



Strengthening Deterrence in the Black Sea Region

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Russia's development of its offensive capabilities in the Black Sea region could pose a threat to NATO. Yet Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey each have different perceptions of the threat, making it difficult for the Alliance to strengthen deterrence policy in the regional dimension. Although NATO is gradually adjusting its forces in response to the new strategic situation, the credibility of deterrence depends on the rotational presence of U.S. troops.

In response to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's aggressive actions on NATO's Eastern Flank, the Alliance is strengthening its deterrence abilities. However, NATO's policy objective is not to balance Russian regional military superiority, but to deter Moscow from aggression by convincing the Kremlin that this would be met with a swift and decisive response. In the Baltic Sea region, such a response would be ensured by the presence of the multinational battalion battle groups (approximately 1 000 soldiers each), which should achieve full operational readiness in the middle of 2017. In the Black Sea region, a similar mechanism is being created on the basis of the NATO naval presence.

The Development of Russia's Offensive Capabilities. According to the Russian naval doctrine last updated in 2015, the Black Sea is of strategic importance, and policy priority is to stop NATO enlargement and the deployment of forces and infrastructure near the Russian borders. The Russian authorities have warned that the U.S. presence in the region is destabilising. In their view, the SM3 missile launcher base in Deveselu, Romania, which has been fully operational since May 2016 and which is the American contribution to the NATO missile defence system, is a threat to Russia and may become the target of a pre-emptive attack. Russia has already demonstrated its readiness to use military force against countries in the region that remain outside NATO and the EU. The Black Sea Fleet supported offensive operations against Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), and Russian military involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine (ongoing).

Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has expanded its offensive potential in the Black Sea region. The Black Sea Fleet has the capacity to carry out amphibious assault operations involving approximately 2 000 soldiers and dozens of combat vehicles. It also announced that a new airborne brigade will be formed (beginning in 2017), which may increase the number of troops able to participate in offensive operations to approximately 5 000. Under the pretext of the Kavkaz 2016 manoeuvres, Russia has deployed its advanced long-range S-400 air and missile defence system to the annexed Crimea. In 2016, the Black Sea Fleet was also strengthened with eight multi-purpose Su-30SM aircraft (and in 2017, the fleet is set to receive additional aircraft), whose missions may include escorting Tu-22M Backfire bombers armed with cruise missiles to attack large ships such as aircraft carriers. The offensive potential of the Black Sea Fleet is reinforced by Varshavianka class submarines and Buyan M corvettes armed with Kalibr NK nuclear capable cruise missiles with a range of 300 to 2 600 km (depending on the version). In 2015 and 2016 the ships demonstrated long range precision abilities with strikes against targets in Syria.

Such potential and existing capabilities could allow Russia to undermine the territorial integrity of a NATO member and effectively prevent Allied ships and aircraft from accessing the Black Sea area to restore the status quo. At the same time, Russia could threaten the territory of NATO members in order to prevent them from rendering help to an Ally.

NATO Forces on the Eastern Flank. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea, NATO has been strengthening its deterrence potential. However, it still respects the 1997 declaration on refraining from permanent deployment of

substantial combat military forces on the territory of its new members. After the 2014 NATO summit in Newport, the Alliance improved its ability to deploy a rapid response force (NRF) on the Eastern Flank, including to Bulgaria and Romania. However, before the July 2016 summit in Warsaw, Romania (like Poland and the Baltic States), sought to create a deterrence mechanism based on a continuous, rotational NATO presence. Because of Romania's location and the threat of a Russian amphibious assault, Bucharest called for the establishment of a NATO naval mission in the Black Sea. Just before the summit, Bulgarian prime minister Boyko Borisov said that his country did not feel threatened by Russia, and that the deployment of permanent naval forces could be provocative. Turkey did not back the Romanian proposal either, as Ankara has been seeking to improve relations with Russia since the downing of a Russian aircraft in November 2015. Turkey also feared that it would bear the main burden of a NATO presence, as the Montreux Convention limits access to the Black Sea by warships from non-littoral states.

Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria finally reached a compromise position, which was approved by NATO defence ministers during the February 16 North Atlantic Council (NAC) meeting. The presence of NATO ships in the Black Sea will be enhanced, and they will be put under the command of the Alliance's Standing Naval Forces (Standing NATO Maritime Group 2—SNMG2) operating in the Mediterranean. In this way, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe (SACEUR) will have operational command, and will be better able to monitor threats from Russia and react faster to any indications of crisis.

The NATO presence in the region will consist of two additional elements. During the NATO Warsaw summit, the Allies agreed to enhance the air force presence in Bulgaria and Romania, which will help monitor airspace and facilitate a joint threat assessment. Poland, the UK and Italy offered to contribute aircraft, and NATO also decided to set up a multinational land brigade based on a Romanian unit. Bulgaria offered to contribute 400 soldiers, and Poland pledged approximately 250. Since the role of the brigade will be to coordinate exercises of multinational sub-units and ensure the visible presence of NATO troops, it will not be able to participate in defensive actions to speed up any NATO response.

U.S. Actions. U.S. troops, present in the region in the framework of the Black Sea Rotational Forces initiative, are the main pillar of deterrence in the Black Sea. After the annexation of Crimea, the U.S. strengthened the Marines unit based in Romania from 250 to more than 400 soldiers. In April 2016, it deployed, albeit briefly, its most advanced fifth-generation fighter, the F22 Raptor, to Romania. In February 2017, it further strengthened its presence on the ground with a battalion (approximately 500 soldiers and heavy equipment), which is a part of Armoured Brigade Combat Team stationed in Poland and the Baltic States. Since the middle of 2015, approximately 150 soldiers have been deployed on a rotational basis to Bulgaria. The U.S. Navy's Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers, armed with Aegis air defence systems have been regularly entering the Black Sea. This all indicates that the U.S. is able to deploy the forces necessary to neutralise the threat posed by Russian offensive capabilities in the region, including Moscow's rhetoric on using nuclear weapons. The rotational presence of U.S. troops also increases the credibility of U.S. commitment to defend Allies in the event of a conflict.

Prospects. The Russian policy of intimidation and increasing costs for NATO is aimed at enforcing a new European security system, which Moscow believes should include a Russian sphere of influence. Aggression against Georgia and Ukraine has de facto blocked the enlargement of NATO (possibly also of the EU) to the post-Soviet space. It cannot be excluded that, under extreme circumstances, Russia could also decide to undermine the territorial integrity of the Alliance in order to force negotiations on a new security architecture. Although such a scenario could most easily unfold in the Baltic States, the presence of the missile base in Romania could also be a convenient pretext for offensive action, presented as a pre-emptive, defensive operation. The risk of such a scenario may rise during Zapad 2017, the large scale combined Russian and Belarusian exercises planned for September, which may be accompanied by unannounced snap exercises in the Black Sea region. During this period, NATO will probably strengthen its naval, land and air presence in the Black Sea region.

Further development of deterrence based on land forces for defensive missions and a continuous instead of regular naval presence will be hindered by the divergent interests of Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania. For historical reasons, Bulgaria remains vulnerable to Russian political, military and economic pressure. The resignation of the Bulgarian government in November 2016, the country's presidential election, the dissolution of parliament, and an early parliamentary election scheduled for the end of March, further complicated attempts to strengthen NATO's presence and security guarantees for the region. Turkey, which has since the end of the Cold War perceived Russia more as an economic partner than a threat, will make its participation in NATO deterrence policy conditional on support for Turkish interests, such as those related to the situation in Syria. Despite these difficulties, the possibility of further NATO adaptation to the threats could be considered by the Alliance, as a means of putting pressure on Russia should it continue attempts to destabilise European security.

At the same time, Romania and Bulgaria must, through the development of bilateral political and military cooperation with the United States, ensure the right conditions for the presence of U.S. forces. After the March parliamentary election, Bulgaria will be under pressure to follow the example of Romania, which plans to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP in 2017 and is modernising its armed forces. Increased defence spending by all European NATO members, and investments in military capabilities, will be a key prerequisite for extension of the U.S. rotational presence in Europe, which is necessary for credible deterrence in the Black Sea region.