

NATO's Strategy Towards the Black Sea Region

Eugene Kogan

The NATO Black Sea littoral states (with the exception of Romania) lack a coherent and convergent policy towards NATO's adversary – the Russian Federation. The policies of two out of three NATO Member States (excluding Romania) lack cohesion, sharpness and understanding of what needs to be done in order to deter an aggressive Russia. Therefore, steps need to be taken to convince the Bulgarian and Turkish governments to change their positions in the Black Sea region. Without a unified position, supported by NATO solidarity, Russia will remain the only beneficiary.

Although the pursuit of compromises and negotiations with Russia are the unwritten rule for countries such as Bulgaria and Turkey, such pursuits damage NATO as a whole. Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey remind us of the famous fable 'Swan, Pike and Crawfish'- by Ivan Krylov: "When partners can't agree their dealings come to a naught and trouble is their labour's only fruit," while the adversary Russia is joyfully rubbing its hands and laughing behind NATO's back.

gically important region. If one thinks that the pursuit of such a strategy is going to lead to a clearly articulated NATO strategy in the region, then one is mistaken. This is not going to happen anytime soon as NATO littoral states have still to find a unified position. Although it strives to find a common position, NATO as an organisation cannot force its members to achieve unity and enhance their co-operation. As a result, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis stated

dialogue with Russia "from a position of strength." However, both statements have become a mantra lacking real substance. Whatever NATO is capable to offer as a unified policy line is no match to what Russia is capable to counter militarily, namely, swift and robust military action. At the same time, it should be remembered that NATO operates under severe constraints. It has to do everything by consensus, and there are sharply divergent views among the allies

Photo: US Navy



Ships from participating nations are in formation during exercise Sea Breeze 2011. Sea Breeze is the largest multi-national maritime exercise in the Black Sea region.

As a result of the divergent policy, NATO as a whole continues to struggle to find a common and credible policy for this strate-

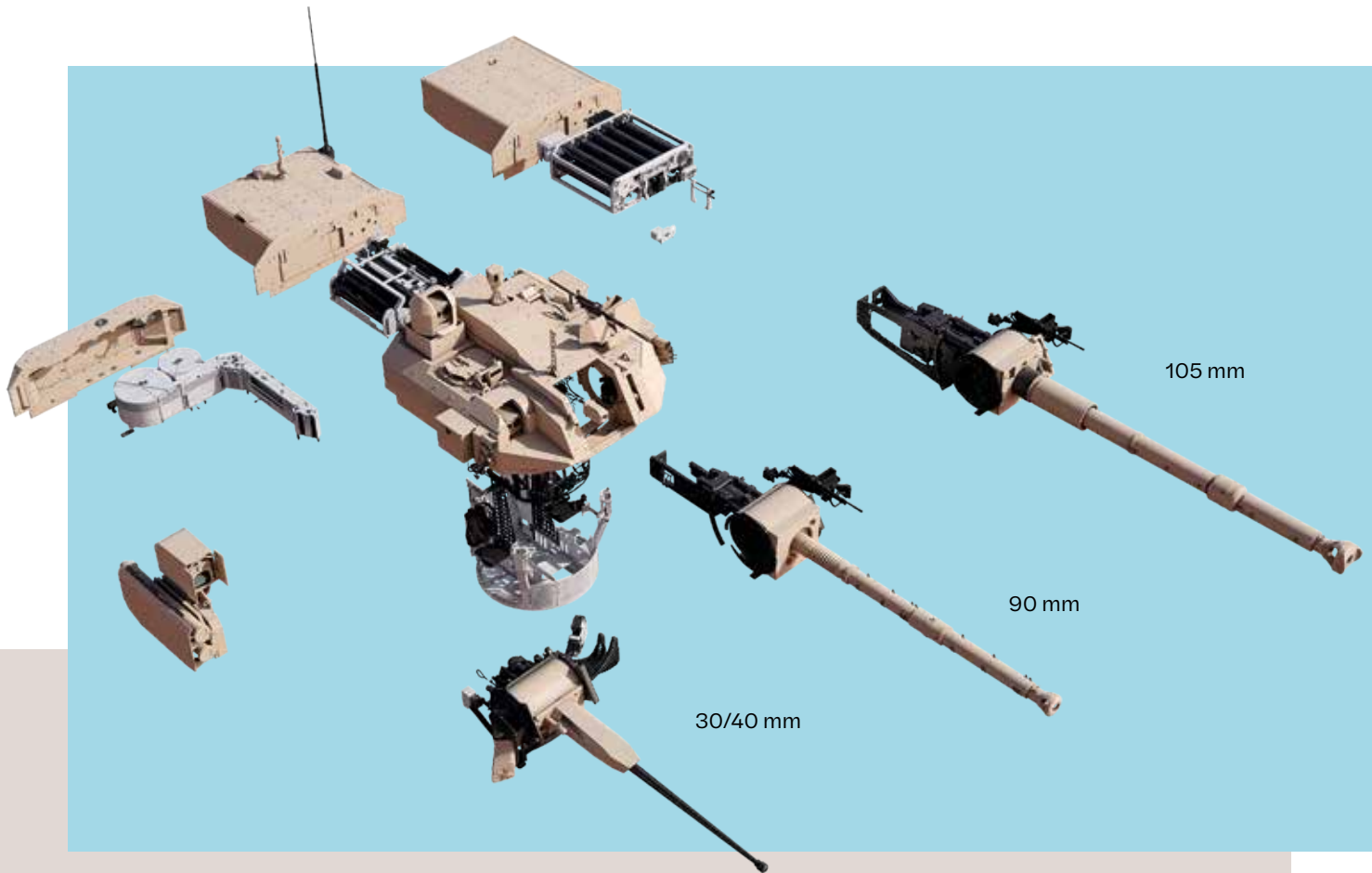
Author

Eugene Kogan is a defence and security expert based in Tbilisi, Georgia.

in October 2017 that "We are not threat to Russia. But we need dialogue from a strong position of defence and discouragement". While this statement is fine, it nevertheless lacks any specifics relating to the common position and policy. The same can be said of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who said in January 2017 that the alliance and the new US administration under President Donald Trump agreed on the need for

over how to react to Russia. Russia has an advantage since President Vladimir Putin and his military advisers can decide everything on the spur of the moment (with the plans prepared well in advance) and launch military operations without any prior warning. A balanced NATO presence in the Black Sea region neither convinces nor deters Russia from further encroachments in the region. NATO solidarity is indeed im-

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portant but again it does not scare Russia and its leadership since the latter understands the nature of brute force better than NATO and knows how to use brute force to its best advantage. In other words, NATO must be prepared militarily at any time for any potential Russian operation in the re-

President Klaus Iohannis in October 2017 that “the brigade in Romania is only a part of our answer to the increased Russian presence in the Black Sea. However, it would send a message that an attack against a member of NATO will be treated as an attack against all allies.”

as more allied visits to Romanian and Bulgarian ports. However, this is not enough. NATO must encourage the air, ground, and naval component in both countries to join forces on a bilateral basis reinforced by a US presence on the ground. It is clear that the Bulgarian government is likely to oppose such an effort since it does not wish to irritate Russia. Krassimir Karakachanov, the Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, said in March 2019 “I am convinced that between Europe and Russia, between NATO and Russia, it is necessary to look for a path – for a peaceful resolution of the problems.” This statement is shared and supported by Boyko Borissov, the Bulgarian Prime Minister, who said in early March 2019 that “He has always been against military activities next to the shore of Bulgaria, except for military exercises.” The questions that remain to be answered are: if a peaceful resolution cannot be achieved, what then? Both options are unattractive but in the real-world deterrence does not always work.

The US and other NATO allies have to find a way to convince the Bulgarian government that increased co-operation will help to reinforce NATO cohesion and ability to operate bilaterally and multilaterally. Other options namely, NATO temporarily reflagging ships from non-Black Sea navies under the flags of Bulgaria and Romania was flatly rejected by Bulgaria in 2016 and since then the Bulgarian government has not changed its position. Besides, Karakachanov, said in March 2019 that “Bulgaria has no plans to have naval NATO bases on its territory.” Thus, changing the mindset and attitude of Bulgarian officials remains a main challenge for NATO as well as challenge to the security of NATO operations in the Black Sea. Even though the Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO Allied Command Operations, Curtis Scaparrotti, said in March 2019: “the Russians do not like our presence in the Black Sea, but these are international waters, and our ships should go there, and our planes should fly” unobstructed and all NATO members should support such efforts, the reality is different. NATO’s motto ‘All for One and One for All’ appears to be fragile despite Stoltenberg saying “that an attack against a member of NATO will be treated as an attack against all allies.”

However, even without these challenges, NATO needs to develop a coherent contingency plan for Black Sea maritime operations. That is why now is the right time to prepare a detailed analysis to exercise both sea control and air power projections across the region that also involves Georgia and Ukraine, countries that aspire to become

Photo: USMC



A US Marine with Rotational Force-Europe fires an M240B machine gun during “Sea Breeze 19” in Chabanka, Ukraine, 3 July 2019. “Sea Breeze” is a US and Ukraine co-hosted multinational exercise held in the Black Sea region and is designed to enhance interoperability.

gion against NATO Member States, even if such a probability appears low or some may even say remote. However, the illegal Russian annexation of the Crimea was one example of this happening. Therefore, we cannot ignore potential Russian military action in this region against NATO members and Russia will, as usual, deny any such action and present itself as a victim of any NATO initiated attack. However, it should be emphasised that after Crimea everything has changed and everything inconceivable has now become conceivable. The end result of the annexation of the Crimea led to a belated awakening and understanding in the NATO leadership that something needed to be done to change the situation. This resulted in the acceleration of NATO’s dormant engagement in the region as described below. The first step in the direction of NATO solidarity as a policy line was made in October 2017 when NATO inaugurated a new brigade-size multi-national NATO force with headquarters in Craiova, Romania, which was designed to counter Russia’s increased threat to South-East Europe following the illegal Russian annexation of the Crimea and continued intervention in east Ukraine. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told a joint press conference with Romanian

NATO’s Black Sea Forces in Craiova will initially have about 4,000 Romanian soldiers, although it is yet unclear whether the initial contingent of troops will increase. The initial contingent is to be supported by forces from nine other Member States, including Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and the US with some 900 troops – although not Turkey, the country that has been drifting from the alliance for some time.

Turkey favours a rather limited NATO presence in the region that does not infringe on Turkey’s interpretation of the Montreux Convention, which restricts the passage of non-Black Sea navies through the Bosphorus Straits. The non-Black Sea navies are permitted to stay in the Black Sea for no longer than 21 days. And a less restricted stay in the Black Sea would principally change the balance of power in favour of NATO. At this point, NATO has been unable to persuade the Turkish government to change its position because relations with the rest of NATO remains tense. Turkey sticks to its strict interpretation of the Montreux Convention, a position also shared by Russia.

In addition to a land-based brigade-size NATO force in Craiova, NATO’s Black Sea maritime presence already includes naval patrols, naval training and exercises as well



Photo: US Navy

Screen capture from video of a Su-27 conducting an unsafe intercept of a Navy EP-3E ARIES II over the Black Sea on 5 November 2018.

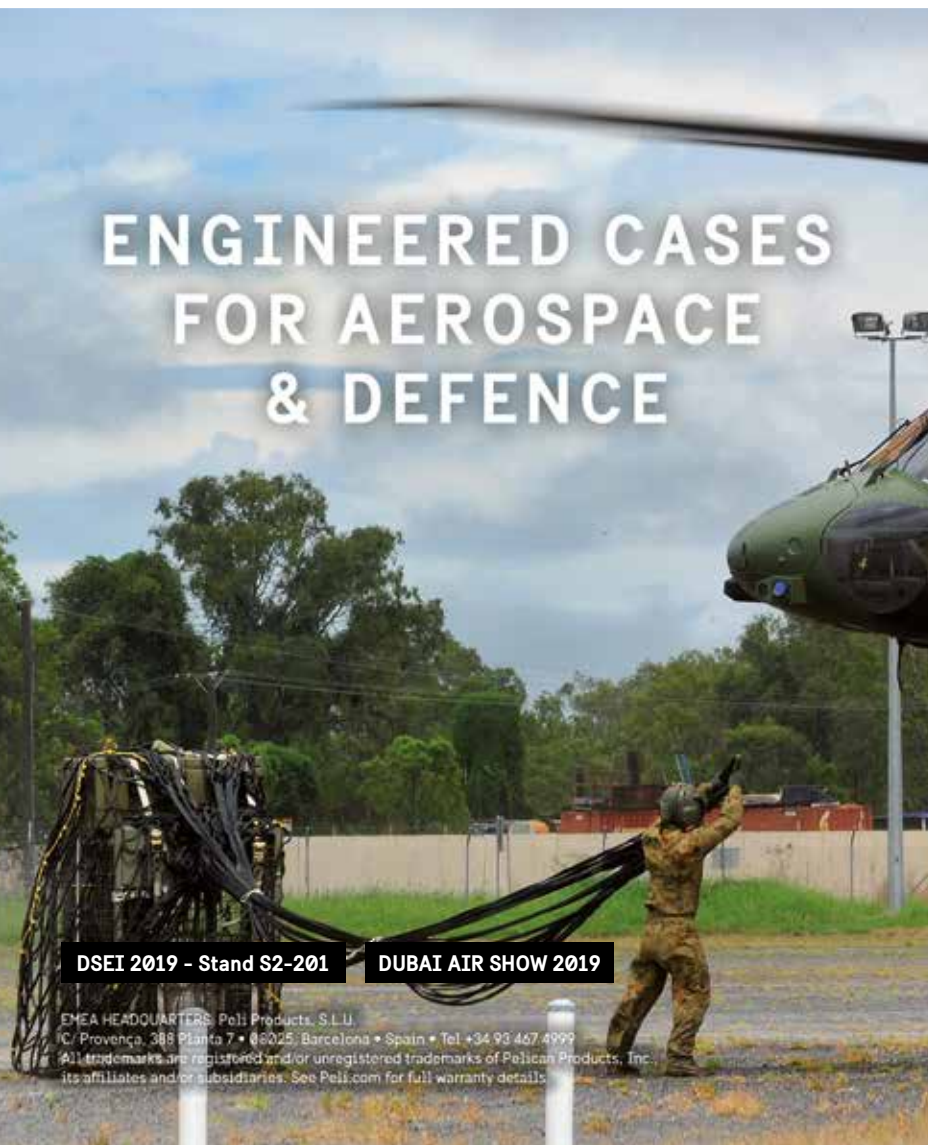
NATO members, even if both countries have currently limited military capabilities. Finally, the air component structure is reinforced by four UK Eurofighter TYPHOON aircraft that sends an explicit message that despite the referendum to leave the EU, the UK remains committed to NATO. Canada is already patrolling Romanian airspace with F-18 combat aircraft along with national pilots, while Italy is patrolling Bulgarian airspace from the Graf Ignatievo Air Base with Eurofighter TYPHOON.

To conclude, NATO's current response is based on actively engaging its key allies in the region, each with their own strategic capabilities. However, it should be emphasised that Bulgarian strategic capacities are limited and are not yet fully modernised. It will take a while for Bulgaria to develop the needed strategic capabilities. In contrast, while the Romanian Air Force is in a better shape although the same cannot be said about the country's naval capacities that are not yet in a good shape. Due to a disa-

greement between contenders for the Romanian multi-functional corvettes project, Romania may not have the first corvette by 2022 as previously envisaged. Turkey's strategic capabilities in the Black Sea are also limited since Turkey does not consider Black Sea its prime area of operations. The Aegean and the Mediterranean Seas are the principal Turkish 'theatres of naval operations' and Turkey is involved there.

Bilateral and trilateral air, ground and naval exercises of the NATO Black Sea Member States should not just be supported but also actively pursued. If NATO wishes to pursue an assertive policy in the region, it should convince the Bulgarian, Romanian and Turkish military to co-operate more closely. This is a challenge that NATO needs to tackle.

NATO as a whole needs to rely on the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO based in Oeiras, Portugal – a naval force that is based not in the vicinity of the Black Sea region. As a result, NATO has concerns in its overall capacity to handle a potential crisis in the region should one occur. Therefore, NATO's policy and strategy in the region requires further clarity, which hopefully NATO policymakers realise and are ready to do something about sooner rather than later. ■



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