

STRENGTHENING NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

A Strategy for Baltic- Black Sea Coherence

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Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis

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The Issue

NATO's Eastern Flank is the most vulnerable sector of the Alliance, one that is increasingly exposed to penetration, subversion, and military probing by a revisionist Russia. This geographic expanse, spanning from the Arctic to the Caucasus, is the primary arena in which tests to the credibility of NATO's defense posture are greatest. Along this flank, there are three core geographic theaters in which the United States and NATO will need to focus their deterrence strategies in a coherent manner: North (Baltic Sea region), Middle (Suwałki Corridor and Poland), and South (Black Sea region).

Previously, the authors addressed NATO's vulnerable Middle theater with their report on "Securing the Suwałki Corridor Strategy: Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense." Building on this work, the current report expands the strategic horizon to consider the multi-domain challenge posed by Russia in the contested spaces of NATO's Northern and Southern theaters encompassing the Black and Baltic Sea ("B2") regions. Without a clear, coherent, robust, and implementable plan for addressing vulnerabilities in these additional regions, the United States and Europe expose themselves to continued aggressive probing from Russia in the future. This increases great-power friction between East and West – elevating the risk that localized tests of strength could result in armed conflict. It is a danger that the United States, its allies, and its partner countries must address.

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INTRODUCTION

LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges

NATO, the most successful alliance in history, responded with speed and decisiveness after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and its ensuing illegal annexation of Crimea. Successive NATO Summits in Wales (2014), Warsaw (2016), and Brussels (2018) have empowered the Alliance to transition from *assurance* toward several Allies, specifically the Baltic states, Poland, and Black Sea states, to *deterrence* along NATO's Eastern Flank from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. NATO has steadily and quickly improved mission command structures and processes, deployed enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battle Groups, increased defense spending from every Alliance member, set up a tailored Forward Presence (tFP), and implemented numerous other capabilities to deter Russia's aggression and, if deterrence fails, to respond and defeat it.

Deterrence requires proven capabilities and the demonstrated will to use them. This has been accomplished through increased rotational forces from across the Alliance, prepositioned equipment, and significant increases in the quantity, sophistication, and scale of NATO exercises. The unity and solidarity of the Alliance is a manifestation of the will of its members, underscored in the overwhelming support for the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, along with dramatic, if uneven, increases in the defense spending of nearly every member state, and in their commitment to improve readiness and responsiveness.

However, it is clear that much remains to be accomplished based on Russia's continued aggression, particularly in the greater Black Sea region, as seen by its brazen attack on Ukrainian Navy vessels in November 2018 and its refusal to comply with the decision of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea to release 24 Ukrainian sailors until September 7, 2019 in a Ukrainian-Russian prisoner exchange.

NATO's priority over the last five years has been the Baltic region, especially in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – the countries closest to the Russian border, including the Kaliningrad *Oblast*. The Baltic Sea is surrounded by NATO Allies (Denmark, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and two close partners (Sweden and Finland), while access to the Baltic Sea is controlled by Denmark and Sweden. The Black Sea has three NATO Allies (Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria) and three Partners (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – by extension of its port on the Danube River). Turkey controls access to the Black Sea through the Bosphorus by applying the 1936 Montreux Convention.

The Black Sea is Russia's 'launching pad' for its destabilizing operations in Syria (which have contributed to hundreds of thousands of casualties in the Syrian civil war), its naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, and its continued occupation of approximately 20 percent of the

Republic of Georgia. In many respects, the wider Black Sea region is of even greater strategic value to Moscow than the Baltic region because the Kremlin has shown willingness to use force more readily there than anywhere else along NATO's Eastern Flank. Russia has and will continue to use force against non-NATO countries in the region—as demonstrated by the ongoing militarization of Crimea—and, if unchecked, will continue to flaunt international law with illegitimate claims to broader territorial waters and an increased Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that threatens Romania's legitimate interests.

The Kremlin employs various means to achieve its goal of undermining the Alliance, driving wedges between northern, southeastern, and southern members of NATO. It has continued to destabilize the Balkans and Caucasus, while attempting to create a gap between Turkey and the rest of the Alliance. If one includes Russia's support for the Assad regime in Syria and the growth of Russian military capabilities there, the result is that NATO's key regional Ally, Turkey, is in effect surrounded by Russia's penetration and destabilization.

Although the exact challenges and opportunities differ between the Baltic and Black Sea regions, NATO needs *coherence* across these two regions, with a balance of capabilities that present a united, unassailable front against Russia's assertiveness. NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea region in an effort to deter Moscow, to assure our Allies (Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria), and to assist our Partners (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). But there is much to be done to increase the deterrence and defense capabilities necessary for effective collective posture and regional stability.

Improving coherence will require heightened levels of readiness and increased capabilities and improvements in several areas. These include, but are not limited to: military mobility – the ability to move as fast or faster than Russian forces; cyber defense, especially of critical transportation infrastructure such as sea ports and rail networks; seamless intelligence-sharing between Allies and Partners and across agencies to recognize looming crises in time; interoperability, as crisis response will require multinational capabilities to engage upon arrival without a long lead-time; air and missile defense for the entire theater; mission command capability in the Black Sea region, similar to what Germany has offered in the Baltic Sea; building a common air and maritime picture that includes our Partners in both regions; countering Russian disinformation; increasing diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin to comply with international law; and pursuing innovative ways to improve maritime capabilities of Black Sea and Baltic Sea Allies and Partners.

This report examines the challenges along NATO's Eastern Flank and offers meaningful, achievable, and sustainable recommendations for building coherence along it. These recommendations can significantly improve deterrence and greatly reduce the likelihood of a tragic miscalculation by the Kremlin about NATO willpower, cohesion, and capabilities.

The “B2” Region



Adapted from © Mapbox 2019.

FINDINGS

The two most effective means of securing the B2 region from future revisionist probing by Russia are **cohesion** and **coherence**.

Cohesion, or political *solidarity* among Allies, is the center of gravity of NATO. It is the key to effective deterrence of Russian aggression, as the Kremlin will not want to engage in a war with NATO if it faces a unified, cohesive Alliance with all 29 states committed to each other and with shared values specified in the Washington Treaty. Preserving the cohesion of the Alliance is the most important task of Alliance leaders and the political leaders of all member states.

Coherence is the *unified effort* to deter Russian aggression in all domains: land, air, maritime, cyber, space, and information. NATO has made great strides at improving its capabilities, readiness, and mission command structures across much of the Alliance. But there are still gaps between some of these domains and indeed some of the geographic regions of the Alliance in terms of its deterrence capability. An example is the difference between NATO's "enhanced Forward Presence" in the Baltic States and Poland and "tailored Forward Presence" in the Black Sea region.

The Kremlin seeks to undermine the **cohesion** of the Alliance with all available means, staying just below the threshold of Article 5 ("An armed attack on one shall be considered an attack on all"). Moscow could challenge governments to reconsider whether they would actually come to the defense of another member by threatening the use of nuclear weapons. Another Russian ploy is to develop intermediate and long-range missile systems that can strike critical infrastructure,

exploit the current lack of adequate missile defense systems, and thereby hold European populations hostage. Most damaging is the effort to drive wedges between Alliance members and exploit inadequate coherence in NATO's deterrence efforts.

Coherence requires **Speed**: (1) speed of recognition of what Russian forces might be planning and doing; (2) speed of decision at all echelons of the Alliance based on a common

“The two most effective means of securing the B2 region from future aggressive probing by Russia are cohesion and coherence.”

definition of aggression and what constitutes a violation of Article 5; and (3) speed of assembly to prevent or respond to a potential crisis. Exercising and demonstrating this speed is essential to effective deterrence.

Speed of recognition requires integrated inter-agency intelligence- and information-sharing across the Alliance. The first indicator

of a possible Russian assault will most likely not be detected by satellites or other high-end, sophisticated sensors. Rather, the first indicators may be a strike by dockworkers or other forms of civil disturbance in a targeted state promoted by disinformation, or infiltration into seaports or rural areas by Russian special forces or militias. Rapid information-sharing between governments, embassies, agencies, and military HQs will be essential for ensuring ‘speed of detection.’ U.S. and Allied special forces and territorial home defense units will be particularly effective in this effort.

Speed of decision is required to enable necessary movements, drawing ammunition, mobilizing and ensuring the rapid deployment of high-readiness forces, reprioritizing transportation assets, repositioning air and maritime forces, heightening awareness of indicators and warning systems, and—most importantly—signaling strong intent and resolve by the Alliance. NATO conducts exercises each year to practice this process. Each member state should do the same. SACEUR has been given increased responsibility in this regard but the more authority that can be delegated, the faster Allied forces can begin to move and the better we can prevent a crisis from erupting.

Speed of assembly is the ability to put forces into position to signal to the Kremlin that NATO is prepared and, if deterrence fails, to defeat attacking forces in all domains: air, land, maritime, space, cyber, and information. Air and naval forces can move relatively quickly in their domains. The movement of land forces is much more difficult and time-consuming and requires capability, capacity, and legal and diplomatic authority. NATO forces must be able to move as fast or faster than Russian forces in order to send a powerful message of unity, resolve, deterrence and to give civilian leaders credible options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Elevate Cohesion and Coherence

- ② Moscow views NATO’s tailored Forward Presence (tFP) in the Black Sea region as a weaker deterrent than NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic region. NATO should plan to reinforce its regional defense and deterrence posture, including tFP, and declare its capabilities across the entire Eastern Flank as Forward Presence (FP). This would improve decision-making and enhance military mobility across NATO territory to ensure reinforcements wherever they are needed. Coherence will then be visible in inter-governmental coordination, improvements in infrastructure, speed in crossing borders, intensified intelligence-sharing, and advanced Allied interoperability. At present, NATO’s tFP includes Multinational Brigade Southeast in Craiova, Multinational Division Southeast headquarters in Bucharest, and Multinational Corps Southeast headquarters in Sibiu – although at Craiova, for example, only a Polish company is deployed with no other Allied troops. Other Allies should consider sending troops to Craiova, even on a rotational basis.
- ② In order to better identify defense gaps, NATO would benefit from a regional risk, situational, and early warning reports on Eastern Flank vulnerabilities. This should be compiled on an annual basis in order to determine the most effective deterrents to Russia’s threats. This should also be a public document. Moscow’s threatening posture and behavior, as well as the necessity of NATO’s defenses, need to be widely publicized to underscore the importance of the Alliance’s posture along the entire Eastern Flank.
- ② By eliminating the distinction between eFP and tFP and also adopting a common



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regional threat assessment, NATO can further an approach of “one threat, one flank, one presence” to secure its Eastern Flank.

Enhance Deterrents and Defenses

- ⦿ Greater investment is needed in trans-continental infrastructure and dual-use transportation infrastructure that would facilitate the movement of NATO forces across Europe. For instance, the Three Seas initiative, launched in 2015, which involves 12 European countries between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas, contains a transportation infrastructure component that can contribute to NATO’s military mobility and buttress its deterrence capacities. Investment in such infrastructure and increased transportation capacity should be considered as contributions towards NATO’s 2 percent defense-spending

target. Closer cooperation with the EU and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative on military mobility is essential.

- ⦿ NATO should undertake a strategic assessment of the Danube and its transportation capacity and whether the river and delta can enhance military mobility on a consistent basis. Contingencies must also be developed to defend the Danube delta and prevent Russian subversion of riverine regions, including attempts to blockade or sabotage passage through the Danube and into the Black Sea.
- ⦿ NATO faces diverse dangers that cannot all be addressed by conventional defenses alone. Cyberspace has been designated a domain in which NATO will operate to defend its members. NATO’s Secretary General has underscored that a serious cyberattack could

potentially be considered an armed attack under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. NATO is also establishing a Cyberspace Operations Centre in Mons, Belgium that will draw on national cyber capabilities for NATO missions. National-level investment in cyber protection for transportation infrastructure should count towards the 2 percent defense-spending target.

- ④ Spending on national security and intelligence could be included as part of national defense expenditures. NATO must also focus on integrating new technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), cyber, robotics, quantum computing, and biotechnology. At the NATO Summit in Brussels on July 11, 2018, Allied leaders announced the establishment of Counter Hybrid Support Teams to provide targeted assistance to Allies, upon request, in preparing for and responding to hybrid

activities.¹ NATO needs a comprehensive assessment of the role and impact of this initiative.

Gain Initiative in the Baltic Sea Region

- ④ **Mission Command:** Germany has established a new maritime command in Rostock that it is offering to NATO and which can provide improved mission command, a common maritime and air picture, and more sophisticated naval exercises and anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Baltic region. It will include Sweden and Finland as well as the surrounding NATO nations of Denmark, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Norway.
- ④ **Improve Air/Missile Defense:** Conduct comprehensive theater-wide Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) exercises each year; convert Air Policing to Air Defense;



“Hungarian Air Force polices Baltic skies” by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

increase air/missile defense capabilities in the Baltic States and assist them in developing mid-range air defense capabilities that would cover their entire territories and significantly strengthen the current NATO air-policing mission, which would help deter and restrict the increasingly frequent Russian incursions

“*NATO needs to develop a more comprehensive plan for the defense of the Black Sea region, similar to what it has already done for the Baltic region.*”

into Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian airspace. Germany and Netherlands should take the lead to include annual regional exercises, in addition to EUCOM/NATO theater-wide exercises. NATO would benefit from a stronger Baltic Air Policing Mission and greater air defense cooperation along the Eastern Flank, as the Baltic states lack sufficient air capabilities and are limited by small national defense budgets. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the number of violations of

Baltic airspace has increased. NATO’s Control and Reporting Centers (CRCs) and Command and Control (C2) should open their networks to intelligence on missile and air defense coming from NATO’s eastern members. A near-term solution would involve fully capable, overhead sensors to maximize the speed of recognition of missile launches, with links between sensors and interceptors. A fully integrated offense-defense capability backed by AI should also be employed through the Command, Control, Battle Management, and Communications System (C2BMC) at the European Command.

- ⌚ In the non-military realm, cyber security cooperation can be increased in the region and joint training programs initiated. Several initiatives can be undertaken in the energy sphere, including developing regional infrastructure such as an LNG corridor and synchronizing the region’s electricity system.

Gain Initiative in the Black Sea Region

- ⌚ NATO needs to develop a more comprehensive plan for the defense of the Black Sea region, similar to what it has already done for the Baltic region. This plan would drive training exercises and mission command adjustments as well as provide the requirements necessary to improve military mobility. The strategic importance of the Black Sea region to NATO should be reflected on the ground.
- ⌚ Improving capabilities in the Black Sea region will enable NATO to regain the initiative in this theater. It includes increasing NATO’s regional C2 footprint. A phased approach to this goal is possible, starting with a joint Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) coordination center which could eventually become a C2 node/coordination center for the whole Black Sea region. The Alliance



“EXERCISE SEA SHIELD 2018” by NATO HQ MARCOM under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

should follow the example of NATO Maritime Command (MARCOM) in Northwood, United Kingdom—where separate cells are dedicated to the Baltic Sea and Black Sea—and eventually phase in a more robust C2 node. In this way, the Alliance can use a logical, step-by-step approach to build out needed capabilities like C2 for the Black Sea.

- ⌚ NATO has been limited in deterring Russian aggression in the Black Sea region, partly because of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which prohibits non-littoral countries from possessing a permanent naval presence in this region. Recognizing the practical implications of this treaty, NATO should develop a naval approach to the Black Sea that respects Montreux, yet achieves Turkey’s full and transparent enforcement of it, most especially in the case of Russian military transits into the Eastern Mediterranean. Working within the confines of Montreux, NATO must set as a priority the maintenance of an effective, year-

round, rotational naval presence by non-littoral powers in the Black Sea.

- ⌚ Prior to his retirement in 2019, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Curtis Scaparrotti expressed concern about Russia’s modernization of its navy and NATO’s insufficient deterrent posture, including shortfalls in land and naval forces as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. His recommendation that the United States deploy more troops and warships to Europe, including two additional naval destroyers to join the four already stationed in Rota, Spain, remains an imperative.
- ⌚ Create a NATO A2/AD “bubble” to help protect the western Black Sea. Capabilities should include unmanned maritime systems, ground-based systems in Romania including anti-ship missiles, drones, and attack aviation. Also needed is more NATO naval and air engagement, including the conversion of

NATO's Black Sea Air Policing mission to Air Defense, with new rules of engagement and enhanced capabilities. Several strategic locations around the Black Sea need to be militarily reinforced and serve as military hubs, and this can include Ukraine's Odesa and the Danube Delta.

⦿ Romania, as the center of gravity of NATO deterrence in the Black Sea, needs significant military reinforcement. First and foremost, this means improving Romania's road and rail infrastructure to enhance military mobility, either through the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) or by Romania directly. It also means developing the existing NATO structures in Romania that are part of tFP. Establishment of the Multinational Corps Southeast headquarters should be accelerated in order to complete the Allied C2 architecture in the Black Sea region, while Multinational Brigade Southeast should be strengthened. The regional maritime HQ for NATO (now only a command element within MARCOM) could be located in Constanța in order to coordinate naval efforts of Black Sea littoral states and other NATO countries. The Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base should be reinforced as a power projection platform for logistics, land, mission command, and air activity. A ROM-UKR brigade could be established to enhance military cooperation, modeled on the POL-UKR-LIT brigade. A Joint Allied intelligence-gathering hub for the wider Black Sea region should be developed in Romania.

⦿ The United States should participate in the Multinational Brigade (MNB) in Romania, which would already have Romanian support. Romania provided an Air Defense Battery to the U.S.-led eFP Battle Group in Poland; the United States should reciprocate with a company or battery-size element for the Romanian MNB,

which could involve a rotational unit from the National Guard such as from the Alabama Army National Guard—Romania's partner state—or elsewhere.

⦿ Romania expects to deploy the delivery of new *Patriot* missiles. Bucharest first ordered the anti-missile weapons in 2017, as part of a \$3-billion-plus arms package. Land-based weapons such as armed Predator or Reaper drones could also help curb Russian military hostilities. It can also supply unmanned naval

“Romania, as the center of gravity of NATO deterrence *in the Black Sea, needs significant military reinforcement.*”

systems to increase the naval strength of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia.

⦿ A Black Sea policing mission needs to be developed, with NATO naval presence every day of the year. Given the restrictions under the Montreux Convention and Romania's

defense budget limitations, a short-term solution could involve equipping small vessels in Romania's military fleet with modern drones and missiles. In addition, as there is no international governing body that decides on violations of the Montreux Convention, Romania should establish a monitoring system that can inform and support the efforts of the Foreign Ministry of Turkey's Department of Maritime Affairs about Montreux Convention violations, particularly by Russia, and publish their violations.

- ⌚ Turkey remains fearful of provoking Putin and emboldening Moscow into fanning the Kurdish rebellion or engineering a major refugee exodus from Syria. To persuade Ankara to focus on deterrence and defense and support a greater NATO naval presence, Alliance leaders need to underscore the

potential Russian threats to Turkey's interests. For instance, a Russian blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea littoral would be a violation of the "condominium" arrangement between Ankara and Moscow. NATO Allies also need to focus on the vulnerabilities of ethnic and religious groups in the region historically and culturally linked with Turkey and threatened by Russia's revisionism.

- ⌚ The economic potential of the wider Black Sea region needs to be pursued, as growing trade and prosperity would raise the security of each littoral state. This should include developing the Anaklia deep-sea port in Georgia, completing the transport corridors over the Black Sea between Romanian and Georgian ports as well as between the Black and the Caspian Seas, transforming Odesa into an EU free trade hub, raising the potential of the EU-Ukraine Free



"NATO Military Committee visits Georgia" by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Trade agreement, and improving capacities for commercial shipping along the Danube River.

Support NATO Partners

- ④ Washington can pursue a more assertive policy in support of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. This will demonstrate that Russia's attacks do not disqualify them from NATO and that any country has the right to choose its alliances. Various intermediate steps can be taken to harmonize their militaries with NATO standards, including enhanced intelligence sharing and maritime cooperation.
 - ④ With the goal of attaining NATO membership, Ukraine should apply the U.S. Department of Defense's DOTMLPF (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities) methodology. To preclude further territorial losses, Ukraine must enhance its military and economic potential and make all-out war too risky and expensive for Moscow. Kyiv must be assisted in integrating its maritime strategy with NATO's broader Black
- ④ Sea strategy, with investments in the naval infrastructure in Odesa.
 - ④ Ukraine's defense-industrial sector must produce or purchase the capabilities needed to blunt any possible Russian offensives. It needs land-based short-range missiles, anti-ship, and anti-air missiles and all elements of a combined arms defense of its maritime borders. The United States can also provide various vessels in exchange for leasing port facilities to the U.S. Navy in Odesa. These could include Mark V boats, equipped with Hellfire missiles and Harpoon anti-ship missiles that can be transported by air to Mariupol and Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov.
 - ④ Russian Navy vessels should be banned from all NATO ports until Moscow enables the free movement of Ukraine's commercial and Navy ships through the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov.² Many of these ships home-port in illegally-annexed Ukrainian territory in Crimea. The EU could also extend this ban to Russian commercial ships originating in the Black Sea.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The inherent challenges of defending the Baltic and Black Seas (B2) region are not new. Littoral theaters such as these have been frequent flash points for great-power rivalry across the centuries. If the United States and its allies are to succeed in the current era of reinvigorated great-power competition, they will need to swiftly overcome the challenge of maritime competition inside semi-enclosed seas. History provides critical context and insightful lessons for the present. Two such lessons are particularly salient for the B2 region.

Lesson One: The “Straits Question”

Owing to its distinct history and geography, the Black Sea occupies a category of its own when it comes to maritime theaters – particularly regarding freedom of navigation. From the narrow gates of the ancient Hellespont—the straits of the Dardanelles—arching north to Crimea and then sloping down to the rocky headlands of the Anatolian mountains, the Black Sea littoral has been host to merchants, pirates, and imperial ambitions since before the time of Herodotus.

The ability to get into—and out of—the Black Sea has always been coveted. In the 18th century, the Russian Empire first secured Turkish guarantees for the free passage of Tsarist merchant vessels through the Dardanelles. Later, in 1833, following a Turkish military defeat, Russia negotiated the closure of the Straits to all non-littoral military vessels under the short-lived Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi. The subsequent London Straits Convention (1841) re-opened the Black Sea to foreign warships during peacetime; and the Lausanne Convention (1923) extended that freedom to

all warships during war and peace. Though this convention, Russia and Turkey disadvantaged their own strategic interests by recognizing the freedom of navigation of other powers through the Straits.

“*If the United States and its allies are to succeed in the current era of **reinvigorated great-power competition**, they will need to *swiftly overcome the challenge of maritime competition in semi-enclosed seas.*”*

In 1936, both countries employed a series of diplomatic maneuvers to change the initial accords. The result was a multilateral agreement known as the **Montreux Convention**. Under Montreux, 10 countries (but not the United States) recognized Turkish sovereignty over

the Straits and, to the satisfaction of Russia, granted Ankara the privilege of restricting military access to the Black Sea by all non-littoral navies. Today, Montreux remains in place. Even though the United States is not a party to the agreement, it respects Montreux in deference to the signatory countries.

Significantly, the persistence of the “Straits Question” throughout European history underscores exactly how great powers can take a proprietary approach to semi-enclosed seas – and seek primacy over them. For centuries, Russia and Turkey both viewed control over access to the Black Sea as essential to their security. But upon the “Straits Question” hinges a still larger quandary: who should control the Black Sea in the first place? Dominion over this maritime theater has shifted. At varying points in time, multiple countries and empires have achieved primacy over the Black Sea through military might, diplomatic acumen, and sometimes both.

In today’s context, the question for strategists and military planners is becoming a fundamental one: is the Black Sea now a “Russia lake,” a “Turkish lake,” or a “NATO lake?” In past decades, the Turkish navy was the preeminent military power. More recently, however, Russia’s transformation of the Crimean Peninsula into an armed fortress—a “Kaliningrad of the south”—and its bolstered Black Sea fleet (see *Strategic Setting*), have granted the Kremlin a significant advantage in the regional balance of forces. Simultaneously, the old Montreux Convention is still a factor in international affairs – providing Turkey with the final say over who and what may enter or leave a major portion of the global commons. The Black Sea is thus unique in the modern world as the only open, *international* body of water where the U.S. Navy (for example) accepts the

logic that sailing here requires the permission of another. As examined later in this report, the 20th century restrictions of Montreux therefore significantly limit the type and size of 21st century military forces that can be used to deter Russian revisionism in the Black Sea region.

Lesson Two: When the Weak Fight the Strong

In the history of great-power rivalry, it is equally significant to note how often maritime strategies reflect a country’s *overall* competitive advantages and disadvantages. One of the best historical examples of this dynamic in action was the 18th century contest between France and the United Kingdom in the Seven Years’ War. At sea, the robust strength of the British Royal navy—when compared to France—mirrored today’s overmatch between the armed forces of the United States and NATO (relative to Russia). At least on paper, today’s Euro-Atlantic navies are collectively strong and Russia is relatively weak.

In his seminal work on maritime military thinking, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, Alfred Thayer Mahan seized upon the parallel example of 18th century France as an illustrative answer to the question: how might a weak state fight an overmatching opponent at sea in a time of war? In the case of France, Mahan writes:

“Want of money, the depression of commerce given over to English cruisers, the lack of good ships, the lack of supplies, etc., compelled the French Ministry, unable to raise large forces, to resort to stratagems to replace the only rational system of war, Grand War, by the smallest of petty wars—by a sort of game by which the aim is not to be caught.”³



“The Battle of Quiberon Bay, 20 November 1759” by Nicholas Pocock under Public Domain.

Separated by several centuries and multiple paradigm shifts in naval technology, France’s 18th century solution to great-power overmatch strongly resembles Russia’s use of “hybrid warfare” in our own time. Much like 18th century France, today’s Russia is playing a weak military hand against the West – and playing it well. Instead of competing directly against the combined power of the United States and NATO, Russia has directed bursts of “sharp power” at smaller conflicts – allowing each to achieve a larger strategic end.⁴ And much like 18th century France, the goal of contemporary Russian strategists is also to not get “caught” in a military crisis or conflict that they can neither control nor win.

Facing an *overall* imbalance of forces with the United States and NATO, Russia has established *localized* military advantages in the B2 regions – particularly around Russia’s Western Military

District and occupied Crimea. The asymmetry in NATO’s response to these moves (see *Strategic Setting*) can unintentionally send an unwanted signal to Moscow: it may indeed be possible to not get “caught” in pursuit of the “smallest of petty wars” along NATO’s frontier. And even though the early phases of the Seven Years’ War did not go well for British forces, perhaps the most important lesson from that conflict was how it ended. Ultimately, it was the stronger United Kingdom—operating in association with allies—who bested France (and her main ally Spain). This too is significant: a strong alliance can defeat even the craftiest of small war strategies.

DEFENDING THE BALTIC-BLACK SEA REGIONS

As flash points for *contemporary* great-power competition, the littoral zones along NATO’s

Eastern Flank—the B2 region—tend to offer less “friction” to revisionist probing by Russia. This is an unwanted dynamic as it imposes rising costs on the West and unless properly addressed, it could also place the overall credibility of the North Atlantic Alliance at risk. While the United States, its Allies, and its Partner states are rallying to respond and mitigate such dangers, thus far they have not achieved sufficient political cohesion to muster *all* necessary assets and position them in the right places.

NATO’s Eastern Flank is the most vulnerable sector of the Alliance, one that is increasingly exposed to penetration and subversion by a revisionist Russian government. This geographic expanse, spanning from the Arctic to the Black Sea and to the Mediterranean, is the primary arena in which tests to the credibility and effectiveness of NATO’s defense posture are greatest. There are three core geographic theaters along the Eastern Flank where the United States and NATO will need to focus their deterrence strategies: North (Baltic Sea region), Middle (Suwałki Corridor and Poland), and South (Black Sea region). Without a clear, coherent, robust, and implementable policy, strategy, and plan for addressing vulnerabilities in these theaters, the United States and Europe will remain vulnerable to aggressive probing from Russia. This increases the tension of great-power rivalry and elevates the risk that localized tests of strength could result in armed clashes.

This preliminary report on the two “maritime theaters”—the northern (Baltic Sea) and southern (Black Sea) zones—is designed to provide Allied leaders with a coherent cross-regional strategy for strengthening NATO and deterring Moscow’s subversion and potential military intervention. It examines Russia’s rising

strength along its borders and the Alliance’s vulnerabilities in two key regions. It assesses how the combination of NATO’s current limitations and Russia’s regional militarization are positioning Moscow to further undermine the security and sovereignty of targeted states. This could culminate in a redrawing of borders, and in the case of the Black Sea,

“Without a clear, coherent, robust, and **implementable policy, strategy, and plan** for addressing vulnerabilities in these theaters, *the United States and Europe will remain vulnerable to aggressive probing from Russia.*”

transforming this maritime domain into even more of a “Russian lake.” The Kremlin is not only expanding its presence in the Baltic and Black Seas – it is simultaneously using these

theaters to project power “over the horizon.” Russia’s revisionism not only challenges its immediate neighbors, but also threatens U.S. interests and the security of Allies and Partners in the Arctic, Nordic, South-East to Central European, Balkan, Caucasus, and Eastern Mediterranean regions.

Several core questions need to be urgently addressed: (1) what makes the Baltic and Black Sea maritime spaces vulnerable, including geography, force posture, and treaties; (2) what can we learn from similar efforts to contend with maritime revisionism elsewhere, particularly the South China Sea); (3) what are the diplomatic and political initiatives, in combination with military capabilities, that can bolster littoral defenses; and (4) what are the best means of limiting Kremlin options for its revisionist aggression. A thorough evaluation of the flashpoints, scenarios, and options in

the struggle with Russia will better prepare Western planners for the eventuality of conflict. More critically, informed action now can prevent a descent into crisis in the future. To achieve this goal, this interim report dissects Russia’s geopolitical motives, strategic objectives, and offensive capabilities in the Baltic-Black Sea theater; it examines NATO-EU military deterrents and defense postures; and it offers recommendations through which the Alliance can strengthen its capabilities to defend Europe.

THE STRATEGIC SETTING

The Kremlin views any gaps in NATO coherence as exploitable vulnerabilities. There are dangers from Russia’s actions in the B2 region where the Alliance is underprepared, has not mustered sufficient troops and equipment and positioned them in the right



“DYMA19 PHOTEX” by NATO HQ MARCOM under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

places, or rallied necessary Allied consensus. The core problem for NATO consists of three *asymmetries* in **perceptions** (Russia’s geographic “arc” vs. Western “silos”), **aims** (Russia’s revisionism vs. Western status quo), and **means** (Russia’s constant probing and weakening of neighbors vs. limited Western defenses). Moscow deftly exploits these *asymmetries* to its advantage and plays its overall weaker military hand astutely. Its militarization of B2 theaters is aggressive and very similar (such as the fortressing of Crimea and Kaliningrad), while that of the West is inconsistent, as is evident in “enhanced” vs. “tailored” Forward Presence in the two maritime theaters along the Eastern Flank.

Russia’s concentration of limited conventional power in specific theaters (including Anti Access/Area Denial—or A2/AD—“bubbles” and surface warfare capabilities) together with dual-use power projection (including *Kalibr* cruise missiles in Kaliningrad and Crimea) has more “teeth” than that of NATO, and its leadership has demonstrated a willingness to use these capabilities. Examples of Russia’s aggressive posture abound, including the deployment of air defense systems in Kaliningrad and Crimea (designed to challenge NATO’s superior air power), the militarization of occupied territory in Crimea (Ukraine) as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), its military presence in the separatist Transnistrian region in the Republic of Moldova, *de facto* annexation of the Azov Sea, aircraft flybys that threaten NATO airspace, and nuclear missile drills targeting the Alliance. Russia is also improving the rapidity of its military deployments, including missile and maritime elements.

While Moscow’s hard power operations against weaker neighbors are largely succeeding in their aims, NATO reactions have failed to fully

deter the Kremlin. This has been evident in the weak Western response to the Azov Sea annexation. A core problem stems from a lack of Alliance consensus concerning its policy toward Russia, as **perceptions** differ even within the Alliance. For instance, Turkey is much less concerned about Moscow’s revisionism in the Black Sea region than Romania. Ankara is only likely to react strongly if Russia directly threatens its territory, even though Moscow engages in a multi-pronged strategy to neutralize Turkey through diplomatic, economic, and energy links.

In terms of **aims**, Western powers seek to uphold the international order in which treaties are honored, borders are respected, and state sovereignty is upheld. In stark contrast, Putin’s Kremlin is engaged in a comprehensive revisionist enterprise to restore Russia’s control over nearby countries and to prevent them from freely joining international organizations such as NATO and the EU. As a result, treaties, borders, and state sovereignty are persistently violated, and an incoherent response by NATO members further encourages Moscow and exacerbates fissures in the Alliance.

Western **means** also differ significantly from those of Russia. Until Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, many NATO leaders bought into and invested in a post-Cold War rapprochement with Moscow. They believed that the Alliance had little need to vigorously defend its Eastern Flank against Russian encroachments. But in recent years Moscow has successfully combined its hard and soft power offensives and even threatened NATO and EU states. NATO belatedly responded through its enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) initiative along portions of its eastern front, and adopted other means to counter Russian subversion, disinformation, and

political penetration. Nonetheless, the West is engaged in an essentially defensive operation in responding to Moscow's multi-pronged offensives.

NATO should consider other strategic tools that can be deployed to mitigate its vulnerabilities in the Baltic-Black Sea theater. It is no longer an effective option to try and secure Europe's entire eastern shoulder based on a defense-in-depth posture that places more than two-thirds of NATO military power in the western half of the European continent. Additional measures—above and beyond NATO's "tripwires"—must be employed to deter overt aggression or probing by Russia. Moreover, NATO's commitment to speed of response needs to be coherently adapted to the wider Eastern Flank.

According to its Wales Summit Declaration of September 2014, NATO "will ensure that our Allied forces maintain the adequate readiness and coherence needed to conduct NATO's full range of missions, including deterring aggression against NATO Allies and demonstrating preparedness to defend NATO territory."⁵ The idea floated at the end of the Cold War that Europe could scale down its defenses exposed a flawed understanding of developments in Moscow, where imperialist revisionism has triumphed. Militarily, the Eastern Flank remains the most exposed vector of the Alliance, necessitating an evaluation of how the United States and NATO are responding to heightened Russian security pressure. Politically, it offers a chance to address the deeper structural cleavages within the Alliance over perceptions of Baltic or Black Sea "indefensibility," and to alleviate any moves toward strategic disengagement.

In terms of hard security, by shifting capabilities eastward to confront the newest threats, NATO

can help ensure that it has ample manpower and firepower to dissuade a Russian offensive against the most exposed Alliance members. It is imperative that NATO's presence in both the Baltic and Black Sea tiers provide sufficient and equal deterrence. Presently, this is not the case. NATO's "tailored Forward Presence" in the Black Sea region falls well short of the "enhanced Forward Presence" for the Baltic-

“Without a change in response to the B2 strategic context, *there is an elevated level of risk to NATO interests at both the theater and global/strategic levels.*”

Polish region – an imbalance that needs to be rectified. It is also vital to strengthen the strategic relationship with Ankara so that Turkey becomes an active contributor to Black Sea security, is not neutralized by Russia, and does not block any further Allied initiatives to enhance NATO presence in the Black Sea.

Without a change in response to the B2 strategic context, there is an elevated level of risk to NATO interests at the both the theater and global/strategic levels. Theater risks

include allowing a second B2 annexation (following Crimea) that would further truncate and destabilize Ukraine, enable greater Russian militarization of the B2 zones, further undermine the Black Sea military balance, and threaten control over Romanian and Ukrainian offshore energy fields. The broader global/strategic risks of allowing further Russian military expansion in the B2 zone would include the pursuit of precedents in other contested regions such as the East Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, and the Straits of Hormuz that would threaten the free passage of merchant shipping through international waters as well as NATO naval operations.

RUSSIA'S CHALLENGE TO THE ALLIANCE

Moscow looks coherently at its Western Flank and has a long-term strategy for this extensive zone. Above all, it seeks to restore its own predominance, to limit NATO's presence, and

to use the Baltic and Black Sea regions for force projection into nearby theaters, including South-East and Central Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Moscow also envisages establishing an operational corridor for moving its military forces between the Caspian, Azov, Black, and Adriatic Seas facilitated by a mixture of captured territories, proxy regions, and Russian allies.

Moscow's Revisionist Objectives

As enclosed maritime spaces, Europe's littoral flanks expose Baltic and Black Sea countries to Russia's great-power maneuvers. They form integrated parts of Moscow's "Eurasian project" designed to suborn neighboring states and diminish NATO's effectiveness. They simultaneously act as "expressways" for projecting energy resources, political influence, and military power beyond Russia's immediate shores into Europe. Alliance members Estonia,



"The Main Naval Parade" by kremlin.ru under CC BY 4.0.

Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are particularly vulnerable to these pressures. Likewise, non-NATO states Sweden and Finland have increasingly become targets of Moscow’s military provocations and nuclear saber rattling. Meanwhile, NATO members Denmark, Norway, and Germany remain at the forefront of Moscow’s subversive political operations.

Without a clear understanding of the threats and vulnerabilities along NATO’s Eastern Flank, and with no unifying strategy for dealing with them, the Alliance risks inviting even more aggressive probing and intervention by Moscow. Russia will seek to expose NATO’s political divisions and test Western resolve, as it did during its invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), and has not hesitated to use military instruments in order to achieve its strategic objectives in the Black Sea region. This approach is likely to continue as proven in Crimea, the Donbas region, and most recently in the Kerch Strait. Lacking a well-defined strategy, Western responses were guided

by reactive crisis management that failed to prevent Russia’s territorial gains in the Black Sea region. Unlike the wars in Georgia and Ukraine, the potential penetration of NATO’s borders either risks undermining Alliance credibility or triggering a NATO-Russia war.

The B2 regions have become militarized border zones between NATO and Russia. In Russia’s Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, the Kremlin is undertaking an aggressive build-up of offensive capabilities, including naval, air, land, and long-range strike capabilities. Kaliningrad is a heavily fortified platform and the centerpiece of Russia’s A2/AD capabilities covering the Baltic region. It is also used for military exercises, simulated attacks on NATO members, and violations of airspace and territorial waters of Baltic littoral states. A similar dynamic is at play in the Black Sea, where the “fortressing” of Crimea and its surrounding maritime zones is well advanced. Here too, Moscow is growing more assertive and has been gradually transforming, tipping the regional military balance of power in its favor for the first time since the end of the Cold

Armed Forces of Russia

Type	2009	2019
Total Active	1,027,000	900,000
Army	360,000	280,000
Airborne	35,000	45,000
Navy	142,000	150,000
Air	160,000	165,000
Strategic Deterrent Forces	80,000	50,000
Special Operations Forces	N/A	1,000
Railway Troops	N/A	29,000
Command and Support	250,000	180,000
Paramilitary	449,000	554,000
Reserve	2,000,000	2,000,000

Sources: 2009: IISS, *The Military Balance 2009*, p. 217.
 2019: IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, p. 195.

War. Moldova's separatist region of Transnistria is also a military platform for Russia that it can use against neighboring states.

Russia's "hard" and "soft" subversive powers are interlinked. Undersea, the Nord Stream 1 (NS1) natural gas pipeline physically connects Russia to Germany via gas transit under the Baltic Sea. Still more pipelines are either under construction (Nord Stream 2, or NS2, in the Baltic) or planned (Turk Stream 2 in the Black Sea). Moscow is promoting the Turkish Stream 2 gas pipeline to cement the dependence of Southeast European states and strangle Ukraine as a gas transit country. America's regional allies are anxious that under the cover of "protecting" its energy infrastructure, these pipeline links will serve as a pretext for the Kremlin to exert greater physical control over maritime navigational routes. For instance, in Bulgaria, Russia has an energy monopoly in gas supplies, conducts a large-scale and intensive propaganda campaign, and exerts significant political influence. In effect, energy deals with Russia degrade the bedrock of political solidarity upon which NATO was founded.⁶

Parallel with its military build-up and energy offensives, Moscow is engaged in continuous disinformation and influence operations to convince its adversaries that war is not in their interest and that NATO is untrustworthy.⁷ For instance, the Kremlin depicts Baltic governments as U.S. proxies driven toward war with Russia – an obvious attempt to weaken their political resolve. Moscow aims to soften up its opponent through disinformation campaigns and by stirring political, social, ethnic, and inter-state disputes.

In the Baltic states, Moscow tries to manipulate Russian-speaking minorities against the central government while its propaganda offensives

focus on attacking national histories and delegitimizing Baltic resistance to Soviet rule. It also fosters inter-ethnic disputes, engages in cyber-attacks against strategic sectors, twists laws and treaties to assert new territorial claims, and interferes in the politics of targeted countries. In effect, the Kremlin is treating the Baltic and Black Sea regions as proprietary theaters, seeking to widen the gap between its influence and Western reactions.

“While Russia’s strategic thinking perceives the entire region from the Arctic to Turkey as a continuous front—with few meaningful distinctions between individual theaters like the Baltic or Black Seas—Western thinking is highly stratified.”



“Centre 2019 strategic command-and-staff exercises” by kremlin.ru under CC BY 4.0.

For Western political leaders, a core dilemma is that their responses are inherently compartmentalized. While Russia’s strategic thinking perceives the entire region from the Arctic to Turkey as a continuous front—with few meaningful distinctions between individual theaters like the Baltic or Black Seas—Western thinking is highly stratified. The Nordic-Baltic region evidently represents one challenge (and set of solutions) and the Black Sea region represents another. Western responses therefore tend to be irregular and NATO’s deterrence posture remains uneven. A more coherent, cross-regional strategy of deterrence is needed to defend this diverse expanse of maritime and land terrain. Failure to address NATO’s vulnerabilities in these theaters will simply invite more aggressive probing by the Kremlin. In a worst-case scenario, it may precipitate renewed attempts by Russia to redraw sovereign borders.

Russia’s Capabilities in Baltic Region

Analysts estimate Russia’s military expenditure to be in the range of \$150-180 billion annually, or about four percent of GDP, with a much higher percentage dedicated to procurement, research, and development than Western defense budgets.⁸ With conscripts making up almost a third of its military, Russia spends much less on maintaining its military than its Western counterparts. Such a level of expenditure is sustainable and has been largely unaffected by Western sanctions.

In the Baltic littoral, Moscow has demonstrated an alarming growth in military might on land, air, and sea. In Russia’s Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, the Kremlin is undertaking an aggressive build-up of naval, air, land, and long-range strike capabilities. Nestled inside of NATO territory, Kaliningrad is a heavily

fortified platform for conducting provocative military exercises, simulating attacks on NATO members, demonstrating disregard for the airspace of neighbors, violating the sovereign territorial waters of Baltic littoral states, and extending its strategic reach via A2/AD capabilities in a broad radius within the region.

Russian naval activities increased in frequency and intensity after Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. A major display of Kremlin power was its *Zapad* exercise in 2017. This war game positioned nearly 100,000 forces in the Baltic region for a simulated war against the West. Russian forces have rehearsed nuclear strikes on Poland and Sweden, and threatened Finnish research vessels in the Baltic Sea, as they frequently violate the airspace of neighbors.

A recent report by the Estonian International Center for Defense (RKK/ICDS) documents a spike in Russian naval activity in the months before, during, and after the *Zapad* exercises. In July 2017, Moscow conducted military exercises in the Pskov region (adjacent to Estonia and Latvia) with 2,500 soldiers from its Airborne Forces. Later that month, Russian and Chinese vessels participated in joint exercises on the Baltic Sea for the first time; and Russia's Naval Day Parade featured 40 vessels from the Baltic and Northern fleets, including new amphibious landing ships and frigates.

Russia conducted a three-day missile test in April 2018 just outside of NATO territorial waters near Latvia. Sweden and Poland were also on high alert after receiving notification of live-fire exercises in the Baltic from the Russian Ministry of Defense. It was the first time that Russia tested live munitions so close to NATO's borders. Latvia was forced to impose a partial shutdown of civilian airspace while

Sweden rerouted flights over the course of the operation. The shutdown of flight MH-17 by Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine in June 2014 highlighted the risks of Russian aggression to everyday European civilians that have become another dimension of the changing security environment with which

“*Russian naval activities increased in frequency and intensity after Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014.*”

NATO must contend. Not even commercial airliners are safe. Russian exercises continued in 2019 with *Union Shield*, a joint exercise with Belarus in Russia's Western Military District.

Moscow's Baltic maritime excursions have also been used in an attempt to undo regional energy independence from the Kremlin. Russian naval exercises in the Baltic Sea in the spring of 2015 disrupted the installment of a high-voltage undersea power line between

Sweden and Lithuania. Though the lines were eventually completed, Russia's pressure on states in the region has not relented. NATO also began expressing its concern about Russia's increased undersea activity in the entire North Atlantic region, particularly its threat to undersea cables designed to bolster transatlantic communications capabilities. At the same time, Moscow continues to construct the Nord Stream 2 pipeline under the Baltic Sea. This would not only enhance the Kremlin's use of energy supplies as a political weapon against the Alliance, but also provide pretexts for deploying Russia's military to "protect" its critical infrastructure.

Over the past two decades, Russia's defense industry has also developed, tested, and fielded dozens of Electronic Warfare (EW) systems to disrupt and suppress a wide range of adversary land-, air-, and space-based communications and electronic signals. Russian technologies target signals emitted and used by aircraft, cruise missiles, radars, rockets, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Russia's military is currently fielding the *Palantin* EW system in its Western Military District. This system is designed not only to suppress an adversary's communications, but also to serve as an electronic intelligence platform. Norway's Intelligence Service charged Moscow with disrupting its GPS signals during NATO Trident Juncture drills in October-November 2018. Oslo claimed that Russian forces on the Kola Peninsula were behind the GPS interference. NATO considers signal jamming a growing threat to the Alliance. Russian special forces were also reportedly found operating in Norwegian territory in September 2019.

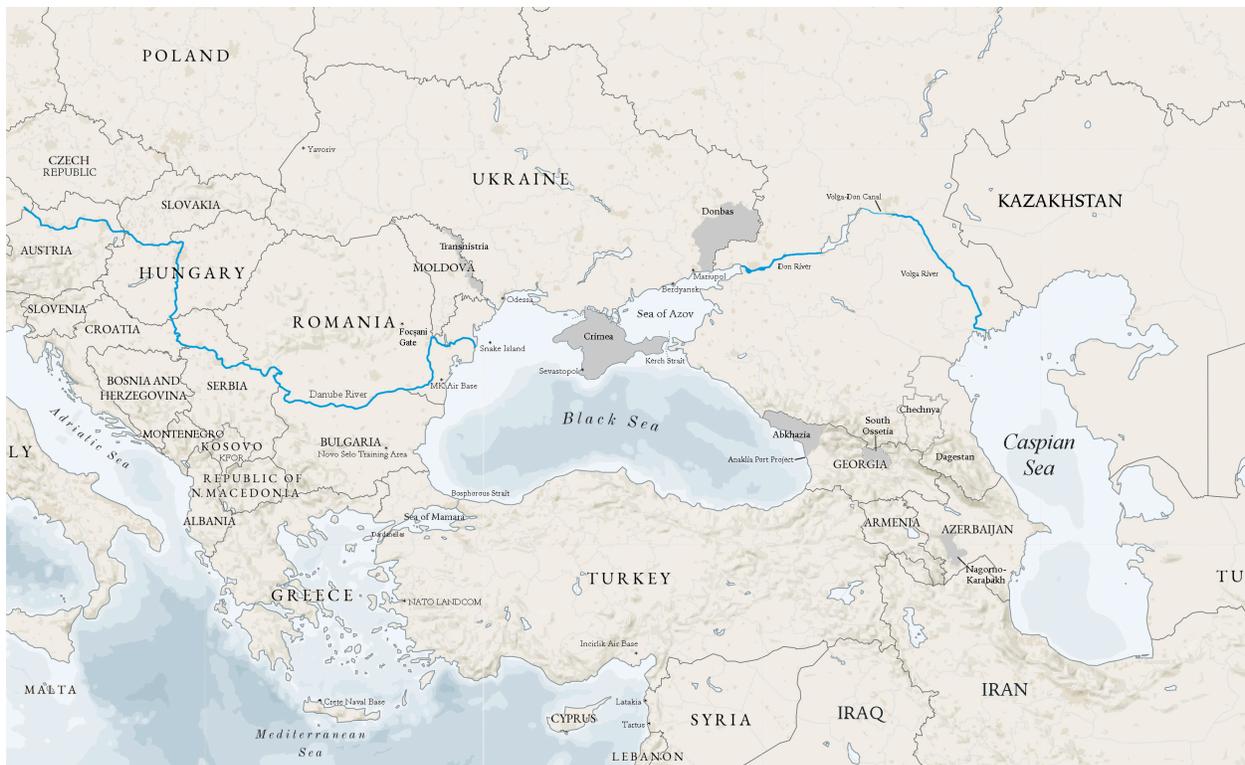
The significant Russian air and missile defense capabilities in Kaliningrad and its ability to wage EW from there give the Kremlin the capability

to make it extremely difficult for NATO and its partners to operate air and naval forces in the Baltic Sea. This would be particularly important in the event of a short but intensive land attack on Lithuania near the Suwałki Corridor or into southeastern Latvia. However, Kaliningrad also poses a potential liability for the Kremlin, as it means Russian forces are "anchored" to this location and cannot risk losing it, while their access in and out of the Baltic Sea can be completely controlled by NATO and Sweden. This helps to limit Russian flexibility in the region.

Russia's Capabilities in Black Sea Region

Since 2014, Russia has embarked on a major military buildup on the Crimean Peninsula and the northeastern Black Sea. This "fortressing" of Crimea and its surrounding maritime spaces has immediate consequences for Ukraine and littoral NATO members Romania and Bulgaria. Not least, Russian forces now surpass the naval, air, and long-range strike capabilities of other Black Sea littoral states – including Turkey. After the Soviet collapse, the Black Sea Fleet underwent two decades of steep decline, operating only a handful of aging vessels. In 2015, after six years of military reform, Moscow began placing new, advanced surface combatants and submarines in the Black Sea Fleet, alongside a massive shore-based buildup of air defense and coastal defense cruise missiles.⁹ A more capable and confident fleet steamed into the Mediterranean to support Russia's successful intervention to prop up the Assad regime in Syria.

In the north Black Sea, Russia is growing more assertive and expansive. In 2018, the Kremlin initiated a "soft" annexation of Ukraine's previously uncontested maritime zone in the Sea of Azov while controlling movement



Adapted from © Mapbox 2019.

between the Azov and Black Seas through the Kerch Strait chokepoint. This passage represents Ukraine's only maritime link between international waters and the ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk. Under international law, Ukraine should enjoy free travel through this bottleneck. However, the Russian navy has imposed a unilateral cordon across the passage, stopping and detaining Ukrainian and foreign ships. Unlike land conquests, maritime occupations do not require the heavy use of ground combat troops. At the tactical level, this Azov cordon diverts Ukrainian military resources away from the war over the Donbas region. In strategic terms, the closure of the Kerch Strait cuts off Ukraine's steel exporting ports to international shipping. That trade is vital because it generates hard currency that Ukraine needs to sustain its defensive war against Russia.

In Crimea, Russia has established a "self-sufficient military formation" consisting of an air defense division, an aviation division, a naval base, and an army corps. It has shifted some of its most advanced anti-air and anti-surface weapons to Crimea to reinforce its naval forces. This fusion of shore- and sea-based capabilities is the fulcrum upon which the maritime balance in the Black Sea has tipped in Russia's favor. The shore-based force is key to Russian military superiority. The seizure of Crimea has allowed Moscow to use long-range, land-based anti-air and anti-ship systems, such as *S-400 DAM* and *Bastion-P* coastal defense cruise missile systems, to cover virtually all of the Black Sea. Russia has also emphasized fleet development as an instrument of regional power and has transformed the focus of Crimea's economy from tourism to defense,

even incorporating Crimean enterprises into mainland Russian defense companies. What was once a Russian naval backwater is now the centerpiece of Moscow's power projection into the Mediterranean.

The Black Sea Fleet is the most operationally and tactically successful of Russia's four major fleets. Its modernization includes arming warships with high-tech, long-range *Kalibr* cruise missile systems. This not only extends Russia's Black Sea A2/AD umbrella but also makes it mobile and offers the Russian navy unprecedented long-range missile capabilities that threaten the entire Black Sea littoral. Moscow is adding six new *Admiral Grigorovich* guided missile frigates, various classes of missile corvettes, and six *Kilo 636.3* submarines. In the summer of 2018, the Russian navy transferred five ships from the Caspian Flotilla to the Azov Sea that could be deployed to block Ukrainian ports, claim Ukraine's territorial water, and support the proxy insurgency in Donetsk.

Crimea has become a platform for various Russian missile systems. Moscow's new shore-based A2/AD umbrella in Crimea includes potentially WMD-capable tactical ballistic missiles, as well as long-range anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles. The *Bastion* mobile coast defense missile system, armed with supersonic *P-800 Oniks* anti-ship missiles, is scheduled for deployment in Crimea in 2020. In February 2019, Moscow announced the deployment of *Tupolev Tu-22M3* Backfire bombers to the Gvardeyskoye airbase in Crimea allegedly to counter U.S. Navy *Aegis Ashore* missile defense installations in Poland and Romania. These strategic bombers are capable of carrying nuclear weapons. *Aegis Ashore* is based on radar and missile systems contained aboard American guided-missile destroyers and cruisers but configured as a ground installation. The sites in Romania and Poland can detect, track, target, and launch interceptors to counter a ballistic missile threat coming from the Middle East. The *Aegis Ashore* system was part of the Obama



"The Aegis Ashore Missile Defense Complex Romania." by U.S. 6th Fleet under Public Domain.

administration's European Phased Adaptive Approach to missile defense designed to interdict small numbers of missiles from Iran and could defend against a Russian threat moving forward.

An additional element is Russia's Caspian Flotilla, which has significantly expanded its capabilities and will be based in Kaspiysk,

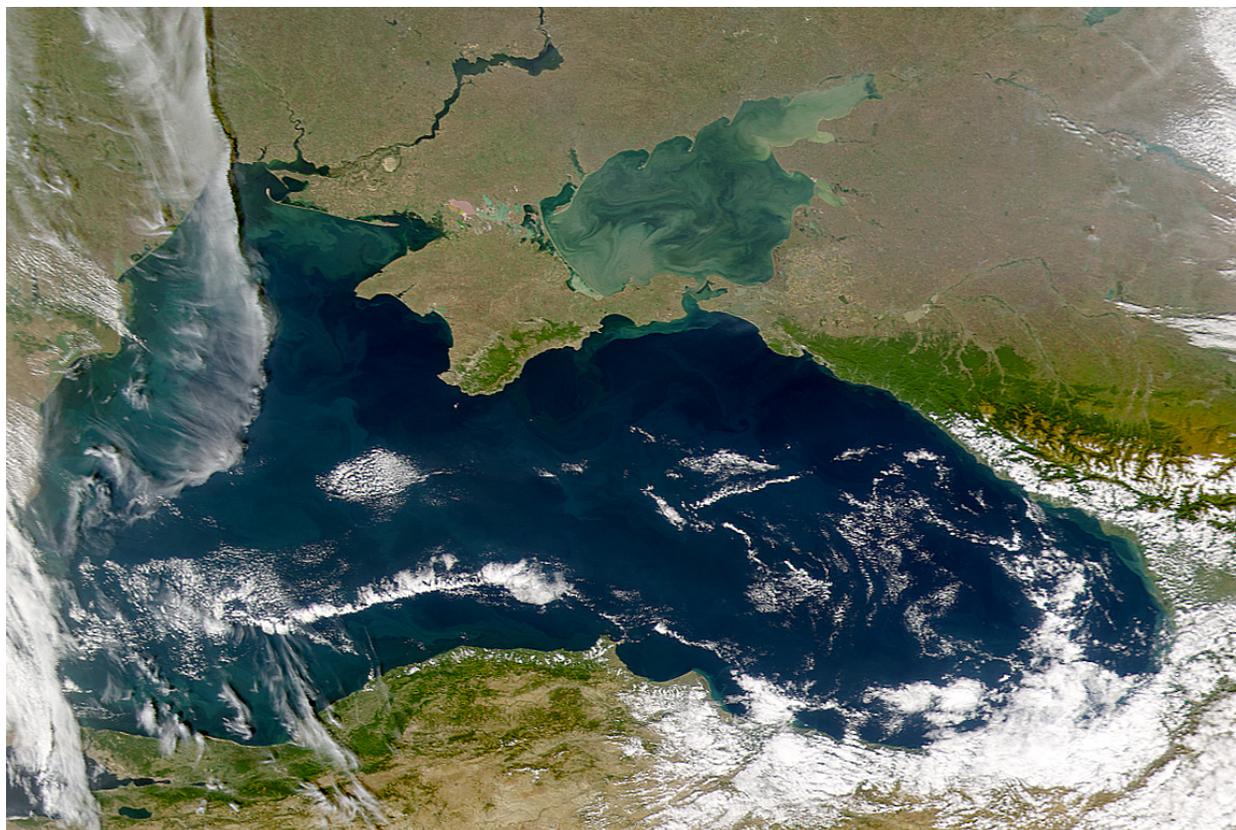
“Russia is planning to expand its internal canal system between the Caspian and Azov, enabling it to rapidly shift forces from one theater to another.”

Dagestan, much closer to the Azerbaijan and Iran borders than before.¹⁰ It will have enhanced air support to more effectively project power and dispatch forces to adjacent regions. Ships from the Flotilla have been deployed in the Sea of Azov after passing through the Don-

Volga Canal. Russia is planning to expand its internal canal system between the Caspian and Azov, enabling it to rapidly shift forces from one theater to the other. Russia's Caspian fleet possesses more firepower than do the navies of any of the other Caspian littoral countries.

The Russian navy protects Moscow's appropriation of Ukraine's gas resources following the capture of Crimea and the control of nearby maritime energy fields. It also has the ability to launch naval bombardments both from the Black and Azov Seas, enable amphibious attacks against ground targets, and impose an economic blockade. A massive increase in army, navy, and air deployments in Crimea and dual-use missiles that can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads threaten a much wider region. For instance, overflights by Russian fighters in Romanian airspace and provocative incursions by the Russian navy into Romanian waters have intensified since 2018. Moscow can threaten Romania if it attempts to repel an intruder from NATO's air and maritime domains.

Along the eastern littoral, about 10,000 Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – nearly 20 percent of Georgia's territory now under occupation. There is constant pressure along the perimeters between these occupied territories and the rest of Georgia. “Borderization” remains an ongoing direct threat to Georgia's integrity as Russian forces continue to annex its territories by surreptitiously moving border posts month by month. Moscow also maintains two bases in Armenia and manipulates disputes between all three South Caucasus states, including the unresolved conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over occupied Azerbaijani territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh, in a classic example of “divide and rule.”



“Seas Azov and Black” by NASA under Public Domain.

The Black Sea region is growing in geo-economic importance, with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Romania planning to host transit routes for Chinese, Central Asian, and European goods crossing between Europe and Central Asia. Moscow is growing increasingly alarmed by the prospect that rail, road, and shipping corridors will bypass Russia and push the country to the periphery of Eurasian trading networks. The proposed deep-water port of Anaklia in Georgia is a valuable example where Russian disinformation campaigns have created endless obstacles for the developers. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called on Georgia to move forward with this project because its development would improve Georgia’s economic and security viability.

In its immediate neighborhood, Moscow may use Ukraine as an example of stifling

independent trade. Even without firing a shot, Moscow could economically strangle a sizable portion of southeastern Ukraine and trigger additional instabilities inside the country. Ukrainian economic and geostrategic interests in the Azov Sea are premised on two major transportation pivots: Berdyansk and Mariupol. Prior to 2014, both of these Azov Sea ports handled almost a quarter of Ukraine’s maritime exports. Current output has plummeted—despite an annual capacity of 17 million tons, the actual export volumes are currently 5.8 million—primarily because of Russia’s detentions of vessels and the proximity to the Donbas war zone. Another limiting factor is the height of Russia’s Kerch Strait Bridge (connecting occupied Crimea to the Russian mainland), which has resulted in Mariupol losing up to 30 percent of its shipping fleet and breaching contracts with foreign customers, including the United States.

CONFLICT SCENARIOS

Russia's subversion, probing, and interventions in the B2 region could develop into several outright conflicts along NATO's Eastern Flank. It is for this reason that the Alliance needs to make preparations – whether to deter escalation, defuse an armed conflict, or defend against outright military confrontation. The Kremlin invariably calculates how risky its interventions are likely to be for Russia in terms of expended resources and manpower, the degree of local resistance, and the prospects for international sanctions. Nonetheless, it may also miscalculate and overreach in its ambitions. NATO contingency plans should be developed for at least five conflict scenarios in the B2 region, with the goal of inflicting severe costs for Moscow in three crucial domains: military resources, geopolitical effectiveness, and international sanctions.

1. Ukraine: In addition to seizing or blocking the Ukrainian ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk on the Azov Sea, the Russian navy can blockade other major Ukrainian ports along the Black Sea, including the key outlet of Odesa, while using Crimea as a bridgehead for its operations along the entire Ukrainian coastline. Having built up its maritime capabilities over several years, Moscow is in a much stronger position than NATO to defend its gains and ward off any countermeasures by NATO forces to open sea-lanes and unblock Ukrainian ports. The impact of a long-term blockade would be to strangle Ukraine economically, promote social instability, and weaken the government in Kyiv. Without strong Western support, Ukraine would become more vulnerable in conceding to Russia's territorial and political demands.

2. Baltic States: Moscow could engineer a provocation involving ethnic Russians

or Russian speakers in Estonia or Latvia in order to justify a direct incursion on behalf of allegedly endangered national minorities. Undercover Russian agents and disinformation outlets could provoke or inject separatism, similar to the Ukrainian Donbas model, in Russian speaking areas of eastern Estonia (Narva) and eastern Latvia (Latgale) or even stir

“Russia’s subversion, probing, and interventions in the B2 region **could develop into several conflict scenarios along NATO’s Eastern Flank.**”

ethnic conflicts in major cities such as Riga and Tallinn. Several subversive scenarios could be manufactured simultaneously in one or both countries and precipitate a direct challenge to NATO. This would test whether there is sufficient Alliance cohesion to subdue Russian proxies and whether this would precipitate a full-scale conflict with Moscow.



“Tank Monument in Tiraspol, Transnistria” by Stefan Wisselink under CC BY 2.0.

3. Belarus: A number of developments could destabilize Belarus and increase tensions along NATO’s Eastern Flank. Moscow may seek to replace Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka with a pro-Moscow loyalist if links between Minsk and Western governments and institutions are intensified and Belarus is seen to be veering outside of Russia’s orbit. President Putin can also push toward a closer union between Russia and Belarus and thereby provide a pretext for another term in office as president of a new state after his current term expires in 2024. Such moves by the Kremlin could precipitate resistance within Belarusian society and lead to a more comprehensive Russian intervention, including military. The permanent presence of Russian troops in Belarus, particularly along its western borders, would be viewed as a direct threat in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia and raise the prospects that Moscow could engineer incidents in order to close the Suwałki Corridor

and link up its forces in Belarus with those in Kaliningrad. Having incorporated Belarus into a single state, Moscow would also be in a more favorable position to threaten and attack Ukraine from the north as well as the east.

4. Transnistria: The Moscow-backed Transnistrian separatist region between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine could be used to precipitate a conflict within Moldova or with Ukraine or Romania. Moscow’s disinformation attacks have claimed that Kyiv threatens Transnistria’s existence by preparing to assist Romania in absorbing Moldova. Concurrently, Russia’s anti-Romanian propaganda claims that Bucharest seeks to annex Moldova together with pockets of territory in Ukraine, including northern Bukovina, southern Bessarabia, and several islands in the Danube delta. Moscow’s purpose is to stir uncertainty and conflict between Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine and lay the groundwork for possible intervention

to defend Transnistria or Russian-speaking populations in Moldova and Ukraine.

Assertions that Kyiv is a direct threat to Transnistria can justify a Russian territorial offensive that would enable Transnistria to gain a narrow Black Sea coastline from Ukraine. Moscow can also support Gagauz separatism

“Moscow can provoke conflicts in the South Caucasus to increase its influence and prevent the development of closer ties between the three South Caucasian states and the West.”

in southern Moldova and Danubian Ukraine as a pretext to emplace its troops or proxies in these territories. Concurrently, it may threaten both Romania and Ukraine with partition by backing the creation of a Budjak Republic in southern Moldova to include Gagauzia in

Moldova and parts of Odesa *oblast* in Ukraine that contain Moldovan, Gagauz, Russian, and Bulgarian minorities. The Kremlin would position itself as their alleged protector both diplomatically and militarily.

5. South Caucasus: Moscow can provoke conflicts in the South Caucasus to increase its influence and prevent the development of closer ties between the three South Caucasian states and the West. It can undercut Georgian sovereignty by a new offensive bifurcating Georgia with a military corridor between the Russian-occupied territory of South Ossetia and Russian-allied Armenia. This would boost Russia’s military presence in Armenia and signal to the reformist government in Yerevan that Moscow will not tolerate the country moving closer to the West.

Moscow could also reignite the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region and adjacent territories under Armenian occupation as a pretext to inject its troops as “peacekeepers” and apply more pressure on both states. Tensions between Tbilisi and Baku, including disputes over access to a Georgian Orthodox monastery in Azerbaijan can also be fanned by Russia to its advantage. Such maneuvers could enable Moscow to disrupt energy and transportation links between the Caspian basin and Europe, including the Southern Gas Corridor from Azerbaijan to Turkey.

NATO’S NECESSITIES

NATO must address several critical questions to deter further revisionist probing from Russia in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Above all, the cohesion and coherence of the Alliance in confronting Moscow must be maintained – and bolstered where it is understrength.



“Reception to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Alliance” by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Alliance Cohesion and Coherence: In addition to the Russian threat, NATO faces several internal challenges in providing security to its members. These can be defined as “**coherence gaps.**” They revolve around four main shortcomings:

1. Insufficient Allied unity in interpreting and responding to Moscow’s policies, strategy, or posture (i.e., different threat perceptions);
2. Transatlantic disputes over resources and capabilities (burden-sharing);
3. Inadequate cooperation between NATO and the EU;
4. Limited attention to combating non-military threats, including cyberattacks, state subversion, and influence operations.

The NATO Alliance rests on four main pillars: ideological, political, economic, and military. Ideologically, member states share fundamental principles such as individual freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and state sovereignty. Politically, there is a need for inter-governmental consensus on common interests, shared goals, and state commitments. Economically, Alliance members have pledged to meet targets in military spending, cost-sharing, and other security-related allocations. Militarily, NATO is based on the principles of a strong, integrated, organized, capable, interoperable, technologically modern, operationally effective, and spatially mobile military. NATO fulfills its objectives by enhancing Alliance readiness, responsiveness and reinforcement in confronting adversaries. The ultimate aim is to have the right forces

available in the right place at the right time to confront and, as necessary, defeat the adversary.

In this context, NATO leaders regularly use the terms “cohesion” and “coherence” to indicate that unity is essential for the Alliance to be successful. According to former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “An Alliance that cannot provide for collective defense will lose the cohesion to contribute to collective security.”¹¹ In clarifying and implementing these core concepts, it is useful to make some definitional distinctions between NATO “cohesion” and NATO “coherence.”

NATO cohesion signifies the level of political unity, ideological alignment, and inter-state solidarity among members, particularly in upholding the **principles** on which the Alliance is based, including the necessity of commitments to mutual defense and agreements on the threats and challenges the Alliance confronts.

NATO coherence signifies consensus between member states in guaranteeing Alliance **capabilities**, including strategic plans, resource requirements, materiel capabilities, operational procedures, command structures, troop numbers, and logistical infrastructure to ensure the maximum effectiveness of NATO missions.

These concepts are often highlighted when NATO confronts a new challenge that questions Alliance unity. Moscow’s imperialist revival since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War refocused attention on NATO’s core mission: to defend Europe from an aggressive adversary. In the wake of Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2014, both external and internal challenges prompted NATO leaders to emphasize the

importance of cohesion and coherence. Internally, the Alliance faced new threats in the cyber domain and from hybrid techniques. Externally, the threat of Russian aggression required unity among member states to speak with one voice and invest in the most effective defense.

“**NATO leaders regularly use the terms ‘cohesion’ and ‘coherence’ to indicate that unity is essential for the Alliance to be successful.**”

Nonetheless, the cohesion imbalance remains, as several NATO members, especially in southern Europe, do not or only grudgingly acknowledge that Russia is the chief adversary in Eurasia and that Russia is already fundamentally at war with NATO. Greater

Total Armed Forces of NATO Members in Europe

Type	2009	2019
Total Active	2,520,776	1,860,660
Army	1,387,978	1,048,575
Navy	284,773	251,880
Air	429,377	338,005
Paramilitary	488,822	781,300
Reserve	1,509,995	1,215,700

Source: Sum of NATO member state armed forces in IISS, *The Military Balance 2009*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*; “U.S. Military Presence in Europe (1945-2016,” *U.S. European Command*, Communication and Engagement Directorate.

cohesion would necessitate mutual agreement on why Russia is the chief adversary, how exactly NATO and its members are threatened, and what “war” (including military, cyber, and informational) actually entails for the Alliance. As all major NATO decisions are made by consensus, any invocation of Article 5 would require the consent of all 29 members. But given the differing interpretations of threats and a divergent sense of urgency among Allies, the most immediately threatened countries must have confidence that they will be defended regardless of whether Article 5 is invoked or whether there is unanimous agreement that they have been attacked.

NATO has sought to identify and rectify any shortcomings in the defense of its Eastern Flank through a series of initiatives. At the September 2014 Wales Summit, a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) was created to ensure the Alliance could respond “swiftly and firmly” to new security challenges posed by Russia along NATO’s borders.¹² RAP contained two initiatives. First, “assurance measures” would increase the military presence for deterrence in crisis situations in the eastern part of the Alliance. These included land, sea, and air capabilities – air-policing fighter

jets, deployment of rotational ground troops, AWACS surveillance flights, maritime patrol in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Mediterranean, and increased bilateral military exercises.

Second, “adaptation measures” signified long-term changes in Alliance force posture to increase readiness to threats from the east or south. The NATO Response Force (NRF) increased from 13,000 to 40,000 troops, including the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF); NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) were formed on the Eastern Flank and activated in 2015, with the goal of improving coordination and cooperation between NATO and national forces; the readiness and capabilities of Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters in Szczecin, Poland was enhanced and a new Multinational Division (MND) HQ was established, along with a Multinational Brigade and Combined Joint Enhanced Training Initiative (CJET), in Romania; military supplies were prepositioned on the Eastern Flank; national infrastructure including ports and airfields were prepared for NATO reinforcement; and a Joint Logistic Support Group HQ was created. In addition, the Comprehensive Approach Action Plan (CAAP) was affirmed in December 2017.

10 Allies, facilitated and led by Germany, were tasked with creating a coherent set of logistical capabilities.¹³ But questions remain as to whether these targets have been fulfilled and what vulnerabilities are potentially most damaging for NATO.

NATO's Vulnerabilities: The combined militaries, economies, and populations of NATO member states dwarf those of the Russian Federation. But building coherence and effective deterrence against Kremlin aggression has little to do with math but about conveying to the Russian leadership that the Alliance, with its partners in both regions, has the **demonstrated capability** to inflict significant and unacceptable costs on the Russian Federation in the event of military conflict, as well as the **willingness to use that capability**. Within that context, it is important to assess the potential vulnerabilities of Allies and Partners that would undermine NATO's combined deterrence.

Some of these vulnerabilities include: (1) a perceived lack of cohesion which in turn invites potential miscalculation by the Kremlin; (2) inadequate levels of combat readiness in several Allied air, land, and maritime forces; (3) insufficient integration of air and missile defense capabilities and exercises; (4) deficient military mobility (capabilities, capacities, legal and diplomatic authorities); (5) incomplete coordination of joint operations by mission command for each region, where Joint Forces Command is too stretched; (6) shortcomings in interoperability (tactical field manual, digital fires, Common Operational Plan); (7) insufficient munitions stockpiles; and (8) growing capability gaps between U.S. forces and other Allies, especially in terms of digital systems.

NATO's Hard and Soft Power: Hard power is a necessary component of deterrence. Building coherent organizations and plans that incorporate all of the combined "hard power" of Allies and Partners is mission number one if



"NATO marks the 30th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall" by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

security is to be maintained in the transatlantic region. The combined militaries of 29 states plus partnerships with other countries in Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific represent overwhelming real and potential combat power that, if trained and ready to operate in multinational formations and organizations, should readily defeat any Russian Federation military capabilities. The key to maximize the benefit of this hard power potential is for each nation to deliver its obligated forces at high readiness and for these formations to train together regularly. Otherwise, the hard power advantage will be diminished in the absence of substantial logistics, weak infrastructure, poor or non-existent air, missile, and cyber defense, and an inability to move and deploy rapidly in all domains throughout the theater.

NATO's significant military advantages give the Alliance the potential options to strike at multiple points—what military planners call “horizontal escalation”—which can put pressure on Russian Federation forces in areas vital to them and distract them or degrade their ability to carry out their original intent. For example, a response to a Russian attack near the Suwałki Corridor might include strikes on Russian bases in the Arctic, Syria, or the Caucasus, in coordination with cyberstrikes, a blockade of Sevastopol, or disabling NS2, NS1, and other Russian pipelines.

The combined industrial base of NATO and its Partners has the potential to generate modern capabilities and necessary quantities of ammunition, fuel, and repair parts for sustained combat. NATO currently has a significant although not guaranteed or inevitable advantage in space-based platforms. Both Russia and China are gaining, hence the Alliance will need to ensure the protection of space-based platforms which are essential for

navigation, communications, targeting, and intelligence while developing the ability to degrade or blind the capabilities of opponents. SPACECOM is intended to accomplish this for the United States.

NATO has naval superiority in the Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Atlantic Ocean. Control or potential control of key straits in Europe (such as Gibraltar, Turkish Straits, Danish Straits, and the Aegean Sea) by Allies and Partners is key to military superiority.

“ The key to maximize the benefit of this hard power potential is for each nation to deliver its obligated forces at high readiness and for these formations to train together regularly. **”**



“EXERCISE POSEIDON 2017” by NATO HQ MARCOM under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

In the event of conflict, NATO would expect to achieve rapid sea control in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic, though the Russian navy is likely to challenge this using submarines, disruption of undersea capabilities, and cyber plus missile strikes on critical infrastructure. Vital to success will be working closely with Allies and Partners in the contested region, particularly Sweden and Finland in the Baltic, enhancing anti-submarine capabilities, and expanding the network of bases, including in Greenland, Iceland, and inside the Arctic Circle.

Air Superiority is achievable but will be challenged immediately due to high-quality and high-density Russian air and missile defense systems. But the high-quality Allied and Partner Air Forces, particularly with the addition of F35s, should be able, in coordination with cyber capabilities, to eventually achieve the necessary penetration and neutralization of A2/AD “bubbles.”

One limiting factor—control of access to the Black Sea—is governed in part by Turkey and the Montreux Convention of 1936 (see *Historical Context*), which limits the size, number, and operational duration of ships of non-littoral nations in the Black Sea. This means that Moscow will almost always have numerical advantage within the Black Sea. Hence, the Alliance must work closely with Partners and coordinate efforts to achieve the highest possible deterrence effect to counter Russia’s aggression and ensure freedom of navigation, as well as protecting the sovereignty of Allies around the Black Sea. This will require several aspects of “hard power” to include modernized naval capabilities, anti-ship systems, increased air and missile defense systems, use of maritime unmanned systems, and a joint headquarters focused on the Black Sea.

Soft power typically includes the use of diplomacy, multinational frameworks and institutions, international law, and economics.

Armed Forces of Finland

Type	2009	2019
Total Active	29,300	21,500
Army	21,500	15,300
Navy	5,700	3,500
Air	4,700	2,700
Paramilitary	3,100	2,700
Reserve	237,000	216,000

Sources: 2009: IISS, *The Military Balance 2009*, p. 174.

2019: IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, p. 103.

Competing in the “information space” can occur in the realm of both soft and hard power. As Secretary General Stoltenberg has stated, “With NATO each nation starts with 28 other friends.” When the Alliance works together, it has the combined diplomatic and legal and information efforts of 29 nations with shared values and interests. Their combined economies and populations far surpass those of the Russian Federation. Reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels in most European nations also increases the West’s economic power.

NATO Capabilities in the Baltic Sea Region:

Along the Baltic littoral, the Nordic five (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), and the Baltic three (Estonia, Latvia,

and Lithuania) plus Poland are concerned about a rapidly rearming Russia. On paper these countries are wealthy enough to defend themselves: their combined gross domestic product (GDP) exceeds \$2 trillion, far more than Russia’s \$1.3 trillion. But this region is divided – into NATO and non-NATO, EU and non-EU, big and small, rich and poor, heavy and light spenders on defense. Strategic incoherence and an inability of states to defend themselves without outside help pose a threat to NATO’s credibility and performance.

While neither Sweden nor Finland are NATO members, the armed forces of both countries routinely train with and often deploy with NATO. Their ability to help with air and sea control in the Baltic Sea region should figure significantly

Armed Forces of Sweden

Type	2009	2019
Total Active	16,900	29,750
Army	10,200	6,850
Navy	3,100	2,100
Air	3,600	2,700
Paramilitary	42,600	39,300
Reserve	262,000	N/A

Sources: 2009: IISS, *The Military Balance 2009*, p. 184.

2019: IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, p. 150.



“NATO Battlegroup Latvia conducts urban operations training” by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

in Alliance planning. Sweden’s decision to reposition military forces on Gotland Island was an important move, as it signaled to the rest of Europe and to Moscow that Stockholm takes the Russian threat seriously. Equally importantly, Sweden now helps deny what would be a critical addition to Russian A2/AD capabilities in the Baltic region should Russian forces try to seize Gotland in a quick strike as a precursor to armed conflict. Finland plays a similar role, ensuring that its many islands do not serve as Russian bases for quick strikes, intelligence gathering, or cyber operations that degrade Allied capabilities.

NATO Capabilities in the Black Sea Region:

NATO has prepared a package of measures to strengthen its posture in the Black Sea. This includes coastal radar systems for Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia. In recent years, the U.S. Navy has increased its

presence in the Black Sea, including holding joint exercises with Romania, which hosts a U.S. missile defense facility. In April 2019, a package was approved in Washington at NATO’s Foreign Ministers meeting to improve situational awareness in the Black Sea region and strengthen support for partners Georgia and Ukraine. Some other measures are being considered at the NATO level, including the pre-deployment of military equipment, a larger military presence, base development, special forces, and a partnership in defense industries between Bucharest and U.S. companies. The American presence in Romania includes fighter aircraft, a force presence at the Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base (about 1,000 soldiers and tanks), and a Black Sea naval presence. There is also Naval Support Facility (NSF) Deveselu, which supports NATO’s ballistic missile defense systems with *Aegis Ashore*. NATO maritime forces in the Black Sea

Armed Forces of Romania

Type	2009	2019
Total Active	73,200	69,300
Army	43,000	36,000
Navy	6,500	6,500
Air	10,200	10,300
Paramilitary	79,900	57,000
Reserve	45,000	50,000

Sources: 2009: IISS, *The Military Balance 2009*, p. 147.

2019: IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, p. 140.

increased their presence from 80 days per year in 2016 and 2017 to 120 days in 2018, but decreased in 2019. This provides opportunities for more exercises and training with Black Sea states, including Saber Guardian 2019, plus 170 engagements per year.

Romania is in a central position to become NATO's hub in the Black Sea in terms of ports, navy presence, and missile defense. It is the Black Sea center of the Three Seas Initiative. The transport corridor between Central Asia and Europe passes through Romania. It is the entry point for Caspian basin energy into Europe and is less dependent on Russian supplies than its neighbors. The commercial importance of the Black Sea for Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, and Turkey is growing with the expected 2021 completion of Georgia's Anaklia large deep-water shipping port. This is part of an important strategy not only to boost economic development but also to enhance the access of all South Caucasus countries to Western markets and institutions.

Romania has demonstrated its commitment to burden-sharing, having met the 2 percent defense-spending guideline since 2017—of which over 30 percent has been allocated for modernization—a trend it intends to maintain

until at least 2027. In this context, Romania has begun improving its naval capabilities. Its navy is small and most of its platforms are obsolete. The government has announced plans to buy four new surface combatants and three submarines for operations in the Black Sea although acquisition has been delayed. It is deepening maritime relations with NATO, including navy participation in the Sea Breeze multinational exercises, and hosting NATO's regional headquarters, Multinational Division Southeast, and Multinational Brigade Southeast. A cyber defense command has been established. Bucharest is also working with Bulgaria to develop Special Forces capabilities and a Multinational Corps Southeast headquarters in Romania, and pursues regional cooperation through various formats, including the Bucharest 9, meetings of presidents, and trilateral (Romania, Turkey, Poland) sessions.

Along with Poland, Romania also hosts an *Aegis Ashore* land-based ballistic missile defense system. The one in Romania is already operational with approximately 140 U.S. Navy personnel. It is a missile defense system emplaced to protect European cities from Iranian missiles. The one in Poland, which will be completed in 2020, also includes

a navy presence. Romania is purchasing *Patriot* surface-to-air missiles and the HIMARS system, America’s premier light multiple rocket launchers.

Romania’s substantial energy deposits in the waters of its internationally recognized Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) remain vulnerable. On February 3, 2009, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) recognized Romania’s and Ukraine’s offshore maritime claims in the Black Sea, prior to Russia’s seizure of Crimea. However, that ruling was predicated on the fact that Ukraine, not Russia, controlled Crimea. Although there is no legal basis for Russia to challenge the delimitation specified by the ICJ, Moscow is highly adept at “lawfare,” or the “instrumental use of legal tools to achieve the same or similar effects as those traditionally sought from kinetic military action.”¹⁴ In this case, it can deploy that tool to claim ownership, for example, of Ukraine’s EEZs in the Black Sea. Bucharest is also concerned that Moscow could try to affect the activities of the offshore energy installations deployed in its continental shelf and EEZ where NATO has only a limited capability to intervene, despite the oil drilling platforms and installations being protected under NATO’s Article 5. The Alliance could greatly benefit *overall* Black Sea security by helping to deter potential revisionist probing of offshore energy resources located in littoral

EEZs. This can include land-based air defense systems, contributions to increase surveillance capabilities in the air and sea, and more intensive maritime patrolling in the Black Sea. If Russia has the ability to threaten regional security with its 365-day maritime presence in the Black Sea, NATO should have the same presence to defend itself.

Bulgaria has made moves toward a modest reinvestment in its navy but has the least developed naval capabilities in the Black Sea region. In April 2016, the government approved a \$1.14 billion purchase program for new aircraft and naval vessels, including two modern, multi-functional corvettes and 16 fixed-wing tactical aircraft. In 2018, Sofia also completed a modernization program for its fleet of (Russian-made) *MiG-29* fighters. While the acquisition of less than a handful of new corvettes may not appear as a major investment, their upgraded capabilities will allow the Bulgarian navy to forge closer ties with NATO navies through participation in a variety of NATO maritime exercises.

Turkey remains the key NATO Ally in the Black Sea region. It provides NATO basing for operations in the Middle East; controls the Bosphorus straits which it can close in case of war; and possesses the Alliance’s second largest standing military. It also maintains the

Armed Forces of Turkey

Type	2009	2019
Total Active	510,600	355,200
Army	402,000	260,000
Navy	48,600	45,000
Air	60,000	50,000
Paramilitary	102,200	156,800
Reserve	378,700	378,700

Sources: 2009: IISS, *The Military Balance 2009*, p. 154-155.

2019: IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, p. 154.



The Bosphorus. “Astronaut photograph ISS008-E-21752” by NASA Earth Observatory under Public Domain.

largest navy among the Black Sea riparian states, which is being modernized with newer frigates, fast patrol boats, and amphibious assault ships. However, Turkey lacks a potent shore-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability, as well as a long-range strike capability. The Putin-Erdogan partnership also presents a challenge in the region, as Turkey will not accept any changes to the Montreux Convention allowing NATO to strengthen its presence in the Black Sea. And

most of Turkey’s forces are concentrated in the south, making it difficult to evaluate their readiness in the event of a crisis situation in the Black Sea. Hence, NATO must work within these constraints while devising new approaches to the region. In addition, Ankara’s purchase of Russian *S-400* surface-to-air missile systems is highly problematic for NATO Allies, as they assist Moscow in developing weapons designed to combat the Alliance.

Supporting Ukraine: Kyiv’s military posture has been land-oriented but its 2019 Naval Strategy concentrates on building capabilities to respond to maritime threats.¹⁵ The document defines the priorities for building effective naval capabilities in three stages by 2035. The first stage, until 2025, aims to establish control over territorial waters and up to 40 nautical miles from the coast. A highly mobile “mosquito” fleet will perform this operation, including *Giurza*-class armored boats, *Centaur*-class assault craft, and two U.S.-built *Island*-class patrol cutters. Kyiv is also planning to purchase 22 modern patrol ships. The second stage until 2030 envisions developing naval capabilities to protect Ukraine’s EEZ, up to 200 nautical miles from the coast. The third stage aims at further expanding capabilities. Washington is expanding arms supplies to Ukraine in order to build up the country’s naval forces. In May 2019, the U.S. Senate Armed

Forces Committee approved a draft National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2020, which authorized the Pentagon to allocate \$300 million for strengthening Ukrainian defense capability by incorporating coastal defenses and anti-ship missiles.

Danube Delta Dimension: The Danube River represents a second gateway into and out of the Black Sea. The Danube River flows through 10 European countries and impacts the economies of each of them. Governance over the Danube is in part the responsibility of the Danube Commission. Russia, as the successor to the Soviet Union, has retained a seat on the Danube River Commission, which gives it another tool in its use of “lawfare” to undermine NATO cohesion and destabilize the Balkans, as it recently tried to do by shipping tanks up the Danube River to Serbia. Romania refused to allow this passage, in accordance



“NATO Secretary General and North Atlantic Council visit Ukraine” by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

with EU sanctions on Russia. Unfortunately, Hungary and other European states allowed the Russians to overfly the tanks to Serbia.

Romania fully recognizes the potential for a Russian thrust to seize or deny the Danube Delta region, combining amphibious with land operations through the historical invasion routes across Ukraine, Moldova, and the “Focșani Gates” in Romania. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in the Odesa region targeting its gas platforms have alarmed Romanian planners and provide ample evidence of the vulnerabilities of the key Romanian port of Constanța to a Russian strike or maritime and air interference with the port and with Romanian gas platforms.

NATO can prepare plans to explore the military potential of the Danube Delta region for NATO’s self-defense and power projection. This could include a special maritime defensive zone along the Danube that would have fixed force protection capabilities for ships and capabilities to launch helicopters and drones. Ships passing the Danube would have more force protection and situational awareness than through the Bosphorus.

Critical to protecting the Danube Delta region will include (1) removing Russia from the Danube Commission or at least reducing its role; (2) international refusal to recognize Russian claims to Crimea and the resulting extension of the self-styled “Russian Territorial Waters and Economic Exclusion Zone” that comes very close to Romanian waters; (3) increased cooperation between Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine to ensure a common maritime picture and shared intelligence about Russian naval and air activities in the region; and (4) improved air and missile defense to protect Odesa and Constanța.

Russia’s Weaknesses: In all military or sub-military conflicts, each adversary faces its own set of weaknesses, which could result in failure and defeat. NATO planners need to assess and exploit Russia’s fears, vulnerabilities, and disadvantages in the event of an escalating

“*Romania fully recognizes the potential for a Russian thrust to seize or deny the Danube Delta region, combining amphibious with land operations through the historical invasion routes across Ukraine, Moldova, and the “Focșani Gates” in Romania.*”

crisis in the B2 region. Moscow’s aggressive probing is grounded in inflated propaganda about its own capabilities. It often pursues an aggressive agenda toward neighbors in order to camouflage some of its internal weaknesses, which are not just economic and

financial but also social, ethnic, and regional. It is important for the NATO Alliance to challenge Moscow's disinformation that depicts Russia as an invincible power and to widely publicize its internal weaknesses, as evident in its ongoing economic decline and escalating social and regional protests against the central government.

Above all, Moscow fears conflicts adjacent to Russia that could spill over into its territory or the escalation of separatist rebellions inside the Russian Federation. NATO's enhanced military capabilities, including land and maritime forces, air defense, striking capabilities, and speed of mobility are important in projecting a sense of uncertainty and potential dread in Moscow that, if provoked and attacked, the Alliance is not only capable of defending itself but also of striking inside Russia's territory. In such a scenario, a resolute NATO response could reveal the insecurities of Russia's leadership as well as the country's political vulnerabilities and military weaknesses, and thereby encourage unrest and revolt in some regions of the federation.

In the Baltic region, NATO can turn the strategic table on Russia by focusing on Kaliningrad. NATO should encourage Moscow to view Kaliningrad as a vulnerable outpost surrounded by NATO territory, isolated from Russia, and with little chance of resupply in the event of war.¹⁶ NATO can exploit this potential vulnerability by making it clear that in case of armed conflict Kaliningrad would be a prime target for an Alliance assault just as the Baltic states are depicted by Moscow as a prime target for Russia's assault. NATO could also leverage Moscow's fear of losing control

of Kaliningrad in order to deter Russia from using its long-range A2/AD assets to interfere with NATO's lines of communications to the Baltic states during a crisis. This posture could entail reinforcing NATO forces and firepower in proximity to the exclave and underscoring that Kaliningrad could be neutralized and lost to Russia through offensive military action.

Belarus also presents both an opportunity and vulnerability for Putin. He may seek to replace its president or even annex the country to gain a position as head of a new united state and extend his term in office. Moscow has exerted diplomatic and economic pressure on Minsk to desist from pursuing Western integration while making comparisons between Belarus and Ukraine, claiming that Western services are preparing a coup. However, the Alliance can clearly signal that any forceful Russian intervention in Belarus could provoke more extensive Western sanctions on Russia, intensify NATO's military buildup along its Eastern Flank, and potentially challenge Moscow's presence in Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea.

An additional challenge for Russia would be for NATO and the EU to successfully promote neighboring countries such as Ukraine and Georgia to implement reforms that meet the criteria for joining both organizations. Commitment to such an outcome undermines Moscow's claims to regional dominance, enlarges NATO's scope and reach in ensuring European security, revives the EU's attraction for aspiring states, challenges Kremlin claims that it is effectively defending Russia, and may ultimately unravel the rationale and legitimacy of the Putin regime.



“MAVI BALINA 16” by NATO HQ MARCOM under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

CONCLUSIONS

Russian forces and actions pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the NATO Alliance. This danger is not confined to low-intensity or non-military forms of conflict. If Moscow attempted to challenge NATO, it would calculate that Russian forces could swiftly exploit uncertainties and political cleavages within the Alliance. Should the Kremlin try to test NATO, its potential opening moves are almost unlimited: from low-threshold “hybrid” probes, limited or temporary incursions, or rapid “stab, grab, and hold” maneuvers aimed at creating a *fait accompli* at the negotiating table.

Russia could seek to maintain its “escalation dominance” across multiple battlefield domains, as well as in the realms of diplomacy and strategic communications in combination with continued “hybrid” tactics. The Alliance must keep pace with these new dangers by positioning forces closer to areas where NATO members face a threat and guaranteeing a rapid political and military response to any provocations by Moscow. The positioning of a more effective NATO defense along its Eastern Flank and adjacent to Russia’s borders will demonstrate the readiness and resolve of Allies to respond effectively when challenged by an expansionist adversary.

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