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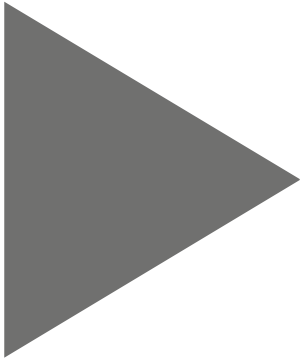
# Security dilemma in the Black Sea region in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

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## **Between the rock and the hard place: Will the Black Sea avoid the escalation ladder?**

### **Abstract**

Since 2014 the Black Sea basin has been the showcase of the contested region where the growing expansion of Russia, on one hand, and the boosting forwarded presence of NATO, on the other, has the potential for a clash. This growing attention on the region is defined by the Russian annexation of Crimea, which was included in Moscow's defence perimeter in the *Fundamentals of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy* of 2020 and therefore made the Black Sea an area of possible sub-strategic use of nuclear weapons. However, a consistent and firm policy by NATO is capable of preventing the ultimate transformation of the Black Sea into a "Russian lake" by drawing the clear "red lines" for Russia and supporting the most vulnerable partners of the Alliance, Ukraine and Georgia.

## Introduction

During recent years, the Black Sea basin has gradually turned into a hotbed of mutual NATO-Russia tensions. On the one hand, the annexation of Crimea pushed forward Russia's efforts in strengthening its military infrastructure on the peninsula while enhancing its Black Sea fleet. Such a situation shows the clear intentions of Moscow to turn the Black Sea into its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) zone where annexation of Crimea is presented as fait accompli for including Crimea in the Russian defence perimeter. On the other hand, the United States and NATO are trying to keep control over the situation in the region by relying more and more on Romania as a new southern pillar. As a result, the growing confrontation in the region is accompanied by an intensive arms race, carrying the high potential for future conflict.

## Russian military build-up on the Black Sea

Currently, the Russian Black Sea fleet entered a time of active modernization. According to the Russian Navy, Chief Commander Nikolai Evmenov, the reason for such prompt modernization is to prevent "the emerging of threats against Russia from the sea directions on the South"<sup>1</sup>. In the end, it will make the Black Sea fleet self-sufficient and balanced for the structure of its means and assets.

Such a decision has become part of Russia's consistent strategy, introduced after 2014. Since the annexation

<sup>1</sup> D. Boltenkov, R. Kretsul, *S Pritselom na Yug: kakim stanet Chernomorskiy Flot posle pereosnashcheniya*, "Izvestiya", 16 May 2020, [www.iz.ru/1011772/dmitrii-boltenkov-roman-kretcul/s-pritcelom-na-iug-kakim-stanet-chernomorskii-flot-posle-pereosnashcheniia](http://www.iz.ru/1011772/dmitrii-boltenkov-roman-kretcul/s-pritcelom-na-iug-kakim-stanet-chernomorskii-flot-posle-pereosnashcheniia).



of Crimea from Ukraine, Moscow has made the peninsula one of the most militarized points of the region, “the land of the Russian glory” as well as the fortress of Russian power projection.

Two fleets of Russia, the Northern and the Pacific, are responsible for strategic missions; therefore, they are mostly equipped with strategic assets. Further, the newest Russian weapons are always initially included in these two fleets. The other fleets, such as the Baltic and the Black Sea ones, consist mostly of sub-strategic military units. *The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030* declares: “During the escalation of military conflict, the demonstration of readiness and determination to employ non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities is an effective deterrent”<sup>2</sup>. This can be interpreted as meaning that Russian non-strategic fleets have been designed to perform “de-escalation” actions on the borders with NATO when an upcoming bigger conflict would be deterred by the threat of the nuclear weapons limited use. This strategy of “escalation for de-escalation”, born in the 2000s, was suggested for containing any large conventional conflicts Russia could potentially face, especially in relations with NATO, which have been listed as among the main dangers and threats in the main Russian strategic documents since the beginning of the century.

<sup>2</sup> *The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030*, Russia’s Maritime Studies Institute: US Naval War College, [https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/o/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RMSI\\_RusNavyFundamentalsENG\\_FINAL%20\(1\).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFDEgWhpd1ING%2FnmGQXqaH5%2FDEuj-DU76EnksAB%2B1Ao%3D](https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/o/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RMSI_RusNavyFundamentalsENG_FINAL%20(1).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFDEgWhpd1ING%2FnmGQXqaH5%2FDEuj-DU76EnksAB%2B1Ao%3D).



Evaluating the Russian Black Sea fleet, the general impression is that it is being constructed primarily for this mission. In particular, it combines limited but effective offensive potential with powerful defensive capabilities. Among the offensive units, it is worth mentioning cruiser “Moskva”, equipped with anti-ship missiles P-1000 “Vulkan”, existing in conventional as well as nuclear versions. It is supported by the three guided-missile class frigates (project 11356) “Admiral Grigorovich”, “Admiral Essen”, and “Admiral Makarov”, and six “Varshavyanka” 636.3 class submarines, all equipped with torpedoes, cruise, and anti-ship missiles<sup>3</sup>. Also included are ten 1241-project corvettes and two 1239 project corvettes armed with SS-N-22 Sunburn anti-ship missiles and supported by the two older 1234 project corvettes<sup>4</sup>.

In January 2021 the Black Sea fleet was also rounded out with the 21631 project corvette “Grayvoron”, while nine more similar corvettes are going to follow in coming years. Also, the fleet is also supposed to be enhanced with two patrol boats of the 20380 project and then two corvettes of the 20386 project. Two more frigates of the 22350 “Admiral Gorshkov” type will be added to the Black Sea fleet within the decade<sup>5</sup>.

Meanwhile, currently all Russian frigates, as well as 636.3 submarines and the corvettes, are equipped with “Kali-

<sup>3</sup> M. Petersen, *The Naval Power Shift in the Black Sea*, “War on the Rocks”, 1 September 2019, [www.warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/](http://www.warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/).

<sup>4</sup> S. Roblin, *Introducing Russia's 5 Deadliest Warships in the Black Sea*, “National Interest”, 1 December 2018, [www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/introducing-russias-5-deadliest-warships-black-sea-37677](http://www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/introducing-russias-5-deadliest-warships-black-sea-37677).

<sup>5</sup> D. Boltenkov, R. Kretsul, op. cit.



br-NK” sea-launched cruise missiles having land-attack, anti-ship, and antisubmarine warfare versions. “Kalibr-NK” is capable of performing conventional as well as nuclear operations and has a range of 2600 km. When deployed in the Black Sea, it is capable of targeting Southern, South Western, and Central European states<sup>6</sup>.

The defensive potential on the Black Sea is presented by the four battalions of S-400 missile systems, as well as the K-300 P “Bastion-P” high-precision coastal missile defence systems, and can cover virtually the entire regional theatre. The “Bastion” system “Oniks-800” anti-ship supersonic cruise missiles with 400 km range makes Russia feel safe enough on the Northern part of the Black Sea. Together with S-300 and “Pantsir-S1” point defence systems, Russia managed to establish an anti-access/area-denial zone (A2AD), expanding it across almost all of the Black Sea. This situation provides Russians with the capability to inhibit military movement into the Black Sea and deny freedom of action to an opponent<sup>7</sup>.

In general, the Russian Black Sea Fleet does not have too many battleships or any strategic assets to be involved in strategic missions; however, a) the permanent increase of the warships number together with the ambitious plans for the coming decade shows Russia’s determination to enhance its Southern flank to confront NATO; b) the current

<sup>6</sup> M. van Dijk, *Russia and NATO in a post-INF world: One year after withdrawal*, “Atlantic Forum”, 2 August 2020, [www.atlantic-forum.com/content/russia-and-nato-post-inf-world-one-year-after-withdrawal](http://www.atlantic-forum.com/content/russia-and-nato-post-inf-world-one-year-after-withdrawal).

<sup>7</sup> D. Gorenburg, *Is the New Russian Black Sea Fleet Coming? Or is it here?*, “War on the rocks”, 31 July 2018, [www.warontherocks.com/2018/07/is-a-new-russian-black-sea-fleet-coming-or-is-it-here/](http://www.warontherocks.com/2018/07/is-a-new-russian-black-sea-fleet-coming-or-is-it-here/).

number and the content of the Black Sea fleet permit Russia to already fulfil sub-strategic operations (even in the framework of de-escalatory missions).

The military exercises Russia has been conducting in the Black Sea also involve strategic bombers (Tu-22M3 Backfire, deployed at the Gvardeyskoe airbase in Crimea) and some of the newest weapons, such as the hypersonic air-launched cruise missile “Kinzhal”<sup>8</sup>. The latter was initially introduced to the most important Northern Fleet; however, the growing strategic role of the Black Sea together with exercises involving “Kinzhal” looks promising enough to believe that it will also become part of the Black Sea fleet soon.

## **The US and NATO allies positions at the Black Sea**

Most often Moscow explains its aggressive behaviour together with the intensive military build-up as responding to the “dangers, having a potential to turn into threats”<sup>9</sup> in the hostile moves of NATO where the European missile defence occupies a special role. In particular, the European Phased Adaptive Approach (put forward by the Obama administration) suggested deploying land-based units in the theatre and Aegis Ashore missile defence in Romania and Poland to protect Europe from the Iranian missiles.

<sup>8</sup> S. LaGrone, *Russians Use U.S. Navy's Aegis Ashore as Excuse to Deploy Strategic Bombers to Crimea*, “USNI News”, 18 March 2019, [www.news.usni.org/2019/03/18/russians-use-u-s-navys-aegis-ashore-excuse-deploy-strategic-bombers-crimea](http://www.news.usni.org/2019/03/18/russians-use-u-s-navys-aegis-ashore-excuse-deploy-strategic-bombers-crimea).

<sup>9</sup> *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, 2 June 2020, [www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/-/asset\\_publisher/rpofiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rpofiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094).





Both sites present the second and the third stages of PAA, while the earliest stages supposed the deployment of the Aegis systems at the navy ships in the Mediterranean. The first Aegis Ashore site was deployed in 2016 at the Deveselu base in Romania, while the second one in Poland was delayed until 2022. Meanwhile, the Romanian Aegis Ashore site already has served as a permanent irritator for Russia. Starting from the moment Moscow condemned the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, it has always been categorically against the European missile defence, seeing it as a US tool to undermine the Russian deterrence shield. Commenting on the opening of the Aegis Ashore site in Romania, Russian president Putin asserted that in response to the “deployment of those anti-missile system elements”, Russia “will be forced to think about neutralizing developing threats to Russia’s security”<sup>10</sup>.

To some extent, this statement was used to justify Russian intensive military build-up in the region; however, it is still based on certain practical concerns.

On the one hand, Russians monitor the growing capabilities of the SM-3 Block II A missiles, which were tested over the Pacific in 2020 and demonstrated successful capability to intercept ICBMs<sup>11</sup>. Though the Romanian missile defence site currently operates SM-3IB missiles, nobody can exclude the deployment of more sophisticated missiles in the future. Due to Moscow’s logic, the only way of guaranteeing the stability of mutual deterrence with NATO could be some

<sup>10</sup> *Putin: Russia will consider tackling NATO missile defense threat, “RT”, 13 May 2016, [www.rt.com/news/342915-putin-nato-threat-missiles/](http://www.rt.com/news/342915-putin-nato-threat-missiles/).*

<sup>11</sup> *US Conducts Successful SM-3Block IIA Intercept Test Against ICBM Target, “Missile Defense Agency”, 17 November 2020, [www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/110957](http://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/110957).*

formal limitations imposed on missile defence, including in its European sites. This idea has always been rejected by the US, who has refused to make NATO interests dependent on third power interests.

On the other, one of the Russian most speculated fears has always been that Aegis Ashore in Europe would be used not only as defensive infrastructure but also as offensive. In particular, Moscow claimed that the SM-3 Mk41 vertical launchers could also be equipped with the navy's Tomahawk cruise missiles, a fact the US has always denied, referring to the INF Treaty and its adherence to it. However, in August 2019, immediately after the INF collapsed, the US successfully tested SM-3 to launch a "Tomahawk" missile, thereby proving that Russian suspicions were not ungrounded<sup>12</sup>. In August 2019, commenting on the American missile tests the president, Putin emphasized this concern: "What worries me is that this Tomahawk missile, which means sea-based, has been "grounded" to unable its launch from the soil. The launch of such missiles can be carried out from launchers that are already located in Romania and should be located in the near future in Poland"<sup>13</sup>.

Somehow it was not surprising that the "Fundamentals of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy," published in June 2020, called the deployment of European missile defence the "main military risk that might evolve into many military

<sup>12</sup> S. Neuman, *U.S. Tests Missile With A Range Prohibited By Now-Abandoned Treaty*, "NPR", 20 August 2019, [www.npr.org/2019/08/20/752657167/u-s-tests-missile-with-a-range-prohibited-by-now-abandoned-treaty](http://www.npr.org/2019/08/20/752657167/u-s-tests-missile-with-a-range-prohibited-by-now-abandoned-treaty).

<sup>13</sup> G. Gotev, *Putin: US in position to deploy new cruise missile in Romania, Poland*, "Euractiv", 20 August 2019, [www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/putin-us-in-position-to-deploy-new-cruise-missile-in-romania-poland/](http://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/putin-us-in-position-to-deploy-new-cruise-missile-in-romania-poland/).



threats (threats of aggression)”<sup>14</sup> and therefore was defined as a potential challenge for Russian nuclear deterrence. Given that Romania is the location of the Aegis Ashore deployment and belongs to the NATO alliance, which “considers Russia an adversary,” (the latter automatically makes it an object of Russian nuclear deterrence)<sup>15</sup> the Aegis Ashore sites turn into potential targets for Russian nuclear strikes. Moreover, it is known that in the face of the gradual withdrawal of Turkey from being the most reliable pillar of NATO at the Southern flank, the idea of transferring this role to Romania is still being considered by both capitals, Washington DC and Bucharest.

In recent years Romania has started to invest in its defence field. Having reached 2% of its GDP on defence since 2017, it has been spending 33-35% of its defence budget on acquisitions (much higher than the NATO-recommended share of 20 percent for major acquisitions)<sup>16</sup>, such as F-16 fighter jets, Patriot missiles, Piranha armoured personal carriers, etc.<sup>17</sup> In 2021 Romania signed a \$296 million deal on the purchase of coastal subsonic anti-ship Naval Strike Missile, which is to be fulfilled by 2024<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> *Basic Principles of State Policy...*

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> V. Socor, *Pillar of NATO: Romania's Ambition in the Black Sea Region*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor”, 8 July 2018, [www.jamestown.org/program/pillar-of-nato-romania-ambition-in-the-black-sea-region/](http://www.jamestown.org/program/pillar-of-nato-romania-ambition-in-the-black-sea-region/).

<sup>17</sup> I.S. Joja, *Dealing with the Russian Lake Next Door: Romania and the Black Sea*, “War on the Rocks”, 15 August 2018, [www.warontherocks.com/2018/08/dealing-with-the-russian-lake-next-door-romania-and-black-sea-security/](http://www.warontherocks.com/2018/08/dealing-with-the-russian-lake-next-door-romania-and-black-sea-security/).

<sup>18</sup> *Romania approves the purchase of NSM Naval Strike anti-ship Missile systems*, “Navyrecognition”, 15 January 2021, [www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2021/january/9560-romania-approves-the-purchase-of-nsm-naval-strike-anti-ship-missile-systems](http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2021/january/9560-romania-approves-the-purchase-of-nsm-naval-strike-anti-ship-missile-systems).

Besides the technical preparations, there are some legislative ones. The new National Security Strategy of Romania adopted in June 2020 lists “Russian aggressive actions in the Black Sea region and the consolidation of its military potential in Romania’s neighbourhood” as potential threats to national security. It emphasizes that Russian action “motivates Romania to continue the widespread efforts begun in 2015 to build extensive defence and deterrence capabilities”<sup>19</sup>.

During recent years, NATO and the US have paid special attention to the Western flank of the Black Sea. Since 2016 the Warsaw Summit Communiqué has defined the Alliance policy in the Black Sea basin. It has introduced the Tailored Forward Presence strategy, which presupposed an increase of NATO military involvement in the region, particularly the rotational presence of the allied navy in the Black Sea, as well as the air policing mission in Romania and Bulgaria, together with the deployment of the multinational brigade in Romania. Also, the resilience concept involved the most endangered regional partners of NATO to support them depending on their situations<sup>20</sup>.

Maritime routine exercises and operations have increased tremendously per year, while the US Arleigh Burke-class destroyers armed with the Aegis missile defence have been regularly entering the Black Sea. During the first two months of 2021, they have already entered three times, showing special concern by the Alliance for regional se-

<sup>19</sup> K. Calus, *Romania’s New security strategy*, OSW Centre, 15 July 2020, [www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-07-15/romania-s-new-security-strategy](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-07-15/romania-s-new-security-strategy).

<sup>20</sup> H. Shelest, *NATO in the Black Sea: Transformation of Approaches and Tailored Presence*, [in:] *Black Sea Region in World Policy: Actors, Factors and Scenarios of the Future*, O. Brusylovska, I. Koval (ed.), Odesa: I.I. Mechnikov National University 2020, pp. 96-111.



curity. NATO officially underscored its position by stating that “The Black Sea is of strategic importance to NATO... In response to Russia’s illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and its ongoing military build-up in the Black Sea, the Alliance has increased its defensive presence in the region and remains strongly committed to Black Sea security”<sup>21</sup>.

In his CEPA report, retired Lt. General Ben Hodges noted, “I think the greater Black Sea region is the real place of competition and poses the greatest potential for conflict”. Explaining the aggressive behaviour of Russia, Hodges suggests to “reinforce Romania” “as the centre of gravity of NATO’s regional deterrence”, noting that the “Michael Kogelnichanu” airbase “should be reinforced as a power projection platform for logistics, land, mission command, and air activity”<sup>22</sup>. He also suggested locating the regional maritime NATO HQ in Constanta, Romania, to coordinate the Black Sea Alliance naval efforts, similar to the example of the HQ in the east of Germany. Supporting partners are envisaged by establishing a common Romanian-Ukrainian brigade similar to the Polish-Lithuanian brigade<sup>23</sup>.

## Russian Black Sea Fleet main missions

The main task of the Russian Black Sea fleet is to practice successful A2/AD, based on mostly conventional deterrence

<sup>21</sup> NATO *Allied ships, aircraft patrol the Black Sea*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 28 January 2021, [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_180887.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180887.htm).

<sup>22</sup> D. Hodges, J. Bugajski, R. Woicik, C. Scmeidl, *One Flank, One Threat, One Presence. A Strategy for NATO’s Eastern Flank*, Center for European Policy Analysis, May 2020, [www.cepa.org/cepa\\_files/2020-CEPA-report-one\\_flank\\_one\\_threat\\_one\\_presence.pdf](http://www.cepa.org/cepa_files/2020-CEPA-report-one_flank_one_threat_one_presence.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.



while still admitting the low-level nuclear operations, aimed to strengthen deterrence stability. This connection of the conventional and nuclear options forms the backbone of the Russian general deterrence posture within the permanent coordination of the Black Sea and the Northern Fleet military exercises.

The current amount and capabilities of the Russian Black Sea fleet are designed to serve several aims:

- Deterrence of the Alliance enlargement to the East along with limiting the capabilities of its military infrastructure by building up the A2/AD zone in the Black Sea region. NATO enlargement together with construction of the European Missile Defense sites in Central/Southern Europe has been listed in the “dangers” chapter in most official Russian documents since 2010. Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russian actions became even more aggressive due to the necessity of retaining the absorbed territory under Moscow’s control. In this regard, the closure of the NATO assets such as the Aegis Ashore missile defence site pushed Russia to significant military build-up at the Black Sea. Therefore, the missile defence site served not so much as a reason but mostly as a justification for the Russian adventurism in the region. Since its opening in 2016, President Putin declared the Romanian Aegis Ashore site as a part of the U.S. strategic nuclear capability. In this connection, the Russian Black Sea Fleet’s rapid development looks like a consistent effort to enhance the Russian defensive perimeter at the southwest of the country. The fact that the annexed Crimea has been included in this perimeter

was perfectly described in the “Fundamentals of Nuclear Deterrence,” issued in June 2020. In the end, it shows the dialectic of offense and defence in Russian strategy where the strategy of *fait accompli* is hidden under the strong defensive rhetoric; therefore, deterrence becomes the part of the offense.

- Power projection in the Mediterranean where the Black Sea Fleet performs a supportive function. In particular, the Black Sea warships actively participated in the Syrian campaign. Since 2013 Russia restored its Mediterranean squadron, the backbone of which is the Black Sea Fleet, while only a limited part of the fleet is based at the Russian naval base in Tartus. One other dimension is the Red Sea and the Arab Gulf, where a number of weak states could provide Moscow with additional bases<sup>24</sup>.

The creation of the A2/AD area in the Black Sea also makes a strong platform for Russia’s coercive behaviour, manipulating with the threat to deny (or limit substantially) NATO’s military moves in the region, which at the end brings us to the growing intention of Moscow turning the Black Sea into the Russian Lake.

## The implications for Ukraine

The annexation of Crimea made the Black Sea fleet much more strategic for Russia in many ways. On the one hand, the 2020 *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence* officially declared Russia’s terri-

<sup>24</sup> I. Delanoë, *Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 2020, [www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/report-chapter-6-delanoë.pdf](http://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/report-chapter-6-delanoë.pdf).

torial integrity among the main objects nuclear deterrence is to stand for. This inevitably involves the annexed Crimea, which would be a reason for the de-escalatory use of nuclear weapons in case Russian conventional deterrence won't be effective enough to keep the West from direct military intervention.

On the other hand, Crimea also gains a critical hub of Russian military infrastructure on the Black Sea, having a critical role in the theatre military operations. As far as Russian "Nuclear Deterrence Fundamentals" call the "attack by an adversary against critical governmental or military sites ... disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions"<sup>25</sup> a reason of their use of nuclear weapons, it may involve Crimea in the centre of the great power conflict, with the potential for escalation to a nuclear level. Besides, the attempt by NATO to deprive Russia of its exclusive A2/AD bubble in the Black Sea can be counted as a trigger for such a conflict.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The annexation of Crimea, as well as the traditional phobia of the NATO strategic infrastructure on its flanks, made Russia increase its military build-up in the Black Sea basin. Altogether, the Black Sea Russian forces are capable enough to create the A2/AD zone for Russia on the Black Sea by the threat and capabilities to wage sub-strategic nuclear operations. In the meantime, NATO is not ready to meet the Russian ambition of transforming the Black Sea into a "Russian lake". The gradual increase of the Alliance military

<sup>25</sup> *Basic Principles of State Policy...*



infrastructure, as well as routine operations and exercises, shows the understanding of the Black Sea's importance for the security of the West. The fact that these actions took place simultaneously with the Russian military preparations indicated the increasing arms race on the Black Sea. Such a situation potentially might have a dual effect on regional security. On the one hand, the enhancement of both rivals' defensive and war-fighting capabilities is aimed at boosting deterrence on both shores of the Black Sea, the Eastern and the Western one. On the other, the security dilemma has always been based on the rivals' ambitions to enhance deterrence concerning their opponent, which in the end risks deterrence failure. Adding the nuclear factor to the equation would not necessarily give the insurance for deterrence failure, but vice versa, the sub-strategic "de-escalatory" character of the regional deterrence may rather provoke rivals in the spirit of a stability-instability paradox when the impossibility of major war pushes opponents for escalation of their sub-strategic capabilities.

Meanwhile, it is still necessary to maintain balance in the Black Sea to avoid boosting Russian expansion in the region, which inevitably breaks the status quo for the sake of the most vulnerable NATO partners, such as Ukraine and Georgia. In this domain the Alliance should:

Continue enhancing its deterrence of the Southern flank by the clear drawing of the "red lines" that Russia should not cross under any circumstances. This is possible by:

a) Transferring part of the NATO regional maritime command infrastructure on the Black Sea, demonstrating the growing role of the region for NATO;

b) Developing constant military support to Ukraine and Georgia, start with involving them in common military training operations and ending with introducing them to the Membership Action Plan. An idea such as the creation of common brigades with partners could be a constructive step in showing the resolve of the Alliance to stand for its partners in the region.

Such measures should be firm and consistent, but avoid any non-transparency or actions that create misperceptions in Moscow, which may lead to conflict escalation in the region. This can be achieved by keeping the permanent communication/ information line with Russia open together with the Alliance declaratory policy showing the will for dialogue not only with partners but with rivals.





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