

NATO and EU Strategies for the Black Sea Region: The Challenge of Power Balance in New Security Environment

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Abstract: The article gives an overview on the dynamic political processes in the Black Sea region after some major geostrategic changes posing instability concerns in the region. The aim is to summarise the policy tendencies of the international organisations (NATO and EU) towards Russia and to present some analytical thoughts on current Euro-Atlantic strategies. Proposed is a different way of thinking based on the “conengagement” approach.

Key words: Black sea region security, balance of power, NATO and EU security policies in the Black Sea.

1. Introduction

Since the formation of a new international security system with the Westfalia Agreements in 17th century, the challenge of “balance of power” is main characteristic of the modern international relations. It means that every state or coalition owns the capability to balance and to deter the power of the other states so that it cannot unify foreign territories. To establish a balance of power means a period of peace and its breaking after the failure of the diplomatic means usually leads to war. The new configurations formed after that, so the new balances of power, means usually increasing the power of one state or international organisation/coalition.

In the latest years, the Black Sea region faces the challenge of “power balance” in a very dynamic way combining political, military, economic and energy aspects. On one hand, the presence of NATO and EU in the region changed the geostrategic orientation of the Euro-Atlantic community, on the other hand the region is traditionally a crossroad between Europe and Asia.

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During the Cold War period it was a borderline between the two blocs and that is why it was a zone of stability. After the end of the two-pole model—appearance of many new actors and a zone of strategic communications related with the Caspian oil. And after the events of September 11, 2001, it is one of the “key” geostrategic regions in the world considered as an outpost in the global war against terrorism.

Today two main challenges characterise the security environment—the major discrepancy in military capabilities after the annexation of Crimea, and the future of the new energy and transport corridors connecting Caspian and European markets. These factors form the wider perception of the Black Sea region in every geostrategic and/or continental policy analysis.

2. Black Sea Region Analysis Format

Attempts to establish control over Eurasian strategic raw materials through a wide range of international (including USA, China, Russia etc.) political and military efforts predetermine the agenda and strategies of international organizations like NATO and the EU. In this respect, the analytical literature presents the thesis of the three security belts in the Black

Sea-Caucasus region, and it should be mentioned that a largest number of unresolved problems are concentrated in the South Caucasus [1]. The first belt is Russia, Turkey and Iran bordering the South Caucasus and possessing immense opportunities for influence—military-political (Russia), economic (Turkey), religious influence (Iran) on transformation processes in Caucasian societies. The second belt includes a wide range of Central Asian countries and parts of Europe, the Middle East and the Balkan Peninsula. Bulgaria and Romania have a particular role here, through which the EU has a direct geopolitical and geo-economic presence. And the third belt covers the United States and Western and Central European countries operating through international and regional organizations in the region.

On one hand, the Black Sea region is becoming a sort of hotspot for the Russian-American interests. On the other hand, national and international security systems face new challenges, risks and threats, shaping a radically new strategic security environment. This is particularly relevant for the maritime dimension, especially following recent trends in strong opposition to the energy and military-political interests of policy makers such as the United States, Russia, NATO and the EU in the Black Sea. For countries in the region characterized by asymmetry in economic and political development, hindered or obstructed integration, the main objective is to increase capacity to achieve more stability through enhanced cooperation and good democratic practices. This is also the leading political line of countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, which integrate into communities and structures with high security capabilities (NATO and EU).

3. Factors That Influence the International and Regional Policies of NATO and EU in the Black Sea Region

The current geopolitical situation in the Black Sea region is determined by two main factors: the presence and periodic “de-froze” of the so-called frozen

conflicts that arose after the end of the Cold War as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasing military and political presence of NATO and the United States and the geopolitics of energy.

Until the events that led to a change in the course of Russian foreign and security policy from a relatively balanced, refrained and even cooperative approach on the international scene to the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation marks a loss of positions in the Black Sea after the division of the navy between Russia and Ukraine. By the time of the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008 and the riots and conflict in Syria, Russia did not demonstrate a firm and consistent policy in the region. As a key foreign policy priority was defined the role of Russia in the Pacific on one side securing its status as a major transit route of trade and economic relations between Europe and the Pacific [2], and on the other, developing partnerships with China, India and Vietnam, and countering the polarization of forces in the region, addressing the growing competition between the US and China [3].

Georgia’s and Ukraine’s attempts of joining Euro-Atlantic and European structures have further exacerbated US influence in the region. Bulgaria and Romania have intensified bilateral cooperation with the United States and have signed agreements to build joint military facilities on their territories. The NATO missile defense system elements were agreed on the territories of Romania and Poland. US bilateral agreements with Romania and Turkey have been signed and Bulgaria declares readiness to accept ships equipped with missile defense capabilities in the Black Sea, taking into account the Montreux Convention.

Military-political cooperation of NATO countries was established with the active support of the United States by maintaining a large number of military exercises in the region with the participation of all kinds of armed forces, air, naval and naval forces, at the expense of the role of regional organizations. The role of the organization for BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation) is highly exaggerated, with most

countries ignoring the regional dimension and clearly declaring their strategic pro-European and pro-American orientation [4]. Competition between countries for more influence, especially in the distribution of transport and energy communications, suppressed integration efforts.

It is necessary to take into account the leadership of Turkey, which has strengthened its naval and economic positions in the Black Sea area and currently has the most powerful modernized naval fleet. In addition, Turkey has grown in the share of Black Sea trade, and a large part of the turbulent flow from the former socialist countries has shifted to the resorts of the Turkish Mediterranean.

The review of regional cooperation in the Black Sea clearly shows a number of positive results, especially for the new NATO and EU members.

The clearly declared position of Bulgaria and Romania that the direct engagement of NATO and the EU with the available military, political and financial potential proved to have a real impact on the security of the Black Sea. Notable is that for the first time final document of NATO summit (Lisbon in November 2010) contains a specific text on the Black Sea coast. According to the document, security and stability in the Black Sea region continue to be important for Euro-Atlantic security and welcome the progress in consolidating regional cooperation through the effective use of existing mechanisms and initiatives based on transparency and the participation of all countries. The Alliance promotes the efforts of the countries of the region and stands ready to support them, based on regional priorities, dialogue and cooperation between the countries of the region and with NATO [5].

The NATO and EU members of the Black Sea region Bulgaria and Romania have also participated in NATO's developed projects in the spirit of "smart defense" and in the EU's "pooling and sharing" initiative.

The processes described have a direct impact on the

change in the security environment in Europe and, of course, in the Black Sea. Already in 2009, the leading Russian scientific experts Jurgens, Dinkin and Arbatov set the five-day Russian-Georgian war in 2008 as a result of NATO's enlargement policy in the post-Soviet area. They also set Tbilisi's attempts to impose control over Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the North Caucasus under the guide of NATO as a dangerous policy for Russia [6]. In the 2009 quoted analysis, they concern the same aspect with Ukraine.

The same predictions are made by Western political scientists. Dembinski, Schumacher, Schwanger criticize the controversial US and EU policy in the region after the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008. On the one hand, restoring relations with Russia, but also differentiating, on the other, declarations to continue the enlargement of NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe without concrete steps to that Ref. [7]. In the German debates, NATO's long-standing NATO and EU policy of neglecting Russian interests at the expense of the West is cited as the main reason for the events and annexation of the Crimea and the Ukrainian conflict. The decision in the early 1990s to ensure security in Europe not through new international organizations but through the existing Western NATO and the EU, with Russia at best being associated partner status, hides the danger of a deepening "Ingroup-Outgroup"-dynamics. It is intensifying with enlargement processes, which are also exacerbating tensions with Russia, especially after the creation of a "new Europe" for which Ukraine is starting to play an increasingly important geopolitical role [8, 9]. The emotions of the two countries in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict allow us to speculate that it is not just a territorial conflict, but a historically determined antagonism that has found conditions for realization and is part of Putin's geostrategic plans.

Following the summits in Brussels and the NATO summit in September 2014, it is clear that a solution for Ukraine without Russia's participation is unrealistic. Neither the economic sanction packages nor the

strengthening of the presence of NATO forces in Eastern Europe will result in Russia's refusal to obtain full guarantees for Ukraine's future outside the EU and NATO. However, political consensus cannot be reached because of the illegality of the annexation of the Crimea and the military destabilization in Eastern Ukraine. The hopes of the West remain a bilateral cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine.

The options of Western strategies towards Russia in the newly established security environment in Eastern Europe are not much. The most logical may be the US "conengagement" strategy that has been applied for example towards China. It includes the so-called "containment" of negatives, and at the same time "engagement" in a dialogue essential for European security. The aim is to influence positive socio-political transformation processes through economic and institutional partnership, while at the same time implementing measures (including by maintaining a stand-by military force for deterrence) to curb any kind expansionist and aggressive behavior.

In this spirit, NATO measures have been taken following the annexation of the Crimea, namely: the reinforcement of intelligence flights over the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, Poland and Romania, expanding the Baltic Air Policy Mission in March 2014 with 10 to 12 combat planes, increasing presence in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea on a rotation basis. Displacement of 12 F-16 and 200 US troops in Poland in 2014, and Canada from May 2014 6 CF-18 in Romania, from April 2014, a US military unit of 600 soldiers was deployed by Vicenza, Italy, in the three Baltic States and Poland, planned military maneuvers in the Baltic countries and Poland are increasing in scale (Saber Strike). In June 2014 the United States send 100 SOCEUR soldiers to Poland, Slovakia and the Baltic States to train local armed forces against scenarios of diversant attacks [10].

Following the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014, it was decided to set up Rapid Reaction Forces with a base in Eastern Europe, raise the military

budgets of Eastern European countries, expand patrol flights over land and sea as part of the plan readiness to act, especially in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea.

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO leaders officially approved the continuous rotational deployment of four multinational battalions (about 4,000 troops) to the Baltic states and Poland to maintain a persistent forward presence—and some of these units have already arrived in Poland to take up their positions. In addition, NATO agreed on further measures to improve the readiness, training, command and control, and logistics support of these forces [11]. Assuming that the United States fully implements the ERI (European Reassurance Initiative) and NATO fulfills the commitments made at its two most recent summits, the alliance will maintain only small force deployed on its Eastern flank to deter and provide an initial forward defense against potential conventional attack.

4. Russia's Policy Perception

There is also the challenge for Russia to assess the measures taken in the already existing military bases and the rotation of US and NATO combat units in the planned maneuvers. Moreover, in turn, following the annexation of the Crimea, Russia implemented a sharp increase and modernization of the Black Sea navy. Thus, the Black Sea area is covered by a large number of shore anti-missile systems and is under the control of strategic missiles, making it a relatively simple task to destroy potential adverse naval force in the Black Sea. The stated potential of the Russian Crimea can be used in possible "hot" points in the Middle East, including in Syria and Iran. Russia is worried about Western efforts to create tension in Eurasia, which poses a challenge to Russian national interests according to their perception [12].

Moreover, in the newest National Security Strategy from 2016, Russia asserts that the U.S. and its allies (NATO) are seeking to contain Russia in order to maintain their dominance of world affairs, which

Russia's independent foreign policy challenges. It describes NATO as a threat because the alliance is expanding its military infrastructure towards Russian borders (a phenomenon that was mentioned as a concern in the 2009 strategy as well) [13]. The rhetoric is clear, in general following the spirit of previous strategic documents and confronting growing concerns about spreading military and political efforts to undermine Russian national interests in traditionally "Russian influenced" regions.

5. Conclusions

We are at the time of challenging the classical power balance principle for keeping the peace and stability in the wider Black Sea region. But actually, the options for reviving the dialogue and cooperation are definitely open. Sanctions, provocations and tensions are contemporary measures. The region has the potential to generate stability. The experience that countries like Bulgaria and Romania gained since their membership in NATO and EU should be supported and promoted by active EU and allies' assistance. The forthcoming presidencies of the EU Council in Bulgaria and Romania in 2018 and 2019 will be followed cautiously by Russia, will attract political attention to the region and hopefully booster the Russian turn back to constructive dialogue.

In this context, it is not naive to recall the fact that the 2007 NATO-Russia Founding Act has not been abrogated during none of the NATO summits. This remains a diplomatic basis and an opportunity for further dialogue, as especially the EU is once again aware of its crucial role in the processes [14]. A long, huge-resource consuming confrontation with Russia is not acceptable. The economic interdependence, the strategically main security threats like global terrorism, are too much higher on the global powers' agenda.

The main issue is not how many specific measures or sanctions are exchanged between the EU and its allies and Russia, but concerns more the objectives of the new program of Russian governance, which defines

Russia as a political, socio-cultural, or even ideological-civilization alternative to West. At the heart of this is the idea of forming the Eurasian (economic) zone of influence as a counterbalance to the Western international-organizational model. It is this tendency that made diplomacy difficult because of the insufficient resources of the existing international negotiating system to respond to the new challenge. Regardless of the final development of the conflict in Ukraine, the analysis shows that security in Europe can only be guaranteed with the participation of Russia. Whether some formats of the previous partnership with Russia will be restructured, international organizations such as the OSCE will adjust their models of action to its interests, or create a new regional international organization or partnership structure remains an open question. Brussels begins to consider, that the geopolitical situation in the region and in Europe after the annexation of the Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine has changed and requires a new diplomatic toolbox for action based on the "congagement" strategy. Namely, partnership is consistent with the interests of Russia and at the same time sets clear legal boundaries of action.

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