining what is to be accomplished by the allies in a Black Sea Strategy should not prove to be an impossible challenge, as they are already defined as a defensive alliance, they have already expressed the strategic importance of the area and some members are even more advanced in defining their purposes in national policy documents. Thus, besides common declarations and strategic documents, some allies have engaged in defining their political purpose in the area, the expression of the desired end-state sought by their government at some point in the last decade. Similar to how the difference in terms of power and ambition to project political purposes have determined different desired end-states in documents like national security strategies of the riparian states, the same phenomenon probably will probably occur when defining the common desired end-state. So this task might be more complicated.

Driven by the escalation in Ukraine, after the Madrid NATO Summit, on 29 June 2022, NATO released a new Strategic Concept that sets the Black Sea region as an „area of strategic importance for the Alliance", also acknowledging "Moscow's military build-up" (NATO, 2022, pp. 4-11) in the region, but this was not followed by properly developing a strategy for this critical flank of the alliance. Allies recognised again the strategic importance of the Black Sea region at their summit in Vilnius in July (NATO, 2023), for the first time in a summit communique, and the most relevant initiative in the Black Sea since then was scaling up the military presence in this eastern flank to multinational battalions in Romania and Bulgaria (DSCFC of NATO PA, 2023).

At an individual state level, The US Congress enacted in March 2023 a bill that called upon the security agencies to agree on a Black Sea

security strategy, the "Black Sea Security Act of 2023" (Congress.gov., 2023). The Act recognises the critical role of littoral states in contributing to the collective security of NATO and Russian expansionism as a threat to the national security of the United States and NATO. It also calls for NATO to develop a long-term security strategy for the eastern flank, a rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea, and Turkey to avoid future actions that could escalate tensions in the region and states the commitment to support and bolster economic ties with the Black Sea states, encouraging the advance of the Three Seas Initiatives. For the US, it seemed important, at that point, to increase cooperation, to prioritise intelligence gathering, to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for new forms of military presence in the Black Sea, or to engage in combating the Russian disinformation in the region. Even if the US desired end-state for the Black Sea might change, the document still offers a scenario to build on through negotiations.

The riparian states of the Black Sea themselves have a history of conflicts throughout history, starting with the involvement in the Russo-Ottoman wars on opposite sides, which will probably influence their suggestions on the desired end-state, as we can already see from differences in their national security strategies. If we consider their strategies an expression of their political purpose in engaging in defending the Black Sea, we can see some different approaches.

Considerations on the political purpose of Romania for a Black Sea

Being closer to the problem, Romania's National Defence Strategy asserts that, in the face of Russia's actions directed at ensuring control of the Black Sea, the country is dedicated to being a pillar of regional stability (RNDS, 2019-2024, p. 9) and engages in raising awareness among allies about the Black Sea region's importance in the security architecture, promoting its potential as an energy and transport corridor, while projecting its ambitions as a regional actor in the energy supplies, due to the energy resources possessed in the Black Sea. According to its national defence strategy (2019-2024), Romania puts its NATO and EU integration as its greatest achievement in 30 years and clearly states the

national commitment to guarding the eastern frontiers and the Black Sea but also underlines the strategic partnership with the US. Also, the country acknowledges the Russian aggression, the hybrid war it conducts – considered to be a rising risk compared to an armed conflict between states – and its efforts to militarise the Black Sea and so commits to continue its efforts to build deterrence and defence capabilities. For solving the defence and security problem in the region, Romania envisions a strategy that consists of increased allied defence and deterrence on the eastern flank, equally from the north to the south; EU unity in action; and the US committed to the security of the Black Sea. From a national point of view, Romania seeks to reaffirm the importance of the Black Sea for regional security and states that the country must engage in communicating this for maintaining and increasing the attention of 3 actors upon the Black Sea – NATO, the EU, and the US (RNDS, 2019). The strategy also considers that Romania should promote Euro-Atlantic integration in the Black Sea, especially in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.

Considerations on the political purpose of Bulgaria for a Black Sea Strategy

According to Bulgaria's National Defence Strategy (2023-2033) and National Security Strategy (2018), the country is much more focused on national interests that can be achieved through meeting NATO and the EU's objectives regarding military and civilian capabilities. The war in Ukraine influenced the defence strategy, and the events in the Black Sea encouraged a vision for solving the defence needs by prioritising the fulfilment of allied commitments. Bulgaria defined Russia as the main threat, similarly to Romania, not just in military terms but also through informational-psychological, political, and economic impact, which means hybrid threats, also stating that the potential for conflict in the Black Sea will be high in the long term, with territorial disputes continuing to put pressure on the area. The Bulgarian strategy defines and priorities the country's potential for deterrence and defence, similarly to Romania, and possible missions under Article 5, while also committing to at least 2% of GDP spending on defence from 2024 (China-CEE Institute, 2023).

Considerations on the political purpose of Turkey for a Black Sea strategy

On the other hand, Turkey's National Security Policy Document is not public, but after the 2018 elections and the country becoming a presidential republic, similar concerns about the war in Ukraine are now linked to the country's national security in the view of the government (Li, 2024). What strongly differentiates Turkey's security policies from Romania and Bulgaria is the influence of two contradictory identities within the country: a westernised and secularised west coast and a conservative, more attached to Islamic traditions and economically underdeveloped east.

Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey seems more concerned with balancing between Europe and the Middle East and Central Asia, emphasising maritime interests and modernising the naval forces (Li, 2024), which could benefit balancing Russia in the Black Sea, but it depends on how successful a strategy based on duplicity can be and how it manages to resolve its most important internal problems related to ethnic separatism. The duplicity was already proven in NATO matters when Turkey used the context provided by the war in Ukraine by leveraging its veto rights to demand candidate countries Finland and Sweden allow weapons exports and end support for Kurdish forces and the PKK.

After 2006, Turkey's relations with both EU and NATO have become increasingly strained due to diverging political priorities, regional disputes, and security concerns. These developments have raised questions about Turkey's alignment with Western institutions and its long-term strategic orientation.

Much different than Romania and Bulgaria, Turkey is prioritising increasing its independent defence industries and military capabilities, not relying on western support, as the divergences with western countries were growing after multiple arms embargoes and the failed *coup d'état* in July 2016 (Li, 2024, p. 72) and, more recently, undermining sanctions against Russia, being a supplier of dual-use items to Russia, and purchasing Russian S-400 air defence systems (Smith, 2020), which led to its exclusion from the F-35 fighter program and sparked concerns over NATO interoperability and security. Further frictions arose from Turkey's

delay in ratifying Sweden's NATO accession, citing concerns over Kurdish militant support, as well as its pursuit of an increasingly autonomous foreign policy that includes close ties with Russia and unilateral military interventions in Syria and Libya.

EU accession negotiations have been frozen since 2018, largely due to democratic backsliding, the erosion of judicial independence, and human rights violations. Also, Turkey's explicit refusal to recognise Cyprus is a core issue that continues to strain its relations with the EU, leading to the suspension of negotiation chapters regarding the internal market since 2006.

While NATO has recognised the strategic significance of the Black Sea, defining a cohesive and commonly supported end-state will be a challenge, shaped by diverse national interests, historical legacies, and geopolitical calculations. We can catch a glimpse of these differences looking at the riparian members. Therefore, the formulation of a common end-state for the Black Sea strategy is not unattainable, but requires major negotiation to achieve a deeper common political purpose, besides the pledged commitment to collective security principles. But maybe the most important part, due to the current security environment, is adopting a strategy for the security of this region and communicating NATO's focused views on what is still to be accomplished in the region in order to defend its members to the world. This could help combat the psychological warfare and also improve the perception of the alliance's usefulness in the area, providing the ways to compete with Russia "for the aspirations of citizens in the Black Sea region" (Gaber, 2024), as experts observed in 2024's Romanian Parliamentary Black Sea Forum and Black Sea Security Conference in Bucharest, mainly because of increasingly observed hybrid threats and communications deficiencies of the allies regarding the area.

Can NATO easily find balance among objectives, methods, and resources in the Black Sea?

This will require that for every type of objective, NATO must define concepts and use resources available for it. So, for example, if an

objective has a stronger impact on just one ally, the methods and resources considered should be proportional to the national level.

Objectives for the Black Sea. After the Vilnius Summit, the allies have already defined some approaches to the Black Sea (NATO, 2023), which can be considered for a possible integration in a future focused strategy:

- supporting Ukraine in the long term, keeping in mind the "as long as it takes" (NATO, 2023) commitment, first regarding NATO membership and second with non-lethal assistance.
- supporting Moldova with its European integration and Georgia to advance its Euro-Atlantic path, as agreed at the 2008 Bucharest Summit.
- developing their own national Black Sea strategies by which they can underline their interests and how they can contribute to an allied strategy. Together, these states can first promote bringing up to date the Strategic Action Plan for the Rehabilitation and Protection of the Black Sea (1996).
- possible cooperation in improving military mobility by improving the infrastructure (railways, highways, and port facilities) to ensure suitability in case of the need to use it for military purposes.
- increased naval presence, air missions, rotational presence of ground forces, increased exercises and trainings, building defence capacity for partners, enhancing strategic communication, and infrastructure protection tasks and missions (Horrell, 2016), fields in which we can see improvements after 2022 or, at least, raised concerns about ways to improve.

A strategy can show, in more detail, the objectives NATO considers in order to prevent or to respond to another crisis in the Black Sea region. Having clear strategic objectives in the area, collectively agreed upon in times of non-crises, the allies would be better equipped in decision-making and this could bolster cooperation, clarifying the level of threat and the level of retaliation it should face.

Adapting the methods. Methods will constitute the ways to achieve the objective of the alliance and, a particular aspect to consider in a future strategy will be to plan according to international law.

International law is of crucial importance in the Black Sea, starting with the Montreux Convention. In the interest of putting forward a successful strategy, the allies must previously be involved in analysing how to use the advantages and disadvantages of international law, for meeting their purposes in the area and for adapting the capabilities they possess and measures them can engage in.

Although a lot has changed in the Black Sea security environment since the great power's strategic competition, the Montreux Convention, signed by Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, former Yugoslavia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union in 1936, still governs the transit of vessels through the Turkish Straits, which links the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and helps maintain a rules-based international order in this region.

Since Turkey joined NATO in 1952, this strait has been under the control of a NATO state. This is, at least theoretically, an advantage, as a NATO ally has the power to impose various degrees of restrictions on all warships passing through and has access to information about them, an advantage that could be used to deter Russia's efforts to gain dominance in the Black Sea. Turkey proved the strategic importance of this Convention on the February 27, 2022 by invoking article 19 and declaring the situation in Ukraine a war, blocking Russia's possibilities to reinforce the Black Sea fleet with ships from other fleets (DSCFC of NATO PA, 2023). Also, Turkey closed the Black Sea to all non-Black Sea riparian state warships in line with the Montreux Convention.

Developing a NATO naval flotilla operated by NATO littoral states (Chiriac and Cheresheva, 2016) would ensure compliance with the Convention but requires an agreement between them, large participation of Turkey, and analysing and overcoming budget and political constraints. Also, Romania and Bulgaria, as NATO allies, can approach the need for an increased presence in the Black Sea by exploring the use of the Danube River and the Danube-Black Sea Canal, as Germany is a Danubian state with a navy that can be invited by Romania into its sections of the Danube River, according to the 1948 Convention Regarding the Regime of Navigation on the Danube (Sloan, 2020). Also, for such an opinion to be available, at full potential, Romania and NATO must work together on modernising the canal for military use, as for now it is relatively small

(Coffey, 2020). But all these efforts would require not just initiative and cooperation, but also financial capacity and political will. There could be negotiations for securing EU funding or support through NATO's common funding mechanisms, based on clear and shared commitment to making inland waterway access a credible component of regional deterrence and mobility, but there is no public indication of a strong political will from any NATO member, the common focus being on mobility via land and air.

Considerations on the resources. Resource allocation differs significantly, as seen among NATO members in the Black Sea region (Becker, 2019 and 2021). Any strategy for sharing the collective defence burden for this region must therefore account not only for defence capabilities but also for broader geopolitical and economic considerations aimed at preventing future large-scale conflict. One such approach involves fostering economic integration with all actors in the region (Amilakhvari and Baghaturia, 2023). While politically sensitive – especially when sanctions are required – economic interdependence could be a long-term stabilising factor, potentially reducing the pressure on NATO to maintain high levels of defence spending indefinitely.

Achieving this, however, goes beyond NATO's military mandate and requires cooperation with the European Union, which has the institutional tools to promote regulatory alignment, democratic governance, and economic development. The EU's involvement is essential for addressing structural challenges and advancing regional stability in non-military domains. At present, even NATO members in the region – Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey – do not uniformly benefit from the same level of integration into EU political and legal frameworks, which limits their ability to promote a cohesive model of governance and stability across the wider Black Sea. Bridging this gap requires a coordinated NATO-EU effort to align security goals with political and economic transformation.

But when it comes to the allocation of military forces, the task seems easier, as France and Italy are serving as the framework nations for the multinational battle group stationed in Romania and Bulgaria, with Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Republic of North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, the United States, Albania, Greece, Montenegro,

Macedonia, and Turkey as contributors. The United States also relocated in 2022 an additional 1.000 soldiers from bases in Germany to Romania, bringing the total number of stationed US forces in the country to approximately 1.900 (Romanyshyn, 2023). Later in the summer, the United States rotated in an additional 4.000 soldiers from Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, near Romania's major Black Sea port, Constanta, doubling the amount of NATO forces stationed in the region (NATO, 2022).

NATO member states have also increased their air defence systems within the Black Sea region, including increased fighter jets, ground-based air defence systems, and surveillance flights (NATO, 2022) and, prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the allies sailed warships in the Black Sea and have tried to increase intelligence collection and military mobility to be prepared for any escalations. Also, Romania and Bulgaria are investing in expanding their maritime capabilities and defence capabilities by announced acquisitions of submarines and patrol ships.

NATO's ability to balance objectives, methods, and resources in the Black Sea will depend on complex legal, political, and regional constraints, but there is a solid foundation to build on, as some objectives have been clearly outlined, there are creative methods to achieve even ambitious defence objectives and the alliance has improved the resource, at least in terms of military presence and capabilities, that it can use in the region.

Can NATO easily define a strategy based on hierarchy, comprehensiveness and knowledge on the environment for the Black Sea?

These attributes will also define the success of a future strategy in an interdependent way. A hierarchy will not translate into coordinated action without comprehensive planning and knowledge about the Black Sea. Comprehensive thinking will assure that the strategy is not focused on just one aspect of collective-defence (like military capabilities) and deep knowledge will help the alliance strategize on assumptions deeply based on reality. NATO already approaches the Black Sea based on these three, to an extent.

Replacing hierarchy with consensus-based. If we consider that a strategy has to be hierarchical, the process will be challenging because

32 sovereign countries will have to develop a strategy in a consensus-based, politically multi-layered and military process. So, instead of a purview of a leader as a "weltanschauung" (world view) that represents both national consensus and comprehensive direction" (Bartholomees, 2006), NATO would have to present the view of the 32 states. At most, the requirement of hierarchical nature will be applicable in the part of the process involving the military structure and when applying the strategy, especially during joint operations.

Therefore, for NATO to have a strategy on the security of the Black Sea, as the consensus would be mandatory, a common stance of the riparian members on regional security matters might speed up diplomatic negotiations that precede such a realisation. As the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and other multilateral platforms in the region – like the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development and the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (DSCFC of NATO PA, 2023) – have failed to make a clear difference on large impact security issues, focusing on economic cooperation, and Russia's revisionism is increasing since 2000, there is a need for a strong form of continuous dialogue on security that can be achieved if NATO states commit to such kind of strategic approach, instead of limiting their cooperation to punctual security operations, like the Mine Countermeasures Black Sea (MCM BLACK SEA) Task Group.

Turkey is a plausible candidate to drive cooperation among the allied littoral states, given its significant military and naval capacity that could support a leadership role, but the aspects described in relation to its political purpose in the Black Sea might prevent it to assume this role.

Comprehensiveness and deep knowledge on the Black Sea security environment

Both the comprehensiveness and the knowledge that will be the foundation of a strategy are related to NATO operating in an environment – in this case, the Black Sea region, which it can impact, but also will impact its efforts continuously, meaning that NATO must be cognisant of its own way of functioning, at all levels, and with all the aspects that it interacts with it. This includes national military strategies, national security strategies, national interest and the external environment, which must be put through analysis to find the factors that will help and

the ones that will affect the end-state (Bartholomees, 2006). Throughout these papers, the national aspects that might impact the form of the strategy were brought to light, after being identified in public sources, meaning that they are well known and NATO can easily take them into account. This is also valid for the knowledge of the external (to NATO) environment, about which some aspects might be a little more relevant in a future strategy.

First, even if Russia, the obvious threat source for NATO in the Black Sea, does not itself have a strategic document revealing a strategy for the Black Sea Region, NATO is not in a position to follow its example. Opposed to Russia, it can't rely on traditional approaches, as its position of proactive key actor in the area before 2022 is questionable and, more, its presence in this area consists of countries with more or less different approaches to security and defence. Russia has an approach to foreign policy that is deep-rooted in its long history of being a superpower of the region, but Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey don't share a common perception of the Russian revisionist threat. To add to that, historically, before 2014's illegal annexation of Crimea, key NATO members governments showed rather less interested in Black Sea security (being more focused on the Baltic Sea security, East Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East, or particular threats, such as migration), although that changed very recently, to be more specific, since 2022, which can be understandable considering that for the western allies the danger might be perceived less imminent, but it has left the impression of a late strategic shift.

Some of the objectives noticed by experts regarding Russia's strategy in the Black Sea (Chindea, 2019) are: separating Turkey and Bulgaria from NATO and EU through economic and energy weaponization, spreading false narratives that would diminish the western support for Ukraine inclusion in NATO, including the threat of nuclear weapons, or deepening control over Crimea to maintain a gateway to control the Black Sea and threat all the littoral states by securing a base for long-range cruise missiles and coastal defence capabilities. Russia does all these while also maintaining or encouraging conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan and interfering in other countries foreign policies, including Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

These are all part of the hybrid war conducted by Russia on the Black Sea countries. According to the chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces and first deputy defence minister, Valery V. Gerasimov, in modern wars, to reach the political goals, it is not enough to use military forces and traditional tactics, but a combination of military means and non-military measures is needed, which shows the Russian approach to hybrid warfare even without even using the term (Mikac, 2022). It has the particularity that its tactics can go unnoticed by the population but still affect all aspects of society and life, in particular politics, diplomacy, economy, and cyber or information. For example, disinformation campaigns are often conducted by inauthentic accounts or local proxies, gradually shaping public opinion and deepening polarisation without clearly revealing their foreign origin. Hybrid war exploits economic vulnerabilities of the area, creates ambiguity by masking the true intentions of the attacker, and is conducted through state and non-state actors against the other riparian states, including through overt or covert actions that affect physical or psychological targets, inflicting fear in the population.

All NATO states are a target of Russia's hybrid war because of its usefulness in degrading the willingness to confront the aggressions conducted in the region and in furthering foreign policies from the Euro-Atlantic path. This means a NATO security strategy for the Black Sea cannot ignore dealing with the hybrid threats and the hybrid war, a term familiar to the alliance, as it shows concern about growing hybrid threats, as they soften the lines between war and peace. This would not be a duplication of EU efforts, but rather complementing them by leveraging NATO's unique strengths: strategic intelligence-sharing, civil-military coordination, cyber defence capabilities, and infrastructure resilience planning.

For example, in Romania, the most present examples of hybrid threats of Russian source could be disinformation and related types of psychological operations, like deception through the Grand Pro-Putin Narratives combined with breaches of the airspace and exploitation of the fear of war, while in Bulgaria is the distortion of history to portray Russia as a protector and liberator, the belongingness to the "Slavic family," or exploiting the tangible dependence on Russian gas (Hadzhiev,

2020). Also, there are similar tactics like the division of the population, for example, in Russophiles and Russophobes in extreme cases, nurturing the feeling of nostalgia towards the times of these countries being USSR's satellites, and different levels of political instability, but still both experiencing governance shortcomings (Hadzhiev, 2020). The Grand Pro-Putin narratives in Romania focus more on influencing the perception of Romanians toward the east, as the feeling of friendship toward Russia is harder to directly appeal to, by blaming the war on Ukraine on NATO's enlargement, nurturing revisionism, and the lack of a voice and benefits in the EU (Expert Forum, 2024).

It is psychologically reassuring that in 2016 NATO publicly stated that hybrid actions against one or more Allies could lead to a decision to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, but the primary responsibility to engage with the threats or attacks is within the targeted country (NATO, 2024). Hereupon, there is no strategic guidance for the threshold above which a call for Article 5 is justified and the equitable response, which leaves the Black Sea allies, just like all allies, in an uncertain position, but closer to a specific area of interest for Russia. Fighting back with the same weapons against the Russian hybrid war is a sensitive topic that must be well analysed so the strategic directions don't lead to escalations. Also, strengthening the intelligence-gathering capabilities and cooperation between BS NATO members and candidates can help have an efficient early warning system, but also avoid limited interoperability or operational gaps. For example, the interoperability within NATO's artificial intelligence (AI) strategy, particularly concerning Turkey, has been questioned (Anadolu Agency, 2023) after the rapid development of AI-based military drones in Turkey. On this basis, engaging with Turkey must be done on a deep basis of understanding its need for acknowledged strategic autonomy in this area.

In conclusion, while NATO may not be able to construct a hierarchical strategy for the Black Sea, but more of a consensus-based one, it looks like it can easily build a coherent and actionable framework rooted in a deep understanding of all the layers of this security environment.

Conclusions

Having a critical frontline for deterring Russian aggression in the Black Sea, a geopolitical space of high levels of uncertainty and propensity to conflicts, the allies are responsible to themselves to come up with a clear security strategy for the Black Sea. Likewise, the riparian allied states – Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey – are well positioned to identify and propose concrete measures to address the challenges posed by Russian expansionism, which is manifested through the illegal annexation of Crimea, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the continued occupation of Georgian and Moldovan territories.

The aim of this paper was to assess NATO's readiness to release a Black Sea strategy. The theoretical foundation of this analysis was Yarger's paper on a theory of strategy (Bartholomees, 2006), which outlines seven premises to build a strategy. These premises were synthesised into four questions about NATO's ability to easily meet the potential requirements, as following:

- Can NATO easily define a proactive approach to the Black Sea?
- Can NATO easily define an end-state supported by common political purpose in the Black Sea?
- Can NATO easily find balance among objectives, methods, and resources in the Black Sea?
- Can NATO easily define a strategy based on hierarchy, comprehensiveness and knowledge on the environment for the Black Sea?

The research has examined the benefits, challenges, current progress, and key focus areas to consider, by analysing academic literature and official documents. Special attention was paid to analyse the views and contributions of Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish, as the riparian states most impacted by the evolutions in the region. Their national positions were compared and contrasted and showed different understandings of the environment and capabilities that might need to be addressed.

To summarise, the research on these questions has shown that NATO already possesses several foundational elements necessary to formulate a Black Sea strategy, as defined by Yarger's theoretical framework. On all the matters addressed, challenges are reconciling

national interests, constructing a strategy through consensus, and the topic that appears to be the most significant hurdle is political alignment. Nonetheless, groundwork laid in recent years suggests that, with deliberate coordination and sustained diplomatic effort, NATO could successfully translate its current capabilities and experience into a focused regional strategy. The alliance has the reasons, the means and the understanding required to collectively define an approach to the Black Sea, a common view on a viable alternative to the risks posed by unchecked Russian revisionism.

This suggests that NATO is prepared in many ways to release a Black Sea strategy – in terms of identifying and presenting an approach based on proactive behaviour, purpose, balance, and a deep understanding of the dynamics in the region. However, the alliance seems to lack in terms of political will. Despite being deeply engaged in the region after 2014, the absence of official discourse on such a strategy over the past eleven years show that progress will continue to be slow if political unity remains elusive. This indicated the need to unify the allied views and actions regarding this area.

Ultimately, there are a lot of research questions left, for example, "Is Türkiye a reliable partner for building a strategy with it as a key regional player?" or "What would strongly encourage the rise of such a common political will?" but this research shows, at least, the potential progress in having a NATO strategy for the Black Sea.

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