

The Romania-US Strategic Partnership and the Security of the Wider Black Sea Region: Historical Landmarks

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The Strategic Partnership, launched in 1997 with the purpose of becoming an advanced mechanism of bilateral cooperation between Romania and the United States regarding fields of strategic interest for both countries, is an important element of maintaining peace and stability in South-Eastern Europe and in the Black Sea area. The Partnership determined a substantial evolution of the bilateral relations based on an intense political speech, as an important aspect for the regional security, and promoted democracy near the Euro-Atlantic community. Romania's relation with the United States, being focused on security aspects, proves its utility, considering that to this day the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union do not have a common strategic vision regarding the Wider Black Sea Region. This is due to conceptual differences and to the fact that, unlike Central and Eastern Europe—where the integrations of NATO and EU were linked, in the Black Sea area, the situation is different, having in mind that only Romania and Bulgaria have been part of these structures. This study's purpose is to present both the evolution of this cooperation format between Romania and the United States in the last two decades and its relevance for the new regional security system. In the circumstances in which the events in Ukraine in 2014 lead to unprecedented tension (Post-Cold War) between the Russian Federation and the Occident, the USA's involvement in ensuring the security of the extended Black Sea Region gains even more relevance.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Black Sea Region, security, cooperation, Euro-Atlantic community, Russian Federation

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, Romania's geopolitical position is tied to the Wider Black Sea area, whose importance is deeply rooted in history.

The challenges regarding this place's security incorporate both old, unresolved issues and new ones. Terrorism and its proliferation overlap on top of problems regarding organized crime, frozen conflicts, energy insecurity, and difficult social transitions of the states in this area. The conflict in the Middle East generated worldwide terrorism, political uncertainty in the Caucasus created difficulties for the transit of energy resources, and the failed attempt at democracy in some states lead to undermining their relationships with the western intelligence services (Maior, 2009).

In the 1990s', Romanian diplomacy multiplied its efforts in the western capitals in order to demonstrate the geopolitical significance held by the Black Sea and to consider Romania as a potential NATO and EU

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member.

Furthermore, Romania's long term security interests in the wider Black Sea area target/aim at improving democracy, economic growth, stability, and European integration, alongside enhancing of the country's importance as a local power.

Assuming the responsibility to contribute in the creation of a security climate, based on cooperation in the area, as well as active support in elaborating a Euro-Atlantic strategy focusing on the Black Sea and the Caucasus can also be found in the National Security Strategy of Romania (2006; 2015). The National Security Strategy of Romania (Strategia Națională, 2015) highlights the fact that the country's consolidation in the Black Sea area by deepening the NATO and EU integration and the development of the Romania-US Strategic Partnership (in every potential field) is the main external objective.

Due to the positive experience registered over time in managing certain complex security-related problems, the cohesion and US attendance in the organization, NATO remains Romania's principal external security guarantor after joining the EU. Hence, a special relationship with the one current superpower, USA, has been absolutely necessary in order to obtain the security goals pursued by the Romanian state over the course of the last three decades.

Moreover, Romanian diplomacy has made significant efforts, ever since the mid-1990s', in order to become a reliable partner in its relations with the winner of the Cold War. The Romania-US Strategic Partnership (1997) and its further development, culminating with a permanent presence of the US military forces on Romanian soil, represent the natural progress of this trend.

The US Involvement in the Wider Black Sea Area

For the United States, the Black Sea represents a strategic corridor that supports the American global consolidation policy in Central Asia, the main space of geopolitical competition between the great powers of the 21st century. Since the end of the Cold War, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's former counselor for security issues and one of the external politics "dark horses" in the last half of the century, has guessed the geopolitical importance of the Central-Asian space. In his book, published in 1997, *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinski says:

in the following decades, the most unstable and dangerous region—capable of throwing the entire global order in chaos—will be that of the global Balkans (For the author). From an American interest point of view, the current geopolitical layout in the main area of energy production is lacking... south of the Caucasus and in Central Asia, where the new, independent, oil exporting states are still at the beginning of their political journey... the region is exposed to Russian and Iranian influences. (pp. 139-141)

The American diplomat's recommendations, in conjunction with the interests manifested by the American energy companies materialized in the adoption by the US Congress, in August 1999, of the Silk Road Strategy Act—SRSA; the document subscribes to the theory of helping "for the economic and political independence of the southern Caucasus and Central Asia countries", targeting the recreation, under western control, of the "Silk Road". In November 1999, during the OSCE reunion at Istanbul, the first American infiltration of the former Soviet space projects was announced: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline (Ougartchinska & Carré 2009).

The American administration is aware of the fact that the influence and control degree exerted in the Central-Asian space will determine both the evolution of the global contest between Washington and Beijing,

as well as the relationship between the Russian Federation and the EU and NATO. The 9/11 attacks and directing the US political and military actions towards the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as the large scale usage of the “energy weapon” by the Russian Federation as a main instrument of external politics in its relations with the European Union (Cottey, 2007) determined the American officials to come up with a strategy for promoting the US interests in the Wider Black Sea Region.

In fact, the answer to “Why the United States did structure their objectives in the Wider Black Sea Region in a coherent strategy so late?” is given in 2006 by Mark Pekala, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs.

Until very recently, we, the United States government, hadn't viewed the Black Sea Region as a region as such, as a specific area for a specific set of policies. We have always been very active. We have worked for over a decade and a half and more on the resolution of frozen conflicts. We've worked for that long and much more on promoting democracy and civil society and the institutions of healthy government and healthy societies in these areas. We have tried to pursue economic reform that leads to greater trade and greater prosperity, and certainly we've talked to countries in the region for a very long time about energy. It's not that we haven't been active. We've been very active on all these fronts. But we haven't put it together into a clear set of Black Sea objectives and a Black Sea strategy. (Pekala, 2006)

This must be also understood because the Black Sea Region as a concept was launched by Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson, American researchers, in June 2004, in a study published in the *Policy Review* magazine (Asmus & Jackson, 2004). The main reason for the newly found interest for this region, according to the authors, is that of the radical changes suffered by the international security system after 9/11. The security risk hierarchy priority was reconsidered, and major changes happened regarding the geopolitical and geostrategic international importance, alongside the NATO and EU expansion, which bring the two organizations in the region's vicinity. The picture is completed by considerations regarding regional resources, mainly energy, vital in order to ensure EU's security (Asmus & Jackson, 2004).

Even if the term was introduced in the article, the configuration and structure of the concept are older. We can confirm that the interest in this idea began around the year 2000, launched through studies carried on by some of the most important European institutes for security studies and European defense (Herd & Moustakis, 2000).

In another article, “The Soft War for Europe's East”, Bruce P. Jackson displays, in 2006, the American vision of a “Great Black Sea”, where the support for democracy would counteract the revengeful ambitions exhibited by Russia. In this space, the western objectives and values and those of Russia are not compatible, says the American politician. Practically, in this context “the relationship between Russia and Europe in the first decades of the 21st century will be defined for the first time, 150 years from the Siege of Sevastopol” (Jackson, 2006, p. 105).

Following along with the westernization of the Black Sea basin, the American politics must promote “geopolitical revisionism”, in order to change the current situation which clearly advantages the Russian Federation and Turkey. These states developed regional organizations for the administration of the Black Sea issues, which fundamentally and in terms of the solutions found in relation with the security threats remain conservative mechanisms, pro-status-quo. Practically, in the opinion of Bruce Jackson the “geopolitical revisionism” strategy aims to replace the classic system based on a balance of power specific to the 19th century (the political, economic, and military control of the Black Sea, shared between the Russian and Ottoman Empire) (Jackson, 2006, p. 105).

Overall, such a strategy aims to replace the influence of the two states with a regional co-operative and independent system, composed of democratic states supported through efficient means by the US and EU. The logic behind this construction lies in the creation of a regional structure, effective and viable, to protect the young ex-communist democracies from the Russian threat. Another major component of this “geopolitical revisionism” aims to challenge the standards that allow the perpetuation of a certain monopoly viewed as anachronism for the 21st century by the American elite, such as the terms of the Montreux Convention from July 1936, that establish the sole military control of the Narrows to be held by Ankara.

The subsequent geopolitical and geo-economical evolutions support the ideas put forward by Bruce Jackson, the fragility of the post-soviet democracy being unable to assure the irreversibility of the democratic reforms initiated and required by those societies.

The first fundamental document for the US policy in the Wider Black Sea Region—the strategy adopted by the Bush administration in 2007—is the result of the initiatives and opinions of outstanding personalities of the American public society, politicians, international relations specialists, economists, etc., expressed at the stand/tribune/gallery of the Congress, as well as during prestigious think-tanks. All of these voices highlighted the necessity of a more active involvement in the geopolitics and geostrategy of the region, asking the Bush administration to elaborate a realistic strategy to strengthen the security and stability of the Black Sea basin.

In order to elaborate this strategy, the American scientific elite suggested more than one course of action to be promoted by the American administration (Cohen & Conway, 2006):

- Enhancing the cooperation and coordinating the actions with the EU, which already developed political, economic, and financial instruments through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP);
- Encouraging democratic and economic reforms in the Black Sea area;
- Stimulating the cooperation with non-NATO states as part of the Partnership for Peace (PfP);
- Supporting Romania and Bulgaria (new members of NATO at the time) through economic, political, and military assistance in order for them to gain a more relevant role/position in the region, concomitant with reinforcing the relations with Turkey;
- Political pressure on Russia for the purpose of lifting the sanctions laid down on Georgia and reviving the multilateral conversations in regards to finding a durable solution for the “frozen conflicts” with the help of the UN and OSCE;
- Extending the bilateral economic agreements with the Black Sea basin states for investing American stock in the transportation infrastructure of oil and gas from the Caspian region to Europe.

In this regard, the American strategy aimed, consistently, to encourage the pro-western governments in Georgia and Ukraine to adopt policies through which the reforming process of these states would gain an irreversible character. The Russian military action from August of 2008 against Georgia, the one against Ukraine in 2014, and the strengthening of Ankara as a regional power whose external political agenda is now only partially connected to EU and NATO’s interests represent the growth that momentarily delays the optimal progress of the American initiatives in the region.

The Romania-US Strategic Partnership

The Strategic Partnership, launched on July 11th, 1997, on the occasion of Bill Clinton’s visit to Bucharest (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), aimed to ensure a consolidated framework of cooperation between Romania and the United States in the fields of strategic interest for both of the countries, as following:

- military cooperation;
- collaboration on problems of regional security, such as stabilizing south-eastern Europe and the Wider Black Sea Region;
- combat unconventional risks (asymmetrical).

The presence of Romanian soldiers in the Iraqi and Afghan warzones and the establishment of American military installations on Romanian territory are the result of the external pro-American orientation in the last decades. Furthermore, since January 2005 (reiterated until nowadays-2019), the Foreign Policy Strategy presented by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has identified the Strategic Partnership as an essential marker of external action.

On December 6th 2005, Condoleezza Rice, State Secretary of the US, signed “The Access Accord” that regulated the deployment of the US army on Romanian territory, in accordance with the vision expressed in *Global Defense Posture Review*. This document (adopted in 2004) represented the strategy of the Pentagon to review its global military force as a consequence of the new global geopolitical realities: Moving the NATO frontiers and the foreshadowed EU expansion in the Black Sea region, the apparition of “hot zones” in areas far away from the European continent—Central Asia and the Middle East or supporting counter-terrorism acts worldwide. A new type of military installations that embodied the concept of mobile, temporary bases, would support the actions of the future military forces that will excel through “operational capacity, agility and rapidity” (Popa, 2005, p. 23).

The Agreement that went into force on July 21st 2006 was aimed at a couple of locations (Mihail Kogălniceanu airbase, Babadag training base, the training zones Cincu and Smârdan) that were going to be used by the American forces. The US presence at the Black Sea was also consolidated through the signing of agreements, similar to the situation Bulgaria was in April 2006: The Novo Selo shooting range, the Bezmer and Graf Ignatievo airbases next to Plovdiv are used by Americans to this day.

The terms stated that Washington would be able to use Romanian and Bulgarian bases in order to train, as well as to carry on multilateral drills in various formats, for provision supplies, and as transit points for the Iraqi and Afghan warzones (Robson, 2009). Essentially, the US has the possibility to deploy 5,000-10,000 soldiers in the Black Sea area, permanently or by rotation in both countries.

The new military installations are effective tools for implementing the American security and stability foreign policy in the Balkans and the Black Sea regions, Caucasus and Central Asia or the Middle East.

On the other hand, these will be integrated in the US global base network, ensuring, along with the military installations in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, the security of the Caucasian oil sources and their transport routes, countering the general threats caused by the export of Islamic radicalism from the zones on the “evil axis” towards the ones suffering from latent interconfessional conflicts, managing crisis and conflicts in Eurasia, the regional instability and worldwide terrorist risk factors (Bidu & Troncotă, 2005, pp. 224-225).

The intervention of the American and NATO armed forces beyond the “safety zone in Europe” and into “the zone of chaos outside of it”, according to Robert Cooper, American military specialist, will decisively rely on the new response capacities in southeastern Europe; thus, at the Mihail Kogălniceanu base has stationed, since January 2010, the Commander of Task Force East, from where American soldiers from both Romania and Bulgaria are coordinated.

Especially important for the regional security is the installation in Romania and in the Black Sea basin of the elements of the American antiballistic system. On September 17th 2009, Barack Obama announced the decision to develop a gradually adaptive approach (Phased Adaptive Approach) for the American missile defense system in Europe, which would protect in a more efficient way both the NATO forces deployed on the continent and on US soil and its allies. Essentially, a new project is proposed, more realistic and easier to be carried out than that of the Bush administration (The White House, 2009).

This approach presents a series of clear advantages in comparison with the former American administration plan (for details, see U.S. Department of Defence):

- enhancing the system that defends Europe, considering that the threats of short or medium-range missiles are growing;

- answering the current threats and incorporating new technologies, as the threats evolve (the SM-3 missile system is lightly adapted and modified, the latest versions Block IIA having a range of over 2,000 km);

- covering the entire Romanian territory (and, finally, of all allied states); the Bush administration version only ensures missile defense for a small part of the northwestern Romanian territory (Harnessing Strategic Partnership).

The 24 SM-3 intercepts systems (Standard Missile 3) set up at the Deveselu airbase, along with the radar system placed in Turkey (up and running in January 2012) will have to be capable of annihilating an eventual long-range missile attack carried out by the Middle Eastern states against the territories of the NATO states (NATO, 2011). The importance of the base is also given by the most modern defensive system of the US army, brought to Romania in the summer of this year (2019), The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) (US to Deploy, 2019).

The Bucharest authorities promptly responded to the American proposal concerning Romania's participation in the gradual adaptive approach of the missile defense system in Europe, by approving the project launched by the Supreme Council of State Defense on February 4th 2010.

The importance of this system for the Romanian security is highlighted in the National Defense Strategy, where it is specified that "the bilateral project developed with the United States will represent a tangible contribution to the development of the missile defense system intended by NATO".

The decision taken by the Obama administration has a special political significance: a clear sign that the US does not abandon the southeastern European states, assigning them an important role in the new geopolitical configuration of the American global interests. Connecting the security policy of Romania, Bulgaria on the southern wing, Poland, Czech Republic, and the Baltic States on the northern wing to Washington, becomes much more efficient when the modern American infrastructure exists on the territory of these states, and the US Government shall assume the privileges of ensuring the security of those societies.

President Donald Trump continues on the path of his predecessors because starting in 2017, billions of dollars are assigned for transporting heavy equipment, armored vehicles, and other military paraphernalia, as well as for building new installations on the states located on the eastern wing of NATO.

According to the statements of the American officials, it is "a long term response to the change of the security environment in Europe. Moreover, it reflects the new realities, considering that Russia became a geopolitical player whose actions are unpredictable" (Lander & Cooper, 2016, p. 1). And this response becomes more and more believable given that the US military leadership adopts new methods and creates new means to be able to counter the eventual hostile acts carried out by Russia through fast response and

intervention units.

Therefore, important American troop movements are happening from and to Eastern Europe, in order to check the ability to transport heavy equipment to a potential warzone as Poland or the Baltic States. One such deployment occurred in March 2019 when over 1,500 soldiers from the 1st Armored Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team were given a week's notice to travel from Fort Bliss, Texas, to Germany and fell in on pre-positioned equipment to train in Poland. "The Army is working various ways to get after it", says Gen. John Murray, commander of Army Futures Command (World Defence News, 2019).

The American military presence and the integration of Romania in the missile defense project give the Black Sea area as a whole and to our country especially an increased strategic importance, which was unimaginable at the beginning of the 1990s'. The authorities at Bucharest highlighted the fact that the involvement in the development of the American antiballistic defense system represents a reconfirmation of "the special relationship with the USA", the project contributing to the considerable enhancement of the security degree of the country and of the European continent.

It is reminded that, when it comes to the bilateral collaboration in the field of security threats and managing them, this already has a considerable "seniority". It deepened due to the multitude of shared actions, from legislative harmonization to those specific to the Iraqi and Afghan warzones. In addition, since December 2011, the at the time directors of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI), George Cristian Maior, and FBI, Robert Mueller, on the occasion of the meeting at Bucharest have highlighted the fact that cooperation and dialogue, especially on the cyber intelligence field (domain in which the SRI is a national authority since 2008), as well as regarding countering economical and financial criminality, diversified and deepened. It represents a practical shape of the will of the two parts to strengthen the Strategic Partnership on security.

Beyond the official statements there are physical results, the information exchange between the two intelligence services leading to the dismantling, in the recent years, of some networks of cyber criminality both on Romanian and US territory, whose activity caused major damage to the American companies (Mueller, 2011).

The tight cooperation with the USA in the counter-terrorism field has a tradition, Romania joining the principles of Proliferation Security Initiative, the American initiative meant to combat the proliferation of mass destruction weapons through blocking illegal transfers on all transport pathways used by felons, in 2014 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

This multidimensional cooperation was emphasized in April 2018, on the occasion of the visit of SRI director Eduard Hellvig to the United States where he met with the leaders of the American intelligence services. Obviously, this official visit is the expression of the close relationship between the Romanian Intelligence Service and American security agencies; all the officials have stated their conviction that this relation could contribute to the strengthening of Romanian-American cooperation within the framework of the Strategic Partnership (SRI).

Another major accomplishment of the American involvement in supporting the Romanian efforts of countering the new threats to the regional security is embodied by the establishment, on October 16th, 1999 at Bucharest, of the Regional SECI Center for preventing and combating transborder criminality (Regional SECI Center Combating Transborder Criminality). The main mission of the Center is that of enabling information exchange between the security and intelligence structures of the member states (the participating countries to SECI) with the purpose of countering organized crime with cross-border branching.

From October 2011, SECI Center has become SELEC (The Southeast European Law Enforcement Center), which provides a multinational expertise to law enforcement authorities across the Southeast European region offering the necessary platform for exchanging information and requests of assistance, supporting operational meetings, joint investigations, and regional operations, as well as delivering quality analytical products. Besides the 11 Member States, SELEC also has 24 partner countries and organizations and has established numerous partnerships with other organizations, bodies, as well as with the private sector (SELEC).

The importance of SELEC lies within the fact that it represents the main regional instrument that directly contributes to the support of the law enforcement authorities' efforts in southeast Europe for countering transborder criminality. The experience and results registered from the point of its establishment until now recommend it as the prepared institution to offer specialized expertise to the similarly tasked structures within the Black Sea Region as an area of interest.

Conclusions

The close relationship with the United States proves its utility, even more, considering that, not even today NATO and the EU do have a joint strategic vision regarding the Wider Black Sea Region. This is due to the conceptual differences, as well as to the fact that unlike Central and Eastern Europe, where the EU and NATO integration were linked to each other, in the Black Sea area the situation is different, only Romania and Bulgaria being part of the two structures.

Through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the EU wants to create a "circle of friends" around its outskirts, including the Black Sea. Highlighting the fact that the region is a "pathway" to the energy-rich region of the Caspian Sea and a barrier to the transborder threats, NATO promotes a "pathway/barrier" design for this area.

Certainly, the US took the Strategic Partnership with Romania beyond some realities that established clear barriers, as well as the difference of international status, compatibility, and political, economic, or military capabilities. We can tell that this close relationship with the US helped Romania to transform itself from a security consumer to a security provider in the Balkans and in the Wider Black Sea Region.

Furthermore, Bucharest valued the fact that the security of the Euro-Atlantic space is indivisible, because the United States is also the ally and strategic partner of the European community.

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