

The Perils of Black Sea Security

Introduction

The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022 has substantially changed the security situation around the Black Sea. The three NATO member states Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey have pursued a very different and distinct policy with regard to Russia. Bulgaria, as will be further presented, remains dependent on Russian gas and oil. Despite the recent Russian decision to halt gas exports to Bulgaria over the country's refusal to pay for supplies in roubles, Bulgaria did not buckle under pressure. Romania maintains a watchful eye after the Russian military operations along the Black Sea coast, in general, and the city of Odessa, in particular. Turkey maintains balanced relations with Russia and Ukraine. As a result, President Erdogan offered to mediate between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky; however, Erdogan's good services are either rebuffed or ignored by Putin. The Georgian government decided to keep the country neutral, not to antagonise Russia, and maintain a low profile with regard to the Russian war in Ukraine. Finally, the region's three NATO member states of Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey have until today been unable to create and implement a comprehensive Black Sea security strategy together with NATO aspirants Georgia and Ukraine to counter the challenges posed by Russia. Moscow, however, successfully implemented its divide and rule policy in the region that left the 3+2 in an awkward situation and not prepared for a war situation. As a result, other NATO member states stepped in and provided necessary military capabilities to Bulgaria and Romania, while supplying economic, humanitarian, and military assistance to Ukraine.

Bulgaria: Vulnerable but Standing

Despite pressure on Bulgaria to ratify a treaty signed with neighbouring Romania on the 18th of March 2021 that would allow NATO cross-border air policing operations,

the Bulgarian interim and new governments have hitherto not done this. Once ratified, the aforementioned treaty would allow NATO air forces stationed at the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base to conduct policing operations in both countries. Situated near the Black Sea, the air base is the main hub for NATO aircraft in south-eastern Europe.

While Romania has traditionally championed or supported initiatives to boost NATO's multinational military efforts in the Black Sea region, Bulgaria has, among other factors, been more reluctant due to its historical affinity with Russia¹ and Russian economic interests in Bulgaria. It needs to be remembered that 77 per cent of Bulgaria's gas needs and 90 per cent of its oil needs are imports from Russia. In addition, Russia supplies fuel to Bulgaria's Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant. As a result, it puts Bulgaria under pressure since the latter managed to diversify its gas imports only slightly and failed to diversify its oil imports altogether. On April 27th, 2022, Gazprom said that it halted gas exports to Poland and Bulgaria over the countries' refusal to pay for the supplies in roubles.² Despite Russia's unfriendly step, Bulgaria did not buckle under pressure. Besides, Gazprom's decision forces Bulgaria to look for alternative gas suppliers such as Norway, the Middle East, and North Africa since alternative supplies from Azerbaijan and the like will not be enough.³ Nevertheless, even a small volume of gas delivery would help Bulgaria under the current difficult circumstances. As a result, the completion of the Gas Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB) in September 2022 will be a timely event.⁴ Therefore, it can be said that Gazprom lost Bulgaria as a reliable customer.

Former Romanian defence official and international security expert, Claudiu Degeratu, also mentions the "reluctance of Bulgaria and Turkey to share information about their airspaces with other governments in the region."⁵ Besides, Turkey has

been and still is reluctant toward a Western military presence in the Black Sea and it shares close but complicated ties with Russia. Moreover, this is despite the fact that the three countries are NATO members. So much for the common position that ends in tatters.

The country's National Security Advisory Council presented its conclusions to President Rumen Radev in February 2022: the Bulgarian armed forces do not have the weapons, equipment, and people to meet the risks arising from the Ukrainian crisis, the conflicts in the Middle East and Asia, international terrorism, and migrant flows. The country was ready to accept troops from NATO partner countries but within a joint battalion battle group under Bulgarian command.⁶ Regarding the NATO battalion battle group, Bulgaria's Cabinet approved the deployment of about 800 Italian troops in the country on May 18th. The deployment will take place once the Italians have achieved initial operation capabilities.⁷ In addition to Italy, Albania, the UK, and the US agreed to contribute troops. One additional point which needs to be stressed is that the Bulgarian armed forces need to increase their combat training and readiness. Finally, the Bulgarian Chief of Defence, Admiral Emil Eftimov, acknowledged that the security situation in the Black Sea remained dynamic. He emphasized restrictions on shipping in the north-western part of the Black Sea, the problems in the Sea of Azov and in the waters of the Gulf of Odessa to Crimea. Furthermore, the dangers in the Black Sea were not [just associated with] naval mines detected by the Romanian and Turkish navies, but also with the very dynamics of the [Russian-Ukrainian] conflict. As it turned out, peace had a price, and the price was directly associated with the maintenance of combat-ready armed forces, the Admiral Eftimov concluded. Therefore, Bulgaria would have to invest BGN36 billion to build minimum military capabilities until 2032.⁸

Georgia: Indecisive and Unprepared

The country's political leadership is trying to maintain a good rapport with NATO. However, at the same time, it is doing its utmost not to irritate President Vladimir Putin's administration. This balancing act shows the indecisiveness and inability to reach the right decision. There is a lack of understanding within the Georgian Dream-led coalition government, namely that if Moscow achieves its goals in Ukraine, the next target will be Georgia, where the Kremlin has some unfinished business since the end of the August 2008 war.

Despite improvements to its land forces, Georgia lacks well-trained reserve, air, and naval forces to complement the land forces and the National Guard in a war situation.

The country's Coast Guard is not equipped for a military conflict or war since that is not its mission, and mechanisms for ensuring coastal protection can be easily overrun or blockaded by Russia. As a result, Georgia remains vulnerable to a Russian naval attack. Whether or not a well-equipped and trained naval force is possible is not yet clear. Such a programme would be expensive for a small country like Georgia, and for now, it is uncertain if the UK or the US will provide financial support. In addition, it lacks a sufficient number of air-defence systems that can withstand attacks from the Russian air force.⁹ Finally, Georgia remains vulnerable to Russian cyber-attacks, even though it has experienced Russian cyber-attacks in the past.

In other words, Georgia is not militarily prepared for a potential Russian offensive and the Kremlin knows that it can bully Georgia and continue the unobstructed borderisation process along the administrative boundary line (ABL) between Georgia proper and the [Russian] occupied region of South Ossetia.

Romania: Staunch NATO Ally

The Romanian National Defence Strategy for 2020-2024, signed by President Klaus Iohannis in June 2020 and approved by

the Parliament the same month, defined Moscow as an "aggressive" threat. The proposed Defence Strategy stated that Russia had contributed to "the deterioration of regional stability with its "offensive positions and aggression in the last years." It added that Moscow had strengthened "offensive military capabilities in the Black Sea" and had created a system capable of "restricting access" to the Black Sea in order to "counterbalance" the development of NATO capabilities on the Alliance's eastern border. As expected, the Kremlin flatly rejected these accusations, and claimed that the new strategy presented by Romania would be used to intensify the military presence of the US and NATO in the Black Sea.

Furthermore, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated: "Bucharest, instead of acting as a provider of stability, contributes to further increasing tensions and distrust in the region."¹⁰ Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu explained that "Romania does not believe that Russia is a hostile state, rather that it is simply drawing attention to the aggressive actions it has undertaken in recent years, some of which have violated international law."¹¹ Aurescu's assertion is dismissed by Moscow.

Following the approval of the Defence Strategy by the Parliament, the country's Ministry of National Defence (MApN) decided to boost the military intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities by acquiring new UAVs, ensuring the country's armed forces can efficiently monitor Romanian borders.¹²

The British company U-TacS and the Romanian company Aerostar signed a cooperative agreement to start production of the Watchkeeper UAVs in July 2021.¹³ In addition, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and IAR-Brasov have signed a cooperation agreement to manufacture IAI's Tactical Heron UAV in Brasov in October 2021.¹⁴ Besides acquisitions of UAVs, 500 French troops as part of the NATO Response Force arrived in Romania between February 28th and March 1st, 2022, to reinforce NATO's defensive posture in the eastern part of the Alliance. They were augmented by 300

Belgian troops. Further, three German Air Force Eurofighter aircraft were integrated into the Italian Air Force contingent in Romania. Finally, two F-35 fighters belonging to the US Air Forces Europe and Africa (USAFE) were deployed and the US has also started the transfer of 1,000 troops from Germany to Romania in February 2022¹⁵ as ordered by US President Joe Biden, to deter any possible Russian aggression against Romania. Finally, President Iohannis stated that it was necessary to increase the current defence budget from 2 per cent of GDP to 2.5 per cent. Further, Iohannis added that it was necessary to achieve the energy independence of Romania, mainly through the development of renewable and civilian nuclear energy.¹⁶

Russia: Aggressive but Unsuccessful

To harass Romania in particular, Russian aircraft have increased their patrol over the Black Sea, some of them periodically violating Romanian airspace. Back in July 2018, then Defence Minister, Mihai Fifor, acknowledged that Russian incursions in Romanian airspace have increased.¹⁷ Since then, the overall situation regarding Russian aircraft incursions into Romanian airspace has not changed for the better.

For instance, RAF Typhoons on the NATO Enhanced Air Policing mission scrambled in August 2021 as a Russian aircraft was detected entering the Bucharest Flight Information Region and heading towards Romanian territorial airspace. As with many Russian military sorties, the aircraft had not filed a flight plan and was not speaking with Romanian Air Traffic Control, thereby causing a flight safety hazard to all air users.¹⁸ In addition, in April 2022, NATO fighter aircrafts scrambled four times in the last 20 days from the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base to intercept Russian fighters that took off from Crimea, flying towards NATO territory along the Black Sea coast. Each time, the Russian fighters turned away without incident, but the flights represent a growing threat to the alliance.¹⁹

The overall Russian goal in the Black Sea is to sow distrust between NATO allies

Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, isolate and subject Georgia to its will and destabilise Ukraine by taking advantage of the lack of a strategic and comprehensive day-to-day NATO presence and strategy.

To reinforce its goals in the Black Sea, Russia's Southern Military District announced in January 2022 that the country's Black Sea Fleet would hold major drills in "the waters of the seas adjacent to the Russian territory, as well as operationally important areas of the World Ocean."

Military experts have warned that the Black Sea Fleet's warships and submarines could play a significant role in a potential Ukrainian conflict, threatening the country's coastal cities (most likely Berdyansk, Mariupol, and Odessa) and military infrastructure with missile strikes as well as the use of cyber and electronic warfare systems.²⁰ Fortunately for Ukraine, Russia failed in its naval mission while Ukraine, using its anti-ship cruise missile Neptun, sank the Russian cruiser Moskva that undoubtedly boosted the morale and spirit of the Ukrainian nation and also showed that the underdog Ukraine can use successfully its home-manufactured missiles.²¹ Since that episode, the Russian fleet has kept a distance from the Ukrainian coast.

Turkey: Maintaining a Neutrality Stand

Even though President Erdogan offered to mediate in a standoff between the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky, in January 2022, Putin was disinclined to accept the offer. Erdogan said that the "conflict in the east of Ukraine should be resolved on the basis of Ukraine's territorial integrity and rejected Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea"²² – made him an unlikely mediator in the Kremlin's eyes.

Erdogan did his utmost to maintain a balancing act between the obligation of Turkey to NATO as a reliable ally and his friendly relations with the conflicting sides. However, such a balancing act is untenable since Erdogan is not willing to make a decision, and ultimately, he will steer Turkey into a position of neutrality. That was

and still is Putin's aim, to keep Erdogan's Turkey a neutral actor around the Black Sea region in the case of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Four days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Turkey has closed off the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits to warships from any country whether or not they border the Black Sea. The closure of the straits will still, however, allow warships through if they are returning to a home base in the Black Sea. This would include Russian ships in the country's Black Sea Fleet.²³ At the same time, Turkey did not close its airspace to Russian military and commercial aircraft. The only exclusion was the closure of Turkey's airspace to the Russian fighter aircraft bound for Syria.

Finally, Turkey did not join the Western economic sanctions imposed on Russia. And indeed, energy security needs to be brought into the equation. Turkey, despite previous claims of becoming a major gas hub, remains dependent on Russian gas deliveries and the latter can turn off the gas tap at any to Russia convenient moment. Azerbaijan, as Turkey's ally, is unable to substitute gas deliveries from Russia to Turkey since it lacks capacity. Turkey's newly found gas resources in the Black Sea requires explorations and financial investments. Due to the current dire economic straits of Turkey, financial investments are not forthcoming.

Ukraine: Feat of Valour

The country stands at the centre of the standoff between Russia and NATO since Putin demands clear and binding guarantees from the Alliance that Ukraine will not become a NATO member. As the world has witnessed, since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24th, the country has been fighting for its independence and sovereignty. It is equally obvious that the Kremlin has severely miscalculated and underestimated the resilience and resistance of the Ukrainian armed forces and the civilian population. If Moscow thought that an invasion would be a piece of cake,²⁴ it has very badly miscalculated. After 96

days of war, Putin's goal to become master of Ukraine has not been accomplished; but we need to remember that the war continues, and it is rather difficult to say when and how the war will end.

It should also be emphasised that Ukraine has actually been at war since March 2014 and its land forces are combat proven and experienced. Surprisingly for everyone around the world, the Ukrainian Air Force and a small but potent air-defence systems proved to be a difficult nut to crack for the tepid Russian Aerospace Forces. The only Ukrainian service that lags behind in capability is the Navy. Russia, despite overwhelming armed forces, and much better than average air and naval forces in particular, was so far unable to defeat the Ukrainian armed forces. In addition, Ukrainian cyber security proved to be adept and successful in cyber security operations. There is no doubt whatsoever that Western military assistance in general, and that of the US²⁵ in particular, played and continue to play a decisive role in Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

Whether or not the fairly balanced state of military affairs will lead to the successful outcome for Ukraine in the war with Russia is not a foregone conclusion. What is known now is that Ukraine is resisting Russia's invasion on its own in terms of boots on the ground since it is not a NATO member. What is evident, however, is that the West, and especially the US, is ready to support Ukraine militarily for as long as it takes.

Conclusion

It is clear that the normally calm waters of the Black Sea have become very stormy since February 24th, with an aggressive Russia able to operate from its well-fortified Crimea-based Black Sea Fleet naval base and the Southern Military District in Rostov. Ukraine is fighting hard since it knows what the cost of surrender is; namely, to become a pawn of Putin's Russia for the foreseeable future. It can be said that after 96 days of war, the Ukrainian armed forces demonstrated their strengths, capabilities, and a high degree of resistance against the Russian invaders.

As for the three NATO member states in the region, as long as they are not directly involved in the conflict, their behaviour will differ since they lack any common position. Still, Ankara allows Russian civilian ships, to be used for war purposes, transit through the Turkish Straits. Such an act puts Turkey squarely in the camp of Russia and exposes its weaknesses as a NATO ally. The Georgian government's position can be surmised as follows – not to have any position and avoid a clearly stated position. This strategic ambiguity will not save Georgia if Moscow achieves its goals in Ukraine.

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Layout: Medienbüro Meyer