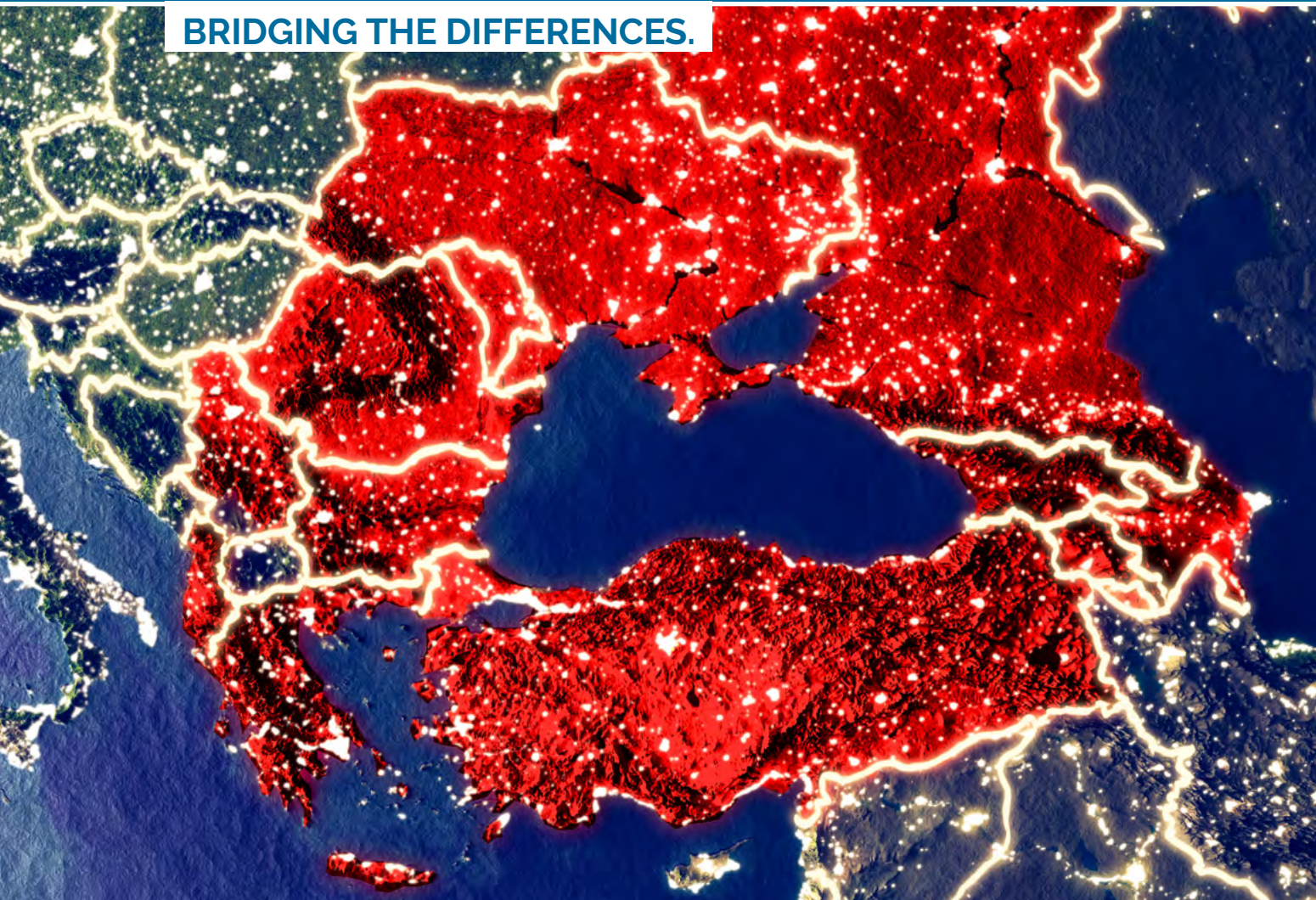


SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

BRIDGING THE DIFFERENCES.



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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 fully upended the post-Cold War European security architecture. Consequently, a new and uncharted geopolitical era began, forcing NATO, the European Union, and every European country to reconsider their strategic planning and defense priorities. This has resulted in significant policy changes at the national and supranational levels across the continent.

The Black Sea's proximity to NATO's eastern flank has elevated the Alliance's level of alert and prompted significant military consolidation in the region. Member states have also prioritized enhancing national security, including through the revitalization of domestic defense industries. While grander visions for a new regional security architecture remain under development, the immediate focus is on implementing concrete and immediate measures to strengthen deterrence and defense capabilities.

In response to the Russian unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, NATO decided at its 2022 Madrid Summit to designate the Black Sea as an area of key security concern in its 'Strategic Concept' – the guiding document for the Alliance's conduct of security policies in the upcoming years. This decision was followed by the adoption of regional defense plans at the 2023 Vilnius Summit. However, the Black Sea region continues to lack the same level of intra-NATO and regional security cooperation that characterizes the Baltic Sea, particularly after Finland's NATO membership and Sweden's expected accession to the Alliance.

The three littoral NATO members – Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye – have different strategic outlooks on regional security (Vişan 2021; Ratchev and Tagarev 2022). These differences have prompted questions about the Alliance's capacity to emerge as a meaningful player in the region (Chiriac 2023; Gramer 2023). Bulgaria, despite adjusting its security stance post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine, faces domestic divisions and has historically opposed several measures to develop a more cooperative framework around the Black Sea. Türkiye has adopted a pragmatic security policy that occasionally diverges from that of most NATO members, aiming to capitalize on opportunities arising from the conflict. Furthermore, Türkiye seeks to safeguard and enhance its privileged status established through the 1936 Montreux Convention governing the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

The war in Ukraine has exposed not only the region's fragile security but also the shortcomings of past approaches by international organizations, including NATO and the EU. Economic (including food and supply chain) security, should be integrated into comprehensive regional and continental security frameworks. Additionally, the mouths of the Danube hold strategic military importance, and their security is vital for the region's overall security. The interconnectedness of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean necessitates a unified strategic approach, as acknowledged by the EU in its updated maritime strategy adopted in March 2023.

Despite their diverse perspectives on threats and approaches to security-building, countries in the wider Black Sea region share common short-term objectives that facilitate cooperation on various issues. The contradictory rhetoric and actions of some outliers complicate the development of a long-term common vision for a security architecture. Nevertheless, all countries share immediate common goals and collaborate effectively on several fronts.

Beyond the three NATO members around the Black Sea, countries in the wider region have displayed varying degrees of willingness and capability to address Russia's threatening posture. Within NATO, Hungary maintains a distinctive profile, continuing cooperation with Moscow on several issues and refraining from providing full support for Ukraine's war effort. Georgia has gradually adopted a more ambiguous stance towards Russia, evolving into a less reliable partner for NATO and the EU. Ukraine has contributed the most to weakening Russia's military potential and A2/AD capability in the Black Sea. Kyiv's forces have done so with direct and indirect aid from NATO and EU member states. Azerbaijan has used the Russo-Ukrainian War as a window of opportunity for remedying its long-standing grievances regarding Nagorno-Karabakh and becoming a major source of energy for the EU, while Armenia has also distanced itself from Russia.

The countries in the wider Black Sea region agree on the diagnosis regarding Russia's revisionism and bellicose behavior but partly diverge when it comes to the adequate response to these challenges. This divergence poses significant challenges for enhancing regional security and political cooperation at a time of intense volatility. To overcome these differences, Black Sea countries need to identify new pathways for advancing their security cooperation. In this paper, we suggest six such pathways.

First, we advocate for a comprehensive, fully regional approach to security, that considers the interests of both NATO members and partners. Second, we suggest the development of a joint defense procurement and production framework that would help develop national defense industries, assist with interoperability issues, and serve as a key venue for defense cooperation with positive economic feedback loops. Third, we suggest pushing for strengthening the EU's defense capabilities jointly with Türkiye and in a way that complements NATO's military capabilities. Fourth, we advocate for revising the region's multilateral and minilateral formats to limit Russia's influence and avoid future blockages. Fifth, we advocate for the intensification of efforts to increase connectivity and mobility throughout the region. Finally, we suggest seeking to attract US economic interests to ensure long-standing American defense commitments to the region.

This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging conversation regarding security cooperation in the wider Black Sea region in several ways. Firstly, it seeks to provide a realistic and independent assessment of the key challenges facing security cooperation in the region. Secondly, the paper aims to provide an overview of the strategic outlook of the key stakeholders and their circumstances when it comes to the security and political developments in the region and beyond. Finally, we sketch a set of possible pathways for enhancing security cooperation between the NATO members and partner countries in the region. In doing so, we join recent contributions by prominent think-tanks from the region and beyond (SSF et al. 2023; Helmonds et al. 2023; Năumescu 2024; Secu 2024).

The Black Sea and the European Security Architecture

Since the Crimean War (1853-6), the Black Sea has emerged as a persistent focal point of geopolitical and military significance. The region has played a crucial role in numerous conflicts that have shaped the course of European history. The strategic importance of this region, with its access to important trade routes and proximity to major powers, has consistently fueled tensions and hostilities. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the naval warfare following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine show the continued importance of the region in world affairs.

From the inter-war period, the Black Sea power dynamics have been defined by two key factors. Firstly, the 1936 Montreux Convention regulates maritime traffic to and from the Black Sea, across the Mediterranean, and to the global ocean. This convention provides Türkiye privileged status as it legally controls circulation through the two 'Turkish straits,' enabling it to use the provisions of the convention to exert power in the region. Secondly, the Russian Black Sea Fleet and Moscow's effective control of Sevastopol and Crimea enabled it to project significant power across the Black Sea and beyond until the current naval warfare with Ukraine. This has made scholars declare the Black Sea an informal Russo-Turkish "condominium," where the two regional powers enjoy privileged status (Cagaptay 2023; Isachenko and Swistek 2023)

The strict provisions of the Montreux Convention make the Black Sea a de facto "Mare Clausum" – a body of water not accessible to other states. This status has been recurrently challenged by countries such as Romania or Bulgaria, which would prefer for the Black Sea to be a "Mare Liberum" – a body of water accessible to all states under the provisions of the Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS). This would enable NATO allies, such as the US or the UK, to permanently station ships and navies in the Black Sea. However, none of these countries has pressed the issue, choosing to avoid creating tensions with Ankara while facing Russian revisionism. This has prevented the adoption of a comprehensive strategic outlook on the region and the design of a clear security strategy, despite some efforts of littoral NATO partners.

In this context, the countries from the wider Black Sea region have developed and joined several relevant multilateral and minilateral formats of cooperation. Among these, the most important have been the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the South-East

European Cooperation Process (SEECF). These formats have been useful but limited in their capacity to enhance both economic and security cooperation in the region.

Within the wider European security architecture, the Black Sea has not benefited from the same attention paid to the Baltic Sea, which has gradually become a "NATO lake" with the admission into the Alliance of Finland and Sweden. In the words of Ben Hodges (2021), the region has often been seen as a "black hole" by strategic planners in Brussels and Washington. Only with the annexation of Crimea - and especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine - has the region received increased attention from Western powers, despite its troubled history and strategic location.

Following the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, the Alliance has established its "Tailored Forward Presence" in Romania and Bulgaria by deploying rotational NATO troops and developing new deterrence and defense strategies. Because of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, that presence has translated into new multinational troop contingents in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania aiming to enhance allied deterrence. Italy and France lead the new presence in Bulgaria and Romania, but the US military presence has also increased significantly. In this context, a former US Ambassador to Romania described the country as the "defense lynchpin against Russian aggression" (Zuckerman 2020). Nonetheless, the region has yet to be satisfactorily embedded in a coherent vision for European security. The enhanced military presence and deterrence are only ad-hoc measures necessary to provide an immediate response to the acute risks and threats emerging from Russia.

The Black Sea region's status in a post-War continental security architecture remains unclear and much will depend both on the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the willingness of Western powers, especially the US, to commit more support to the region. In this regard, important multilateral formats, such as Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative, with its important projects related to connectivity and infrastructure, may play a key role in shaping the Black Sea region's future relevance and defining characteristics in the wider European security and economic configuration.

The political polarization affecting the US makes its long-term commitment to regional and European security unpredictable. Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 would upend current transatlantic relations and increase uncertainty and security anxieties in the wider Black Sea region, as well as across NATO's Eastern flank.

This may reignite European debates about 'strategic autonomy' or, as it has been renamed recently, 'strategic sovereignty' to appease European Atlanticists. Currently, there is no agreement among EU member states over the need, definition, or scope of 'strategic autonomy'. Since its launch in 2014, the concept has evolved to include important economic and trade elements, focusing on novel notions of industrial policy and re-shoring of key supply chains. While no longer contested per se, the meaning of the concept remains politically contested. In the Black Sea region and Central Europe more broadly, the concept receives a cold shoulder, as these countries consider the US presence and continued involvement in Europe's strategic affairs paramount for their continued security. However, all these countries have by now understood the importance of increasing one's

strategic autonomy and are investing in their defense capabilities. Importantly, American prodding played an important role in making these countries increase their military spending.

In the Black Sea region, all three NATO member countries have increased their military investments, but only Türkiye retains a sizable and military-capable naval fleet. This situation creates a visible asymmetry of power between the three, which Türkiye aims to perpetuate because it ensures its regional preeminence and influence within NATO. However, this has not stopped the development of useful trilateral formats, such as the Turkish-Polish-Romanian and the Romanian-Turkish-Bulgarian trilateral.

To summarize, the Black Sea region has historically been a geopolitical hotspot. The Montreux Convention grants Türkiye control over maritime traffic, creating a de facto "Mare Clausum," contested by some countries. NATO's increased presence in Romania and Bulgaria responds to the growing Russian threat. However, the region has been lacking the attention received by the Baltic Sea, even if recent events have brought it to the center of Western attention. The future of the Black Sea depends on the Russo-Ukrainian War and Western commitment. Political polarization in the US could impact transatlantic relations, potentially affecting these two elements: the EU's inability to act autonomously, together with the power asymmetry in the region hinders coordination when the US is not actively interested in getting involved.

Strategic Outlook

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally shaken the perception of the countries in the wider Black Sea region regarding their security environment. Some of these, such as Romania or Poland, have had their worst fears confirmed by Russia's aggressive actions. Although others have condemned the invasion, they have found it hard to shift their strategic outlook altogether and have taken an ambivalent position. Bulgaria has been caught in a long-lasting domestic struggle over security policy but has a broadly pro-Western orientation. Meanwhile, Türkiye and Hungary have adopted transactional and highly pragmatic stances that sometimes diverged from the NATO and EU consensus. Ankara continues to balance its relationship with Moscow and seeks to compartmentalize its many dimensions. Nonetheless, all NATO member states have emphasized the crucial role of the Alliance in strengthening deterrence and defense capabilities.

Bulgaria

The events in Ukraine have been a wake-up call for many political leaders in Bulgaria, who now recognize the need to take security and defense more seriously. NATO and the EU are seen as the most important pillars of the country's security and development, and Bulgaria strongly supports measures aimed at strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank and putting pressure on Russia to end its aggression. At the same time, Sofia has proved more cautious when it comes to the provision of military aid to Ukraine.

Public opinion in Bulgaria remains broadly divided on the war. While the vast majority of Bulgarians remain committed Euro-Atlanticists, many still have a positive attitude toward Russia, which translates into political support for pro-Russian parties (Zankina 2023). This can be explained, among other things, by the long-standing historical, cultural, and other ties between the two countries. The Bulgarian government's position on the war and military aid to Ukraine has also been, at times, ambiguous, due in part to the near-constant political crisis affecting the country since 2021, with frequent changes in government (Zankina 2023). This variation can also be explained by the presence or, respectively, absence of more nationalist and pro-Russian parties in the governing coalitions. Nonetheless, the vast majority of political parties agree with the need for additional defense expenditure and the strengthening of NATO's deterrence in the Black Sea. A multinational battalion combat group led by Italy has been deployed on Bulgarian territory as part of NATO's measures to strengthen its forward presence on the Eastern flank.

Bulgaria supports the development of EU security and defense policy but sees NATO as the core of the collective defense of the Euro-Atlantic area. The war has put the need for modernization of the

Bulgarian armed forces on the political agenda, but substantial hurdles remain on the way to translating this aim into concrete actions (Angelov 2023). The main combat systems of the country's military are outdated and incompatible with NATO and EU standards. Ironically, Bulgaria has also found itself in the paradoxical situation of bringing added value to the defense of Ukraine precisely through its outdated base of Soviet-era equipment and production infrastructure. This disincentivizes it, in the short term, to transition to NATO standards. Nonetheless, the Bulgarian MoD has developed an ambitious modernization program, but its implementation cannot be ensured in the short or even medium term. Bulgaria has acquired various NATO-standard platforms in recent years, and there are several other priority projects underway. The chronic shortage of personnel remains a serious challenge, and it will be an uphill battle to find a balance between spending on personnel, new equipment, and training.

Romania

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has validated Romania's long-standing view that Russia should be treated as a revisionist actor aiming to reshape the regional and international order according to its interests (Wezeman and Kuimova 2018). Consequently, Bucharest has been broadly opposed to making any concessions to Russia's demands, such as security guarantees, NATO withdrawal, recognition of annexed Ukrainian territories, and the removal of US forces from Central and Eastern Europe. Bucharest sees any concessions made to Moscow as potentially fueling continued Russian revisionism in the Black Sea region and beyond (Chiriac 2023).

In response to the evolving security landscape, Romania has accelerated the implementation of existing defense priorities, emphasizing its strategic partnership with the US, and seeking to deepen its involvement in NATO and the EU. Additionally, there is increased emphasis on bilateral and minilateral military and political cooperation, with the emergence of several "trilateral" formats as well as intensified bilateral cooperation with Moldova and Ukraine. However, limited resources and the lack of a comprehensive vision for the region hinder Bucharest's ability to easily reach all its objectives, despite substantial military and political backing from Washington. Moreover, domestic political issues and the emergence of a strong far-right political movement raise important questions about the future of Romania's foreign and security policy in the years to come.

Nonetheless, Romania enjoys a broad mainstream pro-Western and anti-Russian domestic consensus both among the public and the political elite. Public opinion has been broadly supportive of Romania's contribution to NATO and the EU's efforts in support of Ukraine and remains committed to a Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation. The political elites remain among the most staunchly pro-Western in the region and all mainstream political parties aim to enhance American and allied military presence in Romania. Both the public and political elites have been supportive of the deployment of NATO battle groups led by France in Romania, as well as of the enhanced American presence (Balaşa 2023).

Romania emphasizes the importance of NATO for its national security but also sees a need for the EU to better coordinate its level of ambition with NATO. As such, Bucharest has called on the EU

to improve its capabilities for rapid reaction and to complement its resources to those of NATO. In the Black Sea, Romania would like to see a growing and permanent NATO and/or US naval presence, which has been mostly suspended by the naval warfare between Ukraine and Russia (Chiriac 2023). This position has historically faced opposition from both Türkiye and Bulgaria (Kotsev 2016). In the meantime, Romania has launched an ambitious program of defense investments and acquisitions to improve its deterrence and defense capabilities. However, these investments will make a meaningful difference only in the medium-to-long term, as they suffer from significant administrative hurdles, lack of resources, and recurrent political friction (Ilie 2022).

Türkiye

Ankara's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been pragmatic and transactional. The Turkish government seeks to balance its security commitments within NATO with a long-standing competitive partnership with Russia. In doing so, Türkiye plays a complex role in the region and its behavior is driven by two main concerns in the Black Sea. Firstly, it wants to avoid provoking Russia. Ankara does not want to see Moscow expand its influence in the region, but it also does not want to do anything that could lead to a conflict. Secondly, it wants to assert its leadership role in the region (Isachenko 2023). Türkiye wants to be seen as the leading regional power, and it is wary of any attempts by other internal or external powers, such as the US, to increase their influence in the region (Dalay and Isachenko 2022).

Historically, Ankara has relied on its regional cooperation schemes to pursue these two goals, such as the Black Sea Naval Force and the Operation Black Sea Harmony. However, the Russian aggression has made both schemes unworkable. Instead, Türkiye has agreed to join different trilateral formats for security and naval coordination, including those tasked with demining the Black Sea and enhancing deterrence. The war has also enabled Türkiye to assert its privileged rights over the "Turkish Straits" and the possibility to play the role of mediator in the conflict, enabling the signing of the Black Sea Grain Deal and the transfer of prisoners of war. These roles have enhanced the country's international standing and are enabling President Erdoğan's dreams of making Türkiye a global power (Cagaptay 2023).

In the context of the war, Türkiye has initiated military cooperation with Ukraine and provided valuable military aid and access to military technology necessary to the war effort. In doing so, Ankara balances Russia's influence in the Black Sea and beyond, enabling it to both pursue its regional leadership ambitions and limit Russian influence (Isachengo and Swistek 2023). However, seeking not to provoke Moscow and to maximize the opportunities offered by the war, Ankara has not joined Western sanctions against Russia and represents an important economic conduit through which Russian international trade in its part of the world takes place, including international travel and the import of banned goods from the West.

At the strategic level, Türkiye seems to deploy various strategies of "crowding out" American and NATO presence. For instance, it has used the wide latitude offered by the Montreux Convention

to bar access to all ships that do not sail under the flag of a Black Sea country, including non-belligerent NATO vessels. This will enable Türkiye to emerge as the preeminent naval player in the Black Sea after the conflict, as the Russian Navy has been substantially affected by Ukraine's conventional and unconventional naval operations.

South Caucasus

The Russian invasion further reshaped the geostrategic environment that emerged in the South Caucasus after the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Neither of the three countries from this sub-region, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, openly criticized Moscow for its actions in Ukraine. Contrary to expectations, Georgia abstained from joining Western sanctions against Russia, continuing its balancing act between Russia and the West.

The developments in Ukraine have had both economic and security implications. The region has suffered economically from the effects of the war, considering its reliance on regional trade with Russia and high levels of remittance transfers from immigrant workers. However, these regional developments have also led to a new redistribution of power. Azerbaijan, emboldened by its military success in 2020, has glimpsed an opportunity to advance on the battlefield and forced a take-over of Nagorno-Karabakh from the Armenian minority (Dumoulin and Gressel 2023). In turn, Armenia has contested Russia's monopoly of force, withdrawing their representative to the Russia-led CSTO alliance. This has encouraged the EU and the US to increase their diplomatic, military, and economic engagement in these two countries (Atasuntsev 2023). The energy crisis provoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine has also increased the importance of Azerbaijan to the EU, enabling it to maximize its regional objectives without European criticism. Georgia, meanwhile, has gained more room to maneuver in its foreign policy but has remained reluctant to push for a more pro-Western orientation considering the level of uncertainty and the interests of the local oligarchs to avoid enhanced EU conditionalities.

Georgia, as the only country from the three with direct access to the Black Sea, is a relevant stakeholder in the security and political dynamics of the region. Tbilisi's ambivalent foreign policy has raised questions regarding its commitment to improving cooperation with NATO countries (Burkadze 2022). However, the war has led to an enhanced partnership with Romania, for instance, which signals that Georgia is interested in contributing to advancing regional cooperation in security and defense matters. The country's strategic position on the Middle Corridor for trade and energy offers significant opportunities.

Comparative Regional Perceptions and Approaches

Initially marked by strategic shortcomings, Europe's security architecture has faced challenges stemming from the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO's eastward expansion and a reliance on U.S. military might. The concept of strategic autonomy has emerged post-2014, gaining traction amid Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine more widely. Despite unanimous recognition of the need for self-defense, disparities persist among EU member states: the Russia question remains pivotal, with policies in countries like Hungary and Türkiye that diverge from the rest of the Alliance. Amid fears of a revanchist Ukraine and ongoing geopolitical shifts, the text explores efforts to strengthen EU defense capabilities, the enduring U.S. partnership in the region, and challenges in the Black Sea basin. The unfolding narrative underscores the urgent need for a cohesive, long-term vision to address the complex security dynamics shaping Europe's future.

Shortcomings of European Security Architecture before February 2022

A consensus has emerged in Europe on the strategic missteps that led to the current security crisis. With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and NATO's eastward enlargement, European security became less of a priority, with Article 5 and US military power seen as the mainstays of European defense. National defense spending fell below the 2% of GDP threshold, the defense industries of Europe became less of a focus, and the countries on the continent made their energy dependent on a single source, whose unreliability they underestimated. Europe only understood Russia's role in and attitude towards European security after each of Russia's actions, and decisively changed its approach to Russia only after it had invaded Ukraine. Post-2022, the EU is forced to take a critical look at its security architecture and address its weaknesses, decoupling from Russia, increasing its military spending, and revamping its defense industry. While these are significant steps towards enhanced security, current defense posture and security still face important challenges, related mostly to the lack of a common long-term vision.

European Strategic Autonomy

After 2014 and Russia's invasion of Crimea, a debate began in Europe about its strategic autonomy, but without much determination to address what was then not generally perceived as a serious problem. Despite its aggressive behavior and its leader's clear statements, Russia was not unanimously assessed as a security threat to Europe. Once the war in Ukraine started, Europe acknowledged the need to address its own defense, but member states still did not unanimously agree on the extent and definition of strategic autonomy. Since it was first launched in 2013, the concept has evolved to include not only defense, but also the economy, with a focus on supply chains and, virtually, all EU policies. While it is no longer criticized as a move away from NATO, strategic autonomy remains a rather vague concept, given divergences within member states on its priorities. In Eastern Europe, the concept is met with a lukewarm reception, as countries on the Eastern flank, now in the geographic proximity of war, value US support, which they would like to see continued. The importance of a serious increase in one's capacity to defend oneself is now well understood, and Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Latvia are investing substantially in their national defense. Romania, in particular, values its strategic partnership with the US, which contributed to the country's air and land security. Hungary maintains a distinctive profile, continuing its cooperation with Moscow on several issues. However, despite controversial political messages, the country has not effectively blocked the important red-line agreements with the EU and NATO.

The EU Level of Ambition

One of the reasons why the concept of strategic autonomy remains vague is that there is no common understanding of the EU's level of ambition. The current European Commission started its mandate on the promise of a "geopolitical Union." Nevertheless, the EU's modus operandi, its constant reactive behavior, has only continued through the current mandate, sometimes at odds with statements and insular actions of EU leaders.

The 'Russia Question'

Russia's behavior over the past decade and the invasion of Ukraine clearly defines not only an unreliable partner but an aggressive opponent to Europe. Countries in Eastern Europe are adamant in their desire to protect themselves from Russia and are advocating for its containment, a strategy also currently embraced by countries farther from the conflict. As long as Russia displays aggressive behavior, it is to be contained, according to the European approach. In the region, Hungary and Türkiye are the outliers of this policy. Hungary continues its economic and political ties with Russia, resorting to a pro-Russian and anti-EU narrative that is more spectacular in discourse than in its translations into actions. Türkiye maintains a special posture opposing Russia sanctions in a constant disagreement with the EU, yet it remains a compliant NATO member. With the war in Ukraine turning into a war of attrition, with Europe still dependent on Russian supply chains, albeit less in the field of energy, and in a world increasingly geopolitically polarized, how to approach Russia on a long-term basis remains an open question.

Fear of a Revanchist Ukraine

The outcome of the war remains unclear, yet the longer it continues, the likelihood of a Ukrainian victory as initially foreseen and still hoped for diminishes. This brings about a fear of a Ukraine that would resent a West it may perceive as insufficiently supportive of its fight, a revanchism that would mostly have an impact on its neighbors. The Hungarian government has embarked on this narrative, supported by nationalist forces in other neighboring countries. The issue of minorities in Ukraine and other unresolved disputes surface regularly only to fuel this narrative.

Strengthening Defense Capabilities in Eastern Europe

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the need for robust defense capabilities in Eastern Europe. Countries in the region have responded by increasing their military spending and focusing on arms procurement. NATO has also updated its regional defense plans to reflect the new security threats. European initiatives to enhance defense cooperation, including aligning arms procurement and creating maintenance hubs, are welcome developments. The establishment of an international training center for F16 pilots in Romania is a prime example of such cooperation.

US Partnership and Involvement

The United States has been a staunch supporter of NATO's efforts to strengthen its eastern flank. It has maintained a mobile presence in Poland since the end of the Cold War and a regular presence in Romania since 2003. In 2007, the US initiated plans for an anti-missile shield in Poland and Romania, and it has actively participated in NATO exercises in the region. The US has also provided significant military and financial assistance to Ukraine during the war. Despite geopolitical shifts and domestic politics, the US remains a vital pillar of security in Eastern Europe. However, Türkiye remains an advocate of a closed Black Sea and opposes a permanent US/NATO naval presence.

Moreover, the wider Black Sea region plays a reduced role in the overall strategic planning of the United States. This means that the region would receive limited attention and resources from American planners, who are more preoccupied with strategic developments in other parts of the world considered to be more of a priority. This limits the depth and breadth of US presence and contribution in the region, provoking anxieties in several regional capitals but also satisfying Türkiye's desires for limited American and NATO presence in the Black Sea.

The Black Sea Basin

The maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea remain contentious issues. Türkiye has traditionally opposed the concept of an open sea, even after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to NATO. Romania's efforts to develop a NATO Black Sea strategy have yielded limited

results. Russia's current dominance of the Black Sea, its restrictions on freedom of navigation, and attacks on Ukrainian ports have underscored the need for a comprehensive NATO and US approach to Black Sea security. Apart from Türkiye, the Black Sea littoral states have weak navies, making a serious short-term deterrence of Russia's maritime aggression dependent on a potential NATO presence. However, this presence is discouraged by Türkiye due to the Montreux Convention. Romania and Bulgaria are investing in their naval capabilities, but this long-term process leaves the immediate and short-term needs unaddressed. Russia's recent attacks on Ukrainian ports on the Danube have exposed the vulnerability and importance of the river's mouths.

China's Role in Eastern Europe

China does not pose a direct military threat to Eastern Europe, although its cyber activities raise concerns. However, its anti-Western stance, aligned with Russia's, contributes to undermining public trust in international institutions and exacerbates social polarization in the region. In line with EU policy on China, countries in Eastern Europe, except for Hungary, are aiming to reduce their supply chain dependence on China. While China is not explicitly labeled as an adversary, it is viewed with suspicion, and its close relationship with Russia is followed with concern by Eastern European countries.

Integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into Western Organizations

There is a shared consensus that Ukraine and Moldova will eventually join the EU, and a decision was made in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia would one day become members of NATO. The EU accession process for Ukraine and Moldova has been initiated, and negotiations are expected to begin soon. It is widely acknowledged that the accession process, especially that of Ukraine, will be neither short nor easy, requiring transformations within both the countries and the EU itself. However, the commitment to accession remains firm on both sides. Ukraine's membership in NATO, a clearly stated goal of the Alliance since 2008, is a more politically complex objective. Despite Ukraine's insistence on a clear accession path, this has not yet been decided. Moldova currently has no intention to join NATO, although it seeks closer cooperation and is a serious partner. Georgia may soon become an EU candidate country, but its internal politics complicate its accession process. NATO membership remains a stated but distant goal for Georgia.

Revision of Multilateral Institutions

Multilateral institutions that were part of the regional security architecture until the war in Ukraine (OSCE and, to some extent, the UN) have proven to have institutional limitations due to Russia's veto power. Regional formats such as Bucharest9 (B9) have been successful in advancing the security interests of the region, keeping the Eastern flank on NATO's agenda, and achieving concrete results in increasing allied presence in the region. Smaller trilateral formats – Romania, Türkiye, Poland;

Romania, Türkiye. Bulgaria – may also prove useful for coordinating security measures, creating synergies, and further advancing security needs. The Romania-Ukraine-Moldova format proved effective in tackling illegal trafficking before the war and in coordinating actions after 2022.

Türkiye

Türkiye plays a crucial role in regional security. As the custodian of the strategically vital Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits under the Montreux Convention and the sole NATO littoral state with a formidable navy, Türkiye's cooperation is essential for safeguarding the Black Sea and upholding freedom of navigation. While Ankara's relationship with the US and the EU is complex, its vested interest in a safe Black Sea makes it a reliable partner in achieving this shared objective.

Interoperability, Military Mobility, and Connectivity

Regional security can transcend the sum of its parts and be significantly bolstered through inter-state cooperation. Fostering regional infrastructure connectivity – both air and sea – enhances the flow of goods, including military assets, and contributes to robust economic security. Military mobility of troops and equipment remains limited due to the region's underdeveloped and disconnected infrastructure, posing a significant vulnerability. The interoperability of national defense industries should be a critical consideration in their respective development plans. As countries devise their national defense industry strategies, they would stand to benefit from regional cooperation that promotes complementarity, compatibility, synergies, and economies of scale.

In conclusion, the evolution of Europe's security architecture, from initial strategic shortcomings to the current complex landscape reveals a series of critical challenges and ongoing transformations. The concept of strategic autonomy, born out of the geopolitical shifts post-2014, continues to shape discussions, but its application remains elusive due to disparities among EU member states. The 'Russia question' stands as a pivotal factor, with varying policies among countries, further complicating the pursuit of a unified vision. The fear of a revanchist Ukraine adds another layer of uncertainty, emphasizing the need for cohesive, long-term strategies. Despite these challenges, efforts to strengthen defense capabilities in Eastern Europe and maintain an enduring partnership with the US underscore the commitment to regional security. The Black Sea basin remains a focal point, with Türkiye's role crucial, yet complex. China's influence, the integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into Western organizations, and the revision of multilateral institutions further contribute to the intricate security dynamics. The overarching theme is the imperative for a unified, forward-looking vision to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape and safeguard Europe's future.

Moving Beyond Differences: Pathways to Cooperation

The geopolitical implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the European security architecture and regional stability require more cooperation between the countries of the wider Black Sea region in critical fields, including defense, energy, and stratcom. However, the countries in the region have different strategic outlooks and are promoting different approaches in response to the security challenges they are facing. Security cooperation has intensified on critical issues, such as the very recent de-mining activities in the Black Sea, but much remains to be achieved.

We suggest six key pathways through which we hope to enhance security cooperation in the region in a way that takes into consideration the current landscape and the divergent interests of key players.

1. A Comprehensive Regional Security Approach

The security of the Black Sea needs to be addressed in a fully regional approach. Unlike the Baltic, the Black Sea is not a NATO sea. Consequently, current defense plans and efforts to enhance security cover almost exclusively NATO members, hence the Eastern and Southern parts of the Sea. Yet the region will not be secure as long as its Northern and Western parts remain caught in a conflict or vulnerable. Ukraine's, Georgia's, and Moldova's security will remain fragile as long as Russia holds control of their respective breakaway regions. Efforts to include Georgia and Moldova in military exercises and upgrade and train their militaries help increase their defense capabilities. Yet, the Alliance must find even better political, economic, and military ways to deter Russia's aggression against these two countries. Long-term security plans need to be based on full control of their territories by all countries in the region and their consequent inclusion in or close cooperation with NATO.

2. Common Defense Procurement, Military Mobility, and Interoperability.

A potential pathway to enhancing regional security cooperation can be found in the field of defense production and procurement. All Black Sea littoral countries, with the notable exception of Türkiye, lack comprehensive and self-sufficient national defense industries. Moreover, the region's military mobility of both equipment and troops is very low, which creates an important vulnerability for the allied countries.

We suggest that NATO member states and partner countries develop joint defense procurement schemes that focus on supporting and developing national defense industries. Such an approach could help strengthen the defense industrial base of the region and would make it easier for the countries in the region to support each other's militaries. Joint defense procurement would ensure interoperability, the emergence of positive synergies, and complementarity. This would have both security and economic implications for each country, bringing the volume required for creating economies of scale and recycling the defense expenditure in the local economies.

3. Strengthening EU Defense Capabilities, Jointly with Türkiye.

Strengthening EU defense capabilities in the region should be promoted both by Bulgaria and Romania. However, such a strategy should seek to include Türkiye as a key stakeholder, alleviating Ankara's concerns about Eurocentric security arrangements. New EU capabilities should complement and not substitute NATO capabilities and defense efforts in the region. Still, additional resources and funding provided by the EU are necessary and can produce both useful spillovers and synergies for EU and non-EU countries in the wider Black Sea region. In this regard, Bulgaria and Romania should rely more actively on the various PESCO facilities.

Current European plans to better coordinate national defense industries, align arms procurement, and create maintenance hubs are fully embraced across the region, but these must include Türkiye to avoid new regional tensions. Moreover, European plans must be used to enhance the national defense industries in a way compatible with the first pathway specified in this paper.

4. Revising Multilateral and Minilateral Organizations

Regional Black Sea organizations and the European security architecture have proved their institutional limitations due to Russia's veto power. Minilateral formats such as the Bucharest Nine (B9) have been useful in coordinating the security positions of CEE countries within NATO, enhancing their influence, and should hence continue. The new drive for trilateral formats (Romania-Türkiye-Bulgaria or Romania-Moldova-Ukraine) is to be promoted, despite their inherent limitations which make them inadequate to constitute the basis of regional security cooperation on a long-term basis. While useful for narrow security and political objectives and coordination purposes, they cannot replace more formal and institutionalized formats. Democratic and Western-oriented

countries should consider revising or replacing the current multilateral and minilateral formats that include Russia in a way that enables further cooperation on economic, cultural, and security issues while avoiding future blockages.

5. Enhanced Connectivity and Mobility

Increasing connectivity and mobility throughout the region will significantly boost regional security. Improved infrastructure is essential for effective military mobility, economic security, and reconstruction efforts. Existing regional plans to enhance connectivity and mobility should be expedited to meet evolving security needs.

6. The United States as a Key Pillar of Regional Security: Focus on FDI

The United States' support for and presence in the region remains an important pillar of security, despite Turkish worries. However, it is important to adequately consider both the Turkish priorities and American reluctance to get involved in the region. Ankara has sought to limit US and NATO involvement in the Black Sea, but its opposition has also been convenient for the US, which seeks to avoid increasing its commitments in the region.

To ensure long-term American commitment, Black Sea countries could coordinate an economic strategy to attract American investments and companies. Increased American economic interests would then translate into a potential shift in Washington's priorities in the security and defense sphere, through a bottom-up economic channel.

Conclusions

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has triggered a seismic shift in the European security landscape, compelling NATO and the European Union to reassess and adapt their strategic priorities. The designation of the Black Sea as an area of key security concern by NATO reflects the urgent need for a comprehensive response to Russia's unprovoked aggression. While the Southeastern flank is now receiving increased attention, the Black Sea region faces challenges in achieving the same level of intra-NATO and regional security cooperation seen in the Baltic Sea. The strategic differences among NATO member states bordering the Black Sea, particularly Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye, raise questions about the Alliance's effectiveness in the region.

The varied responses of countries in the wider Black Sea region to Russia's security threats underscore the complexity of regional dynamics. Hungary's cooperation with Russia, and Georgia's ambiguous stance pose challenges to the creation of a unified front against Russia's revisionism. Ukraine's significant contribution to weakening Russia's military power demonstrates the potential for collaboration between NATO and regional partners. In the face of these challenges, the paper proposes six pathways for enhancing security cooperation, understanding the regional aspect of security, emphasizing joint defense procurement, strengthening the EU's defense capabilities in collaboration with Türkiye, revising multilateral formats to limit Russia's influence, increasing connectivity and mobility, and attracting US economic interests to ensure sustained American defense commitments.

This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on security cooperation in the wider Black Sea region by offering a realistic and independent assessment of key challenges. It provides valuable insights into the strategic outlook of key stakeholders, shedding light on the complexities of security and political developments in the region. The suggested pathways for security cooperation add to the growing body of recommendations from regional and international think-tanks, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts to navigate the evolving security landscape in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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