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Russian roulette: the Kremlin's escalation strategy from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea

This article explores escalation as a tool which is being used in Russian military strategy in the twenty-first century. This method of operation has been transformed from a purely defensive deterrence asset which was valid at the beginning of the 2000s into an element of aggressive deterrence, one which bases itself on Russia presenting Crimea's annexation as a *fait accompli*. The authors conclude that the strategic value for Moscow of the Black Sea region has grown with the annexation of Crimea, so that it now surpasses the value of the Baltic region. This can be inferred by comparing the Russian military potential which is present in both regions, as well as through related doctrines and corresponding decisions. To a major extent, the Russian stance in the Baltic plays a coercive role in its strategy: it aims to boost deterrence on the Black Sea, where Moscow sees itself as being more vulnerable.

Introduction

For the last twenty years, escalation strategy has been a constant element of Russian behaviour in the international arena. This all started from the famous 'escalation for de-escalation' principle, which first appeared in military doctrine from the year 2000. The principle emerged as a tool of pure deterrence in the years Russia experienced conventional inferiority, and

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gained more and more coercive functions after what is generally known as the 'Ukraine crisis' of 2014 (*de facto* Russian-Ukrainian political and military conflict). The escalation phenomenon in Russian actions evolved from a point it initially served as the foundation of Moscow's deterrence action to being the key element of its coercive diplomacy, especially against NATO, in the Baltic region, and in the Black Sea region. Russia has a relatively small contingent in both regions compared to its Northern and Pacific fleets, while there is an observable role of the "escalation for de-escalation strategy" when it comes to enhancing and complementing deterrence.

In particular, while Moscow uses the Baltic region as a hostage, something which is necessary for any successful coercion, it perceives the Black Sea as the region which is of vital interest to it and, therefore, needs to strengthen its deterrence in that area. Crimea's vulnerability ensures that Russia employs enormous efforts into creating an anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) zone in the region, which in itself provides escalation dominance.

Therefore the main *objective* of this article is to explore the role of escalation as a tool of the Russian deterrence strategy in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. The main *hypothesis* is that, while the Baltic is still considered as being one of the most probable regions for a potential Russia-NATO conflict, Moscow mostly uses its escalation dominance there as a coercive tool in securing its vital interests around the Black Sea.

The methodology is for the most part based on the deterrence theory framework, which suggests two interpretations of deterrence: narrow and broad. In particular, Freedman's definition of deterrence explains the narrow version as 'an act of persuasion' which defines the costs of a potential attack as outweighing any future benefits one expects to receive from it (Freedman, 2018, p. 4). The broader interpretation of deterrence concerns what is known as the theory of influence (George, 2003), in which deterrence is regarded as the 'persuasion of one's opponent that the costs and/or risks of a given course of action he might take [*adequately*] outweigh its benefits' (George & Smoke, 1974, p. 11). The latter definition involves influencing not only the opponent's thinking in regard to a potential attack option, but also the range of decisions that opponent may want to take in the general course of any action. In other words, this deals with foreseeing and averting any potential threat of attack even before it is formed. Here, coercion means persuasion through the threat to use force, in particular military escalation, as an instrument of political pressure (Cimbala, 1998, p. 3). The authors regard Russian coercion as being part of its broader deterrence strategy, which Moscow mainly uses as an additional persuasion tool in the Baltic-Black Sea region.

The theoretical framework also includes the meaning of escalation as a

tool of influence. In particular, by 'escalation' the authors mean 'an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses a threshold considered significant by one or more of the participants' (Morgan et al., 2008, p. 8). This article deals mainly with deliberate escalation: ie. when a specific player increases (or pretends to be ready to increase) the scope of a conflict, thereby coercing the opponent into avoiding any potential undesired action or, vice versa, compelling him to take the desired action. According to the structural deterrence theory, such an approach is most common in situations which involve an asymmetric distribution of power, when the weaker opponent uses 'coercive diplomacy' to blackmail the stronger rival. This situation, which is called escalation dominance, takes place when the state which is responsible for this form of action-threatened blackmail discovers some type of asymmetric vulnerability and is able to impose unbearable costs on its their opponent (Morgan et al., 2008, p. 17). In other words, 'that side which ...fears eruption [of conflict] the least will automatically have an element of escalation dominance' (Kahn, 1965, p. 290). Freedman (1983) also points out 'the key importance of the relative stakes in the conflict' (p. 219). Acting from the standpoint of 'relative stakes' can be considered as being one of the main features of the current Russian strategy. To a certain extent it also defines the level of Moscow's determination to start a conflict in the region. Hence the interpretation of Russian stakes in the Black Sea region being higher than in the Central European flank tends to present Russian escalation dominance in the Baltic region not as an imminent threat to NATO, but rather as a factor boosting deterrence in the Black Sea region.

Most literature which has been dedicated to Russia's behaviour tends to address the Baltic and Black Sea regions separately. In particular, the majority of authors (Kuhn, 2018; Blenchman et al., 2015; Blank, 2016; Veebel, 2019; Schneider, 2019) see the Baltic states as the main weak point in Nato relations with Russia, and the potential source of possible future conflict. The Black Sea is generally assessed within the framework of the military balance of power (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2015; Gorenburg, 2018; Petersen, 2019; Roblin, 2018), or the regional power shift (Shelest, 2020). While the strategic role of this direction in Russia-NATO relations is gaining more attention, to date it has still only been covered in a few research publications (Åtland & Kabanenko, 2019). The Russian strategy of 'escalation for de-escalation' has attracted significant attention in academic literature (Kroening, 2018; Oliker & Baklitsky, 2018; ven Bruusgaard, 2021). However, the majority of such studies do not cover regional military theatres in Russia's strategy.

The current article uses the case-study method to analyse the military-strategic situation, along with the chances of escalation in the Baltic and the

Black Sea regions. At the same time, the research is based on a comparative analysis of such case studies. It is carried out through the lens of the Russian deterrence strategy, which makes it possible to carry out an analysis of Russian strategic positions, capabilities, and interests in the Central European and southern military districts. A content analysis of official Russian military doctrines and strategies versus speeches by Russian higher-strategic authorities allows an exploration to take place of the broader picture of Russian perceptions and intentions in the region.

The arguments are presented in several parts. The first section explores the escalation phenomenon in Russian official documents and political discourse. It analyses the evolution of escalation strategy from a pure deterrent to a means of coercive diplomacy and political pressure. The second section examines the potential threat of escalation for the Baltic States and the possible outcomes of a NATO-Russia conflict in the region. The third section presents arguments which support the idea that the Black Sea (where enhanced military build-up is ongoing) plays a crucial role in Russian regional deterrence strategy. Finally, the authors conclude with the finding that Russian deterrence strategy in the broader Baltic-Black Sea regions has a complementary structure: Moscow uses its escalation dominance in the Baltic direction as a coercive tool for boosting deterrence in the Black Sea region.

1. Russia and the phenomenon of escalation

The first reference in the Russian official outlook to escalation strategy appeared in 1999/2000. It was an imminent reaction to the NATO military operation in Kosovo. Commonly criticised for the same issues as was the Yugoslavian regime under Milosevic - authoritarianism and the suppression of minorities (mostly in connection with the Chechen wars) - Moscow quickly drew relevant conclusions. The first of these was that even the Russian veto at the United Nations (UN) Security Council as a UN P5 state could not prevent NATO from intervening in the Yugoslav conflict. The second conclusion was about the necessity to provide strong deterrence, which seemed beyond the capacity of Russian conventional forces in those days. From 2000, Moscow proclaimed that the use of nuclear weapons in conventional conflicts as well as in regional wars was now possible 'in critical circumstances' (*Военная доктрина*, 2000). This idea was complemented by the notion of 'predetermined damage', which appeared in documentation instead of the notion of 'unacceptable damage'. Predetermined damage was defined as being 'damage which is subjectively unacceptable to the enemy because it outweighs

any advantages which the aggressor expects to gain from the application of military force' (Военная доктрина, 2000). After the precedent which was set in 1999 in Yugoslavia, regional war has become one of Russia's biggest fears. Placed within the regional war context, the notion of 'predetermined damage' suggests that the aggressor, having suffered certain levels of damage from nuclear weapons or anticipating such damage, would take a step back as a result of the cost-benefit analysis.

Since 2000, nuclear escalation has officially been proclaimed as a means of terminating conflicts 'on terms which are favourable to Russia' (Военная доктрина, 2014). Although the military doctrines of 2010 and 2014 came back to nuclear use as a last resort, when the existence of the state is in jeopardy certain Russian strategies kept ruining this claim.

According to the US 'Nuclear Posture Review 2018', Russian nuclear strategy calls for the early use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict with NATO in order to coerce its major adversary to take a step back from a regional conflict between Russia and its neighbours. In particular, the NPR stipulates: 'it [Moscow] mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or the actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to 'de-escalate' a conflict on terms which are favourable to Russia' ('Nuclear Posture', 2018). Therefore proclaiming the early use of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts, Moscow established a red line for the West. Having signalled that any military interference into its vital sphere of interest will be punished by the use of nuclear weapons Moscow, however, left open a certain window of ambiguity. In particular, it is not clear which interests besides internal issues Russia actually considers to be vital.

2. The Baltic States and the escalation threat

Since 2015, Russia has retained certain degrees of opacity concerning its perception of the geopolitical situation in the Baltic States. The question of whether Moscow regards them as new NATO members or as former territories of the Soviet Union (and, therefore, part of Russian vital interests) remains open.

Referring to the recent decision in the case of Crimea (2015), Russian mass media reported that the prosecutor general's office had begun an investigation into the legitimacy of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia gaining independence in 1991 (Sinovets & Maksymenko, 2019, p. 76). These actions were accompanied by a massive concentration of Russian troops along the country's western borders, as well as provocative flights by Russian bombers

close to NATO's territory. In general, a combination of the Russian Baltic Sea fleet and land-based forces deployed within the Kaliningrad exclave ensures Russia's ability to deter NATO in this region. The Baltic fleet can probably be considered to be modestly equipped when it is compared not only to the Russian ocean fleets but also to the Black Sea fleet. In particular, the Baltic fleet possesses only one 'Kilo' class submarine, five 'Karacurt' and 'Buyan-M' corvettes which are equipped with dual-capable Kalibr missiles, four 'Stere-gushiy' class corvettes which host the regional air defence capability, and a 'Redut' missile system. Missile defence options are mainly provided by the 52nd Coastal Defence Missile Brigade, which operates with 'Bastion-P' and 'Bal-E' anti-ship missile systems which have a range of several hundred km (Roblin, 2021).

However, long-range missiles deployed within the Kaliningrad oblast (the 152nd Guard Missile Brigade) and the Iskander-M systems deployed in the Leningrad oblast (the 26th Missile Brigade) reinforce these relatively modest naval capabilities. The latter can operate not only with the old 'Tochka-U' missiles but also with the newest '9M729' missile system. Tochka-U is capable of carrying a nuclear payload and of threatening key German, Polish, and Lithuanian cities. The 9M729 system is the one which eventually led to the INF treaty collapse in 2019. There is no clear information regarding the number of deployed 9M729s in the region, but such deployment is possible despite President Putin's recent arms control proposition. He suggested substituting the normal non-deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe with a pledge of the non-deployment or even removal of 9M729s from the European part of Russia. However, such a step may not resolve the problem because the two missile brigades with their entire nuclear and missile infrastructure will remain in place, giving Moscow an opportunity for a quick reversal (Luzin, 2020). To a significant extent, such a reversal matters only in combination with Moscow's clear will or motivation to commit acts of aggression against the Baltic states.

Since 2014, NATO and the US have reinforced their joint military presence in the Baltic states and Poland by deploying NATO's 'Very High Readiness Joint Task Force' (VJTF), along with the improved 'NATO Rapid Response Force', and 'NATO's Readiness Initiative' (NRI) which calls for a '4 x 30' approach, or a total of thirty mechanised battalions, thirty combat ships, and thirty fighter squadrons which can be made ready in thirty days (McInnis & McPartland, 2021, p. 15). NATO established eight 'Force Integration Units' in the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. It also organised multinational enhanced-presence battle groups (EFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland on a rotational basis. NATO expanded the 'Air

Policing' mission to maintain constant fighter-aircraft patrols in the Baltic Sea region.

Moreover, Poland and Lithuania, both of which border Belarus and the Kaliningrad exclave, built up and modernised their military and defence capabilities. In particular, Poland purchased the 'High Mobility Artillery Rocket System' (HIMARS), a highly sophisticated long-range precision artillery system, which can target and counter Russian assets in Kaliningrad and elsewhere (Hodges, et al, 2020, p 36). Poland also hosts the 'Multinational Corps North-East' (MNC-NE) in Szczecin, which doubled its staff while converting itself into a high readiness force, and NATO's 'Multinational Division North-East' in Elbląg. Latvia, Estonia, and Denmark jointly inaugurated the 'Headquarters Multinational Division North' in Ādaži.

The US played an important role in enhancing the NATO deterrence in the Baltic Sea region. In 2014, Washington established the 'European Deterrence Initiative' (EDI). Since then, it has invested into the modernisation of EDI infrastructure and relevant personnel training, while also having ensured the continuous participation of American armoured battalions in the EFP battle group in Poland, and having joined European partners in contributing to the Baltic Air Policing Mission in Lithuania and Estonia. The United States has also concluded bilateral defence cooperation agreements (DCAs) with the three Baltic States, in 2017, and with Poland in 2020. These DCAs allow for an expansion of the rotating presence of US troops in the Baltic states (involving four battalions in Poland, one in Lithuania, and one in Latvia), and the ability to be able to conduct additional bilateral and multilateral exercises in the region. As a result, experts have concluded that the chances of Russia launching an attack into the region are smaller today than they were several years ago (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 38).

Meanwhile, NATO's efforts were concentrated on land-based deterrence capabilities while it remained 'sea blind,' which resulted in less credible levels of deterrence at sea (Gołkowska & Szymanski, 2015; Blank, 2019). For now, the Baltic States possess rather modest naval capabilities. The lack of experience in this area, as well as shared, integrated, and constant maritime awareness and training, have led to gaps in the region's levels of capability and strategy (only the annual BALTOPS maritime exercises currently exist in terms of maritime capability levels), while also leaving critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea vulnerable to Russian hybrid activities (Thomas, 2020).

Since 2015, all Russian military manoeuvres which have taken place in proximity to the borders of the three Baltic States have been aimed at showing how easily Moscow could repeat the Ukrainian scenario in this region. The main Russian message for NATO has consisted of demonstrating Moscow's

capabilities. On the one hand, the geostrategic position of the Kaliningrad exclave, which has been immensely militarised during the past decade, has increased NATO's vulnerability to Russia. On the other hand, the Suwalki corridor between the exclave and Belarus, the latter of which itself has increasingly been integrated into the Russian military structure, has made the region quite disadvantageous for the alliance from the standpoint of potential Russian escalation. Besides this, Moscow has been using the rhetoric of supporting the Russian-language population in the Baltic area to demonstrate the potential for a hybrid occupation there. This new angle has thrown NATO leaders into something of a dilemma: if such an occupation were to happen, should they start a military conflict with nuclear Russia or surrender their Baltic allies and thereby demonstrate NATO's lack of credibility when it comes to its defence commitments? In fact, this could bury the alliance as a viable organisation (Андрей Пионтковский, 2014). The aforementioned Russian strategy revealed so many of NATO's weaknesses in the Baltic region that even a nuclear exchange there would not save the alliance's positions if conflict with Russia were to take place.

Despite certain changes in US and NATO strategy, followed by relevant preparations in Europe, most researchers conclude that the Baltic flank is not sufficiently protected. Veebel and Sliwa (2019) have pointed out that, in terms of conventional superiority, the imbalance between Russian and Baltic forces is at a ratio of 1:8 in favour of Moscow. NATO would need eighteen additional brigades to equalise regional conventional capabilities (p. 116). A RAND analysis which is based on war games has concluded that NATO would have a very slim chance of being able to achieve any kind of victory under such circumstances. In particular, Moscow's conventional preponderance and its air defence have made Russia's escalation dominance undeniable, while the alliance does not have enough assets or military infrastructure to be able to fight a conventional conflict here. Moreover, unlike NATO, Russia is aware of its opponent's most vulnerable objects in the region. At the moment, the alliance is not targeting enough assets which Russia considers vital and, therefore, is not in a strong position. Combined with the low credibility of NATO's nuclear threat, the situation looks disastrous for the alliance in the case of a conflict arising, and its capability seems limited when it comes to being able to prevent Russia from escalating a situation into a conflict (Davis et al., 2019). This understanding is permanently being exploited by Russia.

Still, there is some good news available. In particular, Moscow never went any further than some intimidating manoeuvring along the borders of the Baltic states and has shown little interest in any open military confrontation. The question revolves around what Russia is really trying to achieve.

A closer look at Russia's declaratory policy shows that Moscow could use low-yield nuclear weapons in the Baltic. However, it has never clearly signalled its readiness to do so. The only case of any declaratory nuclear signalling took place in 2015 when Moscow demonstrated the imminence of the Crimean 'fait accompli' to the West (Путин, 2015). Moscow has shown that it still considers Ukraine to be its sphere of vital interest. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 took place partially due to a combination of a fear of any NATO military presence along Russian borders and a long-lived dream by Russian conservatives to bring back 'the place of Russian glory'. As far as internal matters go, the Crimea issue was presented as a great political victory. The idea of retaining the peninsula became one of the key tasks for the Russian military. All in all, this stimulated coercive elements in Moscow's strategic thinking, which were aimed at demonstrating to Nato that it will face consequences if it chooses to interfere in Russia's vital interests.

The 'Nuclear Deterrence Fundamentals' in 2020 fortified this 'red line' by proclaiming that the main goal of the Russian nuclear deterrence is to protect territorial integrity. Crimea is now, de-facto, included in the Russian defence perimeter as a fait accompli (Основы государственной политики, 2020).

In this situation, Russia's permanent demonstration of its ability to damage NATO's vital interests in the Baltic can be regarded as a coercive message that the alliance should stay away from Russian vital interests. These actions aim at showing how easily Moscow could repeat the Ukrainian scenario in the Baltics.

However, such brinkmanship and the bleak possibility of starting a nuclear conflict with NATO lacks credibility when it comes to threats other than those which involve the protection of Russian territorial integrity or vital interests. Besides this, heavy reliance on coercive tools serves mainly as indirect proof of the overall Russian weakness vis-à-vis NATO. Therefore Russia's subsequent step was building up its deterrence in the Black Sea region.

3. Escalation and the Black Sea region

Today the Black Sea region has vital importance for Russia. On the one hand, similar to the position in which the Baltic states find themselves, it borders NATO. Russia is increasing its military presence in both regions. On the other hand, unlike the Baltics where Russia keeps stable escalation dominance, the Black Sea presents a more complicated setting. In particular, two factors come into play to make Russia more vulnerable in the region.

The first factor is Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. NATO does not recognise this as Russian territory. At the same time, as mentioned above, Crimea has already been included in the Russian nuclear deterrence perimeter. It is becoming a hub for Russian troops and a location for a huge degree of military infrastructure deployment.

The 'Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030' document declares: 'Any demonstration of readiness and determination to employ non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities is an effective deterrent during the escalation of a military conflict' ('The Fundamentals', 2017). As far as Russian Baltic fleet effectiveness is largely supported by the immense ground force presence in the Kaliningrad exclave, the authors suggest that its role in 'de-escalatory nuclear operations' will be more limited. In contrast, the current structure and growth of the Black Sea fleet ensures its sufficiency for de-escalatory missions in the region.

For instance, it combines limited but effective offensive potential with powerful defensive capabilities. As of today, all Russian frigates and corvettes, as well as 636.3 submarines, carry 'Kalibr-NK' sea-launched land-attack, anti-ship, and antisubmarine cruise missiles. 'Kalibr-NK' as deployed on the Black Sea has a range of 2600km. It can be used in conventional as well as nuclear operations, and is capable of targeting south-eastern European states, along with those in Central Europe and even in south-western Europe (Van Dijk, 2020).

The defensive potential of the Russian Black Sea Fleet consists of four 'S-400' missile system battalions, and three 'Bal' and K-300 P 'Bastion-P' high-precision coastal missile defence system divisions, and also includes the 'Oniks-800' anti-ship supersonic cruise missiles which have a range of 400km, as well as 'S-300' and 'Pantsir-S1' point defence systems. Such a combination of arms creates an A2/AD zone which covers almost all of the Black Sea and provides Russia with the feeling of security it requires (Gorenburg, 2018). According to Andrei Kartapolov, deputy defence minister for the Russian federation, this 'leaves no chance that any potential adversary will attempt to violate the territorial integrity of our country' (Гаврилов, 2021). In other words, this group of troops provides Russia with the capacity to achieve 'sea denial' and 'sea control,' which transforms the Black Sea into a 'Russian lake'.

Although the Russian Black Sea Fleet does not have enough warships to be able to undertake strategic missions, the existing numbers and the appropriate combination of arms provide sub-strategic operation capabilities, including those which could be used for de-escalatory missions. Moreover, the Kremlin is already implementing an ambitious plan for increasing the

number of warships in order to enhance its southern flank against NATO, which confirms Russia's determination in this region.

The development of the Black Sea fleet in the past seven years makes it one of the most dynamic of all Russian fleets, including the ocean-based ones. The Black Sea Fleet acquired three guided-missile class frigates (Project 11356): 'Admiral Grigorovich', 'Admiral Essen', and 'Admiral Makarov'; and has also received four Project 21631 corvettes since 2014. The latest one, the 'Gayvoron' corvette, joined the fleet in spring 2021, while nine further similar vessels are planned by 2030. The fleet will also add two Project 20380 patrol boats, two Project 20386 corvettes, and two more frigates of the 'Admiral Gorskov' 22350-type by 2031 (Болтенков & Крецул, 2020). One of the brightest signs of Black Sea fleet relevance was the fact that, in 2016, it received a squadron of six 'Varshavyanka' Class 636.3 submarines: all equipped with torpedoes, as well as cruise and anti-ship missiles. Moreover, Russian military exercises in April 2021 involved strategic 'Tu-22M3 Backfire' bombers being deployed in Crimea along with the most modern weapons, such as the hypersonic air-launched 'Kinzhal' cruise missile (LaGrone, 2019). Captain Andrey Nenashev, head of the 'All-Russian Navy Support Movement', commented: 'Considering the current situation, the Black Sea Fleet is the most modernised of all Russian fleets as it has received an entire squadron of submarines. This is something we have never had before with any other fleet. Usually, we introduce one or two new ships each year' (Черноморский флот, 2020). Moreover, the personnel of the Black Sea fleet are amongst the most well-trained, with its battleships having carried out a supportive function in the Russian military operation in Syria, from Himym airbase (Кулешов, 2018).

The second factor is the deployment of the Aegis 'Ashore Missile Defence' (MD) in Romania in 2016. A similar MD site in Poland is not yet operational, with the result that it has not been included in this assessment.

The first Aegis Ashore which was deployed in 2016 at the Deveselu base in Romania was part of NATO's transition from assurance to deterrence. Even though the officially-declared mission for the Deveselu-deployed Aegis Ashore was to counter Iranian missiles, President Putin's reaction was rather predictable. He said that the MD site posed a threat to Russia's security so, therefore, Russia 'will be forced to think about neutralising' it (Putin, 2016).

On the one hand, this statement, as well as many similar claims by Russian officials, simply justifies the already growing Russian military presence in the Black Sea region. On the other hand, Putin's words are based on certain practical concerns. First of all, Russia expected that the SM-3IB missiles at the Romanian MD site would be replaced with the 'SM-3 Block II A' missiles, which have a proven capability to intercept ICBMs (US Conducts,

2020). Secondly, Russia's concerns regarding Aegis Ashore in Europe are related to its possible use not only for defensive purposes but also for offensive purposes. In particular, Moscow has claimed that the 'SM-3 Mk-41' vertical launch system (VLS) can be equipped with Tomahawk sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM). Following the collapse of the INF Treaty, the US successfully test-launched a Tomahawk from a Mk-41 VLS. President Putin expressed concerns that Tomahawk missiles 'can be launched from those systems which have already been deployed in Romania and which will soon be deployed in Poland' (Gotev, 2019).

All of Russia's attempts to guarantee deterrence stability with NATO through formal missile defence limitations have failed because the US rejected the requirement to place the alliance' interests under any dependence with third power interests. Most European allies, especially Central European states, share this perception.

Bearing this in mind, the June 2020 'Basic Principles of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy' called the deployment of the European missile defence the 'main military risk which may evolve into many military threats (threats of aggression)' ('Basic Principles'). Therefore, the document defined such a deployment as a potential challenge towards the Russian nuclear deterrence. Romania is eager to increase NATO's presence in the Black Sea region and was, therefore, happy to host the first alliance' Aegis Ashore. This makes Romania as well as Poland (which is going to start operating its MD site in 2022) potential targets for Russian nuclear strikes. Moreover, Bucharest has doubled its efforts to reinforce the eastern flank and become NATO's centre of gravity at a time at which Turkey has not been supportive of the idea to enhance the alliance naval presence in the Black Sea and has instead continued to maintain the Russian-Turkish security condominium.

NATO members only reached a consensus between all of their individual concerns and priorities at the Warsaw Summit 2016. The allies agreed to strengthen NATO land, air, and naval defence components by creating a 'Tailored Forward Presence' (TFP) in the Black Sea region. This TFP aims to equilibrate conventional and non-conventional forces with Russia (Shelest, 2020, p. 99), to provide credible security guarantees for the Black Sea state members of NATO, and to assist the alliance partners in the region. Moreover, NATO members approved the use of the 'Very High Readiness Joint Task Force', the 'NATO Response Force' (NRF), and NATO's heavier follow-on forces, as well as additional high readiness forces which belong to the allies in order to fortify their forward presence forces.

The Montreux Convention, which restricts the number, mode, and class of warships from non-littoral states in the Black Sea (submarines and

aircraft carriers are completely forbidden), significantly limits NATO's capacity to respond to Russia's escalation posture. At the same time, experts from the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) stress that neither NATO nor its single member states have come close to maximising the capabilities which are in fact allowed under the convention (Hodges et al, 2020, p. 32). The main obstacles when it comes to increasing the US and NATO naval presence in the Black Sea are the limited availability of warships and conflicting priorities for their deployment (Hodges et al, 2020, p. 43).

According to Romania's 'National Defence Strategy 2020-2024', the Black Sea region is an area of paramount strategic interest for the country (National Defence, 2020). Romania views Russia's detention of Ukrainian ships in the Sea of Azov in 2018, along with the Kerch Strait navigation blockade and a build-up of troops around Ukrainian borders in 2021, as a threat which could lead to regional conflict. Therefore Romania welcomes all efforts and undertakings which serve to strengthen a unitary and balanced allied presence on the eastern flank. It also supports NATO's defence and deterrence posture in the Black Sea area (including by means of boosting partnerships with other interested states), as well as an improved situation awareness and early warning capacity. As a result, Romania hosts three headquarters of the 'Multinational Division South-East', in Bucharest and Craiova, the 'Multinational Corps South-East' in Sibiu, and an 'Air Policing' mission jointly with Bulgaria. Multinational Corps South-East comprises a brigade of up to 4,000 Romanian soldiers as well as troops who originate from eight other allied states, complemented by nine hundred US troops who have been separately deployed (Selim, 2019, p. 18). Bucharest is upgrading its Campia Turzii base to reinforce Romania's capacity to support NATO, along with the US air force's combat operations and surveillance missions. Both the existing Mihail Kogălniceanu air base near Constanța and Campia Turzii will serve as the main NATO and US hubs in the Black Sea region. The Campia Turzii base will also host the twelve recently-obtained F-16 aircraft. Romania is also increasing its capability by purchasing the Patriot surface-to-air missile system and the 'High Mobility Artillery Rocket System' (HIMARS) (Hodges et al, 2020, p. 43). Romania's modernisation programme includes the acquisition of attack helicopters, four new surface combatants, and three submarines for operations in the Black Sea (Hodges et al, 2020, p. 44).

NATO is boosting its capabilities to deter Russia's escalation strategy and to respond in case there is such a need. The process includes increasing the number and scope of multinational ground and maritime exercises, enhancing joint training, and improving the coordination and interoperability of allied troops and those of their partner states. The alliance also offers the

means of strengthening naval and other defence capabilities for Georgia and Ukraine.

To some extent, NATO's potential in the Black Sea can be estimated through the number of exercises it has carried out in the region. Following Crimea's annexation and growing security concerns by certain member states, during the 2014 summit in Wales, NATO defence ministers decided to increase the number of joint exercises and focus on collective defence scenarios.

Since 2014, the number of participants in the annual 'Sea Breeze' drills in the Black Sea region has increased from an initial five states (Georgia, Romania, the US, Turkey, and Ukraine) to thirty states in 2021. The drills involved 2,000 ground units, thirty naval vessels, and forty aircraft. The duration of the exercises has also become increasingly prolonged. Apart from Sea Breeze, which originally was a US-Ukraine exercise, NATO also conducts joint training and maritime situational awareness exercises (such as those which are named 'Breeze' and 'Sea Shield', the land-based 'Saber Guardian' exercise [sic], 'Noble Jump', 'Steadfast Defender', and the air defence exercise (ADEX)), all of which is supported by 'Standing Nato Maritime Group 2' (SNMG2) each year in the Black Sea.

Nevertheless, experts consider NATO's TFP-based deterrence strategy to be less than optimal while also labelling it as incoherent since its ad hoc response has led to increasingly provocative Russian behaviour. Firstly, Moscow unilaterally closed down certain parts of the Black Sea for foreign vessels between April and November 2021. This blocked NATO's rotational fleet and threatened the maritime security of its littoral states. Secondly, Russia began to escalate the situation around the alliance exercises in the Black Sea after successfully testing its 'P-8' maritime patrol aircraft, 'Poseidon', in December 2020. Working in tandem with submarines and navy destroyers, and operating on ten-hour missions at distances of up to 1,200 km, it can help to hunt down Russian nuclear ballistic missile submarines (Osborn, 2020).

In April 2021, Russia deployed more than 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian border and denied foreign access to certain parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Later, in June 2021, Russian coastguard ships and aircraft forced the British destroyer, HMS Defender,¹ and the Dutch vessel, HMNLS Evertsen,² to alter their courses. Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu stated that the Russian troops which were deployed at the Ukrainian border as well as the planned cordoned-off areas of the Black Sea, 'have demonstrated their ability to provide a credible line of defence for the country' 'in response to

¹ Her Majesty's Ship (HMS).

² His Netherlands Majesty's Ship (HNLMS).

“threatening” actions by NATO’ (‘Russia to Pull’, 2021). Commenting on the ‘mock attacks’ by Russian fighter jets on NATO member warships, President Putin accused the UK and US of mounting a coordinated and provocative operation to assess Russia’s response (HMS Defender, 2021). Moreover, Russian officials and experts highlighted their opinion that Nato Black Sea exercises ‘provoke rather than prevent conflict situations’ (В МИДе заявили, 2021) as far as they ‘supply Ukraine with modern weapons for the war in Donbas’. Therefore Russia ‘will closely monitor the preparation and conduct of the exercises and, if necessary, respond appropriately to the evolving situation in the interests of ensuring the military security of the Russian federation’ (АКИМОВ, 2021).

It can be seen that Russia claims to handle security in the region on a unilateral basis by conducting ‘gunnery exercises’, vetoing defence modernisation plans by its neighbours, and maintaining a tense climate of insecurity. The asymmetry of the NATO naval presence and sufficient Russian deterrence capabilities in the Black Sea region can embolden Moscow’s behaviour and invite it to undertake even more assertive actions, which makes the prospect of open conflict even more plausible (Vorotnyuk, 2020, p. 19). Therefore the key dilemma in the Black Sea region is how to find a fine balance between deterrence and escalation, while correctly reflecting the complex ties between conflict levels (Melvin, 2018, p. 64).

In summing up the Black Sea dimension of Russian strategy, the authors suggest that the existence of the two elements of vulnerability - refusal to recognise the annexed Crimea as being an integral part of Russia, and the placement of the Aegis Ashore missile defence in Romania - makes Moscow feel more vulnerable in the Black Sea region than in the Baltic. The dynamic modernisation of the Russian Black Sea fleet which was aimed at turning the Black Sea into A2/AD serves to shine a spotlight on this concern. The sustainable growth of the naval capabilities of NATO states within the region makes an escalation posture the inherent tool of Moscow’s strategy in any dialogue with NATO.

Conclusions

During recent years the escalation phenomenon in terms of Russian actions has evolved from an element of deterrence strategy into a form of military leverage which Moscow is using increasingly often. Two flanks have been involved in Russian escalation game manoeuvres since 2014 within the European theatre.

The first flank is the Baltic region, in which Russia has concentrated a high number of forces and where it regularly conducts military manoeuvres to show its capability and escalation dominance. On the other hand, Russia's stakes are much higher on the Black Sea flank due to its vital national interests there. In particular, Russia's territorial integrity (Russia has, since 2014, included the annexed Crimea within this notion) has progressively become the focus of nuclear deterrence. Russian vital interests have advanced from the sphere of pure deterrence (permitting a nuclear response when the existence of the state is in jeopardy) to a more graded approach in which deterrence based on *fait accompli* is used more offensively.

Considering the lack of Russia's vital interests and the consistently coercive but not offensive manoeuvres in the region, the authors suggest that the Baltic serves as the main coercive element in the Russian escalation strategy. The main aim of this strategy is to provide additional leverage in deterring NATO from potentially challenging Russia's territorial acquisitions around the Black Sea.

Retaining Crimea became a national priority for Moscow. The 2020 'Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence' document officially declared that nuclear deterrence focuses on maintaining Russia's territorial integrity. This immediately points to Crimea, which could become a trigger for a de-escalatory use of nuclear weapons in a case in which Russian conventional deterrence is not effective enough to keep the West away.

The annexation of Crimea made the Black Sea fleet much more strategically important for Russia in many ways. Moscow regards the fact both that Ukraine participates in most NATO military exercises within the region and the Aegis Ashore missile defence system has been deployed in Romania as potential threats to its national security, especially in light of the US decision to produce intermediate-range missiles and to deploy them in Europe after the collapse of the INF Treaty.

The current composition of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the rapid growth of military infrastructure in Crimea both correspond to Moscow's needs. For example, prior to Crimea's annexation Russians could target Aegis Ashore by only a limited range of means. However, taking over this important Ukrainian territory made such targeting much easier and also made it possible to be able to use a wider range of ammunition for this very purpose. Moreover, since the Black Sea is the gateway to the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea fleet is crucial for military operations in Syria, the region plays a key role in Russia regaining not only domestic power but also international influence.

Such intensive military preparations which have been aimed at decreasing Russia's vulnerability in the Black Sea have led to significant levels of success. Despite increased NATO attention and its growing military presence in recent years, the alliance still does not have enough resolve or a consistent-enough strategy to counter Russian capabilities on the Black Sea flank.

As a result the described escalation strategy delivers Moscow certain advantages. On the one hand, it provides it with opportunities for the enforcement of a coercive strategy in the Baltic region. The strategy is still based on escalation dominance, which gives Moscow additional deterrence leverage. On the other hand, the capabilities of the modern Russian Black Sea Fleet, which rely upon an optimal combination of both conventional and low-yield nuclear capabilities, have created the A2/AD area in the region and this serves to deny NATO's freedom to manoeuvre.

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