



## Murky Tides: Improving NATO's Defensive Posture in the Black Sea Basin

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**Abstract:** Since Russia annexed Crimea and its war of aggression against Ukraine, the security environment of the Black Sea has undergone significant changes. The increased Russian military presence in the Black Sea basin has posed a challenge to NATO's strategic interests, including energy security and the preservation of free navigation. This policy-focused article examines ways to enhance trilateral cooperation in the Black Sea region among the three NATO littoral states—Romania, Türkiye, and Bulgaria—to counter Russian influence. This influence has been a relatively overlooked aspect of NATO's strategic concerns, which has yet to produce a comprehensive strategy for the region. Greater trilateral cooperation among NATO members with coastal access to the Black Sea is envisioned as a step towards the development of a NATO Black Sea strategy and the potential creation of a joint fleet. The three countries have already launched successful initiatives, such as the establishment of MCM Black Sea in January 2024, which serves as a platform for collaborative maritime demining in response to the Russian-Ukrainian war. This article aims to untangle the complexities of expanding NATO's presence in the Black Sea basin and offers recommendations for both domestic and international policies to advance NATO's strategic objectives.

**Keywords:** NATO, deterrence, Black Sea basin, maritime presence, trilateral relations, Romania, Türkiye, Bulgaria.

### Introduction

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Russian-Ukrainian war have influenced NATO's approach to deterrence, shifting the Alliance's focus

towards reinforcing its Eastern flank. In 2016, this focus led to the development of the Tailored Forward Presence Plan. A key outcome of this enhanced deterrence posture since February 2022 was the deployment of multinational battalion groups in Bulgaria and Romania. Based on a proposal from Romania, NATO established the Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE) in Bucharest to better coordinate Allied presence in the region.<sup>1</sup> While Bulgaria's multinational battlegroup has reached full operational capability, it remains primarily focused on ground troops rather than promoting a stronger NATO naval presence.<sup>2</sup> These developments align with the outcomes of the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, which emphasized intensifying NATO's strategic focus on the Black Sea Basin (BSB). This focus could mark the initial steps toward the development of an Alliance-wide Black Sea strategy document to address the basin's persistent status as a strategic fault line.<sup>3</sup> This article aims to propose solutions for enhancing the defensive posture of NATO allies within the BSB, distinct from the broader Black Sea region, which includes other states such as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine that align strategically with NATO. Despite this narrower scope, the recommendations in this article will seek to provide benefits that enhance the security of all NATO-aligned nations in the wider Black Sea region.

In contrast, the Russian Black Sea fleet has benefited from accelerated modernization under its GPV 2027 State Armament Programme,<sup>4</sup> positioning it as a regional hegemon. Smaller states with coastal access to the Black Sea Basin lack the resources to modernize at a comparable rate without external support. Nevertheless, Ukrainian Strategic Communications have reported significant successes in naval warfare, including the sinking of the Moskva flagship in April 2022, inflicting substantial damage on the Sevastopol headquarters in September 2023, destroying a Russian submarine, and effectively disabling approximately one-third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

Concerns remain regarding NATO's commitment to maintaining freedom of navigation in the Black Sea during and after the conflict, as this is vital for sus-

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Mark Lancaster, "2023 – Report – Troubled Waters – How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security, *NATO Parliamentary Assembly*, October 7, 2023, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2023-black-sea-security-report-lancaster-020-dscfc>, 5.

<sup>2</sup> NATO, "NATO's Multinational Battlegroup in Bulgaria Reaches Full Capability," *NATO Newsroom*, December 21, 2022, [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_210099.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_210099.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Lord Lancaster, "2023 – Report – Troubled Waters," 13.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Connolly and Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's New State Armament Programme Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027," Research Paper (Chatham House: Russia and Eurasia Programme, May 2018), [www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-05-10-russia-state-armament-programme-connolly-boulegue-final.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-05-10-russia-state-armament-programme-connolly-boulegue-final.pdf), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Isabel van Brugen, "Russian Black Sea Fleet Lost Third of Its Firepower Since War Began: Kyiv," *Newsweek*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-black-sea-fleet-losses-ukraine-war-crimea-1867614>.

taining regional trade.<sup>6</sup> An indication of Russia's willingness to threaten free navigation in the Black Sea and adjacent waters was its missile strikes in the Lower Danube, which led to its expulsion from the Danube Commission—an intergovernmental organization established by the 1948 Belgrade Agreement<sup>7</sup> that ensured the free movement of commercial vessels on the river.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, there are apprehensions that Russia's naval dominance in the sea could impede Romanian and Turkish efforts to extract natural gas from the Black Sea, a crucial element of European energy security with significant strategic importance.<sup>9</sup>

As Russian aggression continues to erode platforms for international cooperation in the basin, such as BLACKSEAFOR,<sup>10</sup> Allied nations have shifted towards a more defensive posture and demonstrated increased strategic intent to strengthen their naval presence.

### **Expanding NATO Presence and the Montreux Convention of 1936**

Türkiye's geographical control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which provide access to and from the Black Sea, grants it significant strategic importance within the Black Sea Basin. This is reflected in the Montreux Convention, a legal agreement signed in 1936 that, alongside the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, regulates naval access to the Black Sea by restricting naval access for the warships of non-littoral nations. This is achieved by imposing limits on the individual and aggregate tonnage of foreign ships permitted in the Black Sea.<sup>11</sup> This implies that one way to establish a consistent NATO deterrent presence in the basin is by strengthening the navies of Allied littoral states. Notably, the United States is not a signatory of the Montreux Conven-

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<sup>6</sup> NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué, Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius, July 11, 2023," Paragraph 14, *Official NATO Website*, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Danube Commission, "Convention Regarding the Regime of Navigation on the Danube: Signed at Belgrade, on 18 August 1948," 1948, <https://www.danubecommission.org/uploads/doc/convention-en.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Interfax Editorial Board, "Kuleba: Danube Commission Decides to Terminate Russia's Membership, *Interfax Ukraine*, December 15, 2023, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/954454.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Lord Lancaster, "2023 – Report – Troubled Waters," 14.

<sup>10</sup> Lubomir Ivanov, "A Bulgarian Perspective on the Black Sea Region," *NATO Defense College Foundation*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.natofoundation.org/food-for-thought-2021/a-bulgarian-perspective-on-the-black-sea-region/>.

<sup>11</sup> Nick Childs, "The Black Sea in the Shadow of War," *Survival* 65, no. 3 (2023): 25-36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2218694>, 2.

tion,<sup>12</sup> which has enabled it to respond to the 2014 annexation of Crimea by increasing its warship presence in the Black Sea.<sup>13</sup>

Alternatively, the Alliance could implement a resource-efficient rotation of warships in and out of the Black Sea to comply with the Montreux Convention's 21-day limit on the presence of foreign warships.<sup>14</sup> However, neither the U.S. nor other non-littoral navies can maintain a continuous presence of warships for the duration of the conflict. The Montreux Convention grants Türkiye the authority to close its straits to incoming and outgoing warships during wartime, a right it exercised after the war began.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Russia had sent warships into the basin shortly before the war under the guise of conducting exercises in the Black Sea.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, some argue that Türkiye may have exceeded its rights under the Montreux Convention, as it can only restrict a military vessel if the country owning the vessel is a belligerent in the Russian-Ukrainian war.<sup>17</sup> This situation could be interpreted as a diplomatic maneuver by Türkiye to maintain its neutrality between NATO—which it has been a member of for over seventy years—and Russia. Despite ideological differences and often opposing interests, positive relations between Russia and Türkiye have persisted, reflecting Türkiye's discontent with the West and its perception of itself as an outsider in NATO policy formulation.<sup>18</sup>

This sense of being an outlier has become evident in other aspects of Turkish defense policy, such as military procurement. For example, Türkiye's purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia has prevented it from purchasing F-35 fighter jets from the United States due to Section 231 of the Countering Amer-

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<sup>12</sup> RADM Thomas A. Brooks, "Turkey, the Montreux Convention, and Russian Navy Transits of the Turkish Straits," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 148, no. 3 (March 2022): 1, 429, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/march/turkey-montreux-convention-and-russian-navy-transits-turkish>.

<sup>13</sup> Iulian Romanyshyn, "Ukraine, NATO and the Black Sea," *Policy Brief* no. 1, January 2023, NATO Defense College, <https://www.cassis.uni-bonn.de/de/publikationen/ukraine-nato-and-the-black-sea/ukraine-nato-and-the-black-sea>, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Craig Hooper, "In a Russia-Ukraine Peace, Montreux Convention Will Stress NATO Black Sea Peacekeepers," *Forbes*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/craig-hooper/2023/07/03/in-a-russia-ukraine-peace-montreux-convention-will-stress-nato-black-sea-peacekeepers/>.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, "Turkey, the Montreux Convention, and Russian Navy Transits of the Turkish Straits."

<sup>16</sup> "Ukraine Crisis: Russia Warships Heading to Black Sea for Drills," *Al Jazeera*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/8/six-russia-warships-en-route-to-black-sea-for>.

<sup>17</sup> Childs, "The Black Sea in the Shadow of War," 5.

<sup>18</sup> Galip Dalay, "Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh" (Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit), August 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021RP05>, 27.

ica's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>19</sup> However, the ongoing sale of forty F-16s represents diplomatic progress and could encourage further Turkish realignment within NATO.<sup>20</sup> The situation is evolving, as the previously undeployed S-400 systems might be used on the Iraqi border during Türkiye's planned summer offensive against the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK),<sup>21</sup> which would negatively impact the country's military-diplomatic standoff with Washington. Simultaneously, Türkiye has shown signs of greater strategic alignment with NATO by joining the joint suspension of participation in the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in response to Russia's withdrawal a year earlier.<sup>22</sup> This move could enable NATO to increase troop and asset deployment along the Eastern flank, suggesting that Türkiye might commit to an anti-Russian military position despite its tendency to balance relations with both sides. Additionally, local election victories by the center-left Republican People's Party<sup>23</sup> could shift the country away from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian policies and toward democratic governance, making continued cooperation with Russia increasingly difficult.<sup>24</sup>

## State of the Littoral Navies

Due to historical challenges to its national sovereignty posed by Russia, Romania has a vested interest in countering Russian influence in the Black Sea. The country has identified the basin as a strategic priority since the fall of its Communist regime in 1989.<sup>25</sup> Romania views the BSB as a gateway to global trade, given its

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<sup>19</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231," Press Statement, *U.S. Department of State*, December 14, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/>.

<sup>20</sup> Defense Mirror Bureau, "U.S. Expresses Willingness to Reincorporate Türkiye into F-35 Program Pending S-400 Resolution," *DefenseMirror.com*, February 1, 2024, [https://www.defensemirror.com/news/36000/U\\_S\\_Expresses\\_Willingness\\_to\\_Reincorporate\\_Turkiye\\_into\\_F\\_35\\_Program\\_Pending\\_S\\_400\\_Resolution](https://www.defensemirror.com/news/36000/U_S_Expresses_Willingness_to_Reincorporate_Turkiye_into_F_35_Program_Pending_S_400_Resolution).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Iddon, "Turkey May Soon Put Its Controversial Russian S-400 Air Defenses in Operation," *Business Insider: Military & Defense*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-may-soon-deploy-controversial-russian-s-400-air-defenses-2024-4>.

<sup>22</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey Joins NATO Allies in Suspending Europe Arms Treaty," *Bloomberg*, April 5, 2024, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-05/turkey-joins-nato-allies-in-suspending-europe-arms-treaty](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-05/turkey-joins-nato-allies-in-suspending-europe-arms-treaty).

<sup>23</sup> Natasha Turak, "Turkey's Opposition Stuns in Sweeping Local Elections Victory over Erdogan's Party," *CNBC*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.cnb.com/2024/04/01/turkey-opposition-stuns-in-local-election-victory-over-erdogan-party.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Pierini and Francesco Siccardi, "Why the West Should Watch Turkey's Local Elections," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, March 26, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/03/why-the-west-should-watch-turkeys-local-elections>.

<sup>25</sup> George Vişan, "Guardian of the Danube: Romania's Mixed Progress in Implementing a Black Sea Strategy," *The Jamestown Foundation*, December 20, 2021, <https://james>

connection to the Asian landmass to the east and the Turkish straits to the southwest, which provide access to international waters.<sup>26</sup>

To ensure its security and national sovereignty, Romania pursued NATO integration shortly after its democratization. Alongside its NATO accession, Romania prioritized defense cooperation with the United States, securing a rotational U.S. presence at the Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) airbase,<sup>27</sup> which the Department of Defense has utilized since 2014 as a transit center to support operations in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> Since March 2024, the expansion of the airbase to 2,800 hectares, with a capacity for 10,000 NATO troops, has been underway,<sup>29</sup> highlighting the Alliance's commitment to leveraging Romania's geopolitical importance for strengthening its Eastern Flank. Notably, the Aegis Ashore defense system has been operational within Romania since May 2016, providing a security guarantee for Europe through its capacity to defend against ballistic missiles should deterrence fail.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the U.S. has invested in transforming the Câmpia Turzii airbase into a regional defense hub.<sup>31</sup> These developments have enabled Romania to join the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO), marking a step forward in maritime security integration within the Alliance.<sup>32</sup> Romania has also enhanced its military interoperability through similar asset acquisitions<sup>33</sup> with Poland, one of the Alliance's fastest-developing armed forces

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town.org/program/romania-the-danube-and-the-black-sea-growing-security-challenges-and-underutilized-economic-potential/.

<sup>26</sup> Vișan, "Guardian of the Danube."

<sup>27</sup> Vișan, "Guardian of the Danube."

<sup>28</sup> Jack O'Connor and Craig A. Daniel, "Setting a Theater: Establishing Transit Center MK," *U.S. Army: Army Sustainment* 47, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 2015): 18-25, [www.army.mil/article/140098/setting\\_a\\_theater\\_establishing\\_transit\\_center\\_mk](http://www.army.mil/article/140098/setting_a_theater_establishing_transit_center_mk).

<sup>29</sup> Ana-Maria Stancu, "NATO Expands Its Romania Black Sea Air Base," *Euractiv*, March 20, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-policy/news/nato-expands-its-romania-black-sea-air-base/>.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. European Command Public Affairs, "Aegis Ashore Romania: Supporting European Missile Defense for 5 Years and Counting," *U.S. European Command*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.eucom.mil/pressrelease/41296/aegis-ashore-romania-supporting-european-missile-defense-for-5-years-and-counting>.

<sup>31</sup> N. Đorđević, "USAF to Turn Romania's Câmpia Turzii Air Base into Regional NATO Hub," *Emerging Europe*, May 20, 2021, accessed February 26, 2024, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/usaf-to-turn-romania-campia-turzii-air-base-into-regional-nato-hub/>.

<sup>32</sup> Irina Marica, "Romania Becomes 15th Member State of the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO," *Romania-Insider.com*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-joins-naval-striking-support-forces-nato-2024>.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, "Poland and Romania, Equipping Armed Forces with Similar Equipment, Ensure the Security of the Entire Eastern Flank of NATO," Press Release, *Gov.pl – Website of the Republic of Poland*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/poland-and-romania-equipping-armed-forces-with-similar-equipment-ensures-the-security-of-the-entire-eastern-flank-of-nato>.

in continental Europe<sup>34</sup> and envisioned as a primary protector against Russian aggression toward Europe.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these security initiatives and assurances, the Romanian Navy operates a modest fleet consisting of three frigates, seven corvettes, three patrol vessels, and five mine warfare ships.<sup>36</sup> Its only submarine has been non-operational and in reserve for the past 20 years, limiting Romania's deterrence and intelligence-gathering capabilities. However, Romania is currently negotiating the purchase of two Scorpene submarines from France, which would make it the third operator of such vessels in the Black Sea, alongside Türkiye and Russia.<sup>37</sup> A setback for the Romanian Navy has been the cancellation of its plans to acquire four new Gowind 2500 corvettes. The delay and subsequent cancellation occurred after the French Naval Group, which had won the contract, failed to sign the framework agreement necessary to initiate the building process. Additionally, the runner-up bid by the Dutch company Damen could not be finalized due to insufficient funding.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, the Bulgarian Navy operates a fleet of four frigates, three corvettes, two patrol vessels, and twelve mine warfare ships.<sup>39</sup> Although Bulgaria has more frigates than Romania, this does not necessarily translate into a more capable naval force, as much of Bulgaria's defense budget is directed toward modernizing outdated Soviet-era assets rather than making new, substantial acquisitions.<sup>40</sup> However, Bulgaria is reinforcing NATO's Black Sea presence by acquiring two modern MMPV 90 corvettes, built under the management of the

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig and Wojciech Kość, "Meet Europe's Coming Military Superpower: Poland," *Politico*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-military-superpower-poland-army/>.

<sup>35</sup> "Analysis: Poland Aims to Become First European Military Force and the Shield against Russia," *Global Defense News: Army Recognition Group*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/focus-analysis-conflicts/army/defence-security-industry-technology/analysis-poland-aims-to-become-first-european-military-forces-and-the-shield-against-russia>.

<sup>36</sup> "2024 Romania Military Strength," *Global Firepower*, last reviewed August 1, 2024, [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country\\_id=romania](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=romania).

<sup>37</sup> Xavier Vavasseur, "Romania's Submarine Ambitions: Which Impact for the Black Sea Region?" *Naval News*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/07/romania-s-submarine-ambitions-which-impact-for-the-black-sea-region/>.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Felstead, "Romania Cancels Corvette Deal with Naval Group," *European Security & Defence*, August 11, 2023, <https://euro-sd.com/2023/08/news/33413/romania-cancels-corvette-deal-with-naval-group/>.

<sup>39</sup> "2024 Bulgaria Military Strength," *Global Firepower*, last reviewed May 1, 2024, [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country\\_id=bulgaria](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=bulgaria).

<sup>40</sup> Ben Hodges, Steven Horrell, and Ivanna Kuz, "Russia's Militarization of the Black Sea: Implications for the United States and NATO," *CEPA*, September 22, 2022,

German NVL Group, with the first already launched.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, internal assessments indicate a satisfactory level of readiness and organization for conducting missions and exercises.<sup>42</sup>

While these factors suggest that Bulgaria's navy is functioning and gradually improving in line with the Bulgarian economy, concerns remain about the country's domestic commitment to NATO integration. President Radev, despite his military background and U.S. education, has resisted imposing sanctions on Russia and providing lethal aid to Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, Russian disinformation campaigns have fueled ideological divergence between NATO and Bulgaria, as a significant portion of the population supports Putin and views Russian aggression toward Ukraine as a response to NATO policy rather than Russian imperialism.<sup>44</sup> This sentiment has been evident in anti-NATO protests, where nationalist groups have called for the closure of Allied bases and the government's resignation.<sup>45</sup>

While this situation continues to evolve, Bulgaria's internal divisions over maintaining a strong anti-Russian stance<sup>46</sup> could hinder its deterrent posture toward the Kremlin. The parliamentary elections in June 2024, which saw a low turnout of only thirty percent, left the country without a governing coalition<sup>47</sup> but fortunately granted the new pro-Russian Greatness party only five percent of the vote.<sup>48</sup> The pro-Western reformist bloc, We Continue the Change, secured

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<https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/russias-militarization-of-the-black-sea-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/>.

<sup>41</sup> Dimitris Mitsopoulos, "Bulgaria's First Modern Corvette Launched by Local Shipyard," *Naval News*, August 9, 2023, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/08/bulgarias-first-modern-corvette-launched-by-local-shipyard/>.

<sup>42</sup> Yoana Vodenicharova, "Bulgarian Navy Focuses on Developing Capabilities in 2023 – Analysis," *BTA*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/609782-bulgarian-navy-focuses-on-developing-capabilities-in-2023-analysis>.

<sup>43</sup> Lyudmil Iliev, "The War Revealed the Rift between Radev and Petkov," *Sega*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.segabg.com/category-observer/voynata-izvadi-nayave-razloma-mezhdu-radev-i-petkov.-in-Bulgarian>

<sup>44</sup> Boryana Dzhambazova, "Welcome to Bulgaria, Where the Ukraine War Is NATO's Fault," *Politico*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-ukraine-russia-war-nato-fault/>.

<sup>45</sup> Stoyan Nenov, "Bulgarian Nationalists Protest against NATO Bases, Want Government Out," *Reuters*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgarian-nationalists-protest-against-nato-bases-want-government-out-2023-09-21/>.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Roth, "'I Fear Bulgaria Will Become a Soft State': Kiril Petkov on Threat of Russia," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/23/i-fear-bulgaria-will-become-a-soft-state-kiril-petkov-on-threat-of-russia>.

<sup>47</sup> "Bulgaria's Center-right Party Leads in Both National and European Elections," *AP World News*, June 10, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/bulgaria-election-eu-borissov-gerb-dcaacc3d693a7e7f1660152305281b8d>.

<sup>48</sup> RFE/RL's Bulgarian Service, "New Pro-Russian Extremist Party in Bulgaria Has Links to Ponzi Scheme and Theme Park," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-far-right-party-greatness/32986812.html>.



a substantial fifteen percent of votes.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, Bulgaria's President and Commander-in-Chief absence from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Spring Session in May 2024<sup>50</sup> highlights the ongoing internal divisions within Bulgaria's leadership regarding NATO commitments.

Despite these challenges, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has led Bulgaria to a "pragmatic reassessment of security priorities,"<sup>51</sup> and the parliament has overridden presidential vetoes to facilitate aid to Ukraine.<sup>52</sup> Progress in modernizing Bulgaria's forces<sup>53</sup> and increasing military production capacity should also be noted, with a 200 percent increase in military exports in 2022 compared to 2021.<sup>54</sup>

While Romania has actively pursued NATO integration to enhance the security of littoral nations,<sup>55</sup> Türkiye maintains a concrete naval superiority among the three countries discussed in this article.<sup>56</sup> The country operates sixteen frigates, nine corvettes, thirty-four patrol vessels, eleven mine warfare vessels, and, of particular importance, twelve submarines.<sup>57</sup> Although these assets are distributed across a wider operational theater, such as the Mediterranean Sea, Türkiye's ability to move ships through the straits according to its needs enables it to sustain and reinforce its Black Sea fleet. This extensive naval power gives Türkiye primary strategic significance in deterring Russian presence in the Black Sea. However, Türkiye's ongoing stance of cordial relations with Russia<sup>58</sup> may

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<sup>49</sup> "Bulgaria's Center-right Party Leads in Both National and European Elections."

<sup>50</sup> The Sofia Globe Staff, "Bulgaria's President and Commander-in-Chief Absent from NATO Meeting in Sofia," *The Sofia Globe*, May 7, 2024, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2024/05/27/bulgarias-president-and-commander-in-chief-absent-from-nato-meeting-in-sofia/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ilian Vassilev, "Bulgaria in NATO: A 20-Year Retrospective," *Alternativa: Analyses & Alternatives*, March 29, 2024, <https://altanalyses.org/en/2024/03/29/bulgaria-in-nato-a-20-year-retrospective/>.

<sup>52</sup> Yuri Kobzar, "100 Armored Personnel Carriers for Ukraine: The Bulgarian Parliament Overcame the Presidential Veto," *UkraineToday.org*, December 8, 2023, <https://ukrainetoday.org/100-armored-personnel-carriers-for-ukraine-the-bulgarian-parliament-overcame-the-presidential-veto/>.

<sup>53</sup> Georgi A. Angelov, "After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Bulgaria Is Rapidly Trying to Modernize Its Armed Forces," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, September 25, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-modernizing-armed-forces-russia-ukraine/32608683.html/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Bulgaria Increased Its Exports of Arms and Military Equipment by 200 Percent," *Defence Industry Europe*, July 18, 2023, <https://defence-industry.eu/bulgaria-increased-its-exports-of-ars-and-military-equipment-by-200-percent/>.

<sup>55</sup> Lord Lancaster, "2023 – Report – Troubled Waters," 5.

<sup>56</sup> Hodges, Horrell, and Kuz, "Russia's Militarization of the Black Sea."

<sup>57</sup> "2024 Türkiye Military Strength," *Global Firepower*, last reviewed July 3, 2024, [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country\\_id=turkey](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=turkey).

<sup>58</sup> Dalay, "Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh," 27.

impede the Alliance's ability to effectively utilize this naval force to secure control of the Black Sea. Monitoring Türkiye's internal developments for signs of increased democratization could indicate a strengthened commitment to NATO, potentially enhancing its role in regional security.<sup>59</sup>

### Forming a Black Sea Flotilla

In 2016, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis initiated discussions on establishing a joint Black Sea fleet as a potential solution to NATO's reliance on the littoral states' naval power for deterrence against Russia, particularly given the constraints of the Montreux Convention.<sup>60</sup> This initiative gained momentum with support from Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev and Defense Minister Nikolai Nenchev, both inclined to strengthen NATO's presence in the Black Sea. However, Bulgaria's Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov, declined the proposal,<sup>61</sup> citing Bulgaria's limited military capacity and describing the initiative as escalatory. Borissov further suggested that the flotilla would effectively be led by Türkiye and, by extension, by President Erdogan, whom he deemed untrustworthy.<sup>62</sup> This anti-Erdogan stance from Borissov is surprising given their apparent connection:<sup>63</sup> Borissov had engaged frequently with Erdogan during his tenure, earning the Turkish leader's regard as a "best friend"<sup>64</sup> and supporting Erdogan on multiple political and ideological fronts, including fostering bilateral relations and expressing solidarity during Türkiye's coup attempt in July 2016.<sup>65</sup>

Since Bulgaria declined Romania's proposal to form a joint flotilla and the presence of sympathies to Russia in both Bulgaria and Türkiye, the formation of a trilateral Black Sea fleet seems unlikely. The 2016 refusal marked a diplomatic setback among the littoral states that, if avoided, could have strengthened NATO's presence and provided an early opportunity for the littoral states to better coordinate their defense acquisitions prior to Russia's 2022 invasion.

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<sup>59</sup> Pierini and Siccardi, "Why the West Should Watch Turkey's Local Elections."

<sup>60</sup> Marian Chiriac and Mariya Cheresheva, "Black Sea Flotilla Fiasco Worsens Region's Tensions," *Balkan Insight*, June 28, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/28/black-sea-flotilla-fiasco-worsens-region-s-tensions-06-27-2016/>.

<sup>61</sup> Chiriac and Cheresheva, "Black Sea Flotilla Fiasco Worsens Region's Tensions."

<sup>62</sup> Chiriac and Cheresheva, "Black Sea Flotilla Fiasco Worsens Region's Tensions."

<sup>63</sup> Emilia Zankina, "A Delicate Balancing Act: Turkish-Bulgarian Relations within the Context of Foreign and Domestic Politics," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 22, no. 1, special issue on "Turkey and the Balkans: Between Europeanization and De-Europeanization" (2022): 65-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2021.2024990>, 71-72.

<sup>64</sup> Krassen Nikolov, "Former Bulgarian PM Borissov Meets Turkey's Erdogan Ahead of Elections," *Euractiv*, July 5, 2021, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/former-bulgarian-pm-borissov-meets-turkeys-erdogan-ahead-of-elections/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/former-bulgarian-pm-borissov-meets-turkeys-erdogan-ahead-of-elections/).

<sup>65</sup> "Bulgaria's PM Borissov in Ankara: Turkey Is Our Partner on NATO's Southern Flank," *Novinite.com*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/180743/>.

## Recommendations

In light of the political and military complexities discussed in this article, the author recommends the following policy avenues to improve NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea for both littoral states and other Allies:

The three Black Sea littoral NATO nations should pursue smaller cooperative trilateral initiatives as a means of generating political will to improve NATO's deterrent capability in the basin. While the creation of a Black Sea flotilla appears unlikely, other initiatives have seen success. One notable example is the MCM Black Sea demining operation, where countermining ships from the three nations work to maintain secure commercial navigation following the increase of drifting sea mines due to the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>66</sup> The operation was initiated by Türkiye, implying a potential improvement in Bulgaria's willingness to follow Turkish leadership in the execution of security policy in the basin. Similar initiatives could foster further trilateral cooperation, such as forming a regional intra-alliance commission to improve naval patrol coordination, streamline military procurement, and establish an alliance-wide Black Sea strategy. However, Türkiye's sympathetic stance towards Russia may obstruct this pathway.

NATO should take further measures to compensate for gaps in Romania and Bulgaria's naval assets. This can be done by facilitating acquisitions through the provision of economic aid to support the nations' limited financial capacity to strengthen or transform their fleets. Romania's delay and ultimate failure to secure Gowind 2500 corvettes represent a setback in improving the Alliance's immediate deterrent capability in the Black Sea.<sup>67</sup> A similar result for the attempted acquisition of Scorpene submarines would further hinder efforts to strengthen the navies of the littoral states.<sup>68</sup> NATO should take note of the operational limitations imposed by the Montreux Convention and Türkiye's willingness to close its straits during regional turmoil. This increases the strategic importance of reinforcing the Alliance's intra-basin presence, especially for weaker members who are more willing to integrate into NATO's defense policy.

The Bulgarian and Romanian navies can adopt the Ukrainian model of naval warfare to guide their acquisition programs and order of battle. The use of naval drone strikes has allowed Ukraine to achieve unprecedented asymmetric success in its naval defense, following the Mosquito Fleet doctrine.<sup>69</sup> Implementing elements of this doctrine in the acquisitions and operations of smaller navies could

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<sup>66</sup> Antonia Kotseva, "Black Sea Mine Clearance Initiative Calls on Other Countries to Join," *Euractiv*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/black-sea-mine-clearance-initiative-calls-on-other-countries-to-join/>.

<sup>67</sup> Felstead, "Romania Cancels Corvette Deal with Naval Group."

<sup>68</sup> Vavasseur, "Romania's Submarine Ambitions."

<sup>69</sup> Jake Epstein, "Going after Russian Warships Feels Like 'Hunting Prey,' Says a Ukrainian General Overseeing Exploding Naval Drone Operations," *Business Insider*, March 2, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/attacking-russian-warships-naval-drones-like-hunting-prey-ukrainian-general-2024-3>.

create a more effective deterrent at a lower cost. However, since Russia has already recognized the effectiveness of this tool of asymmetric warfare, vigilance toward emerging countermeasures must be maintained.<sup>70</sup>

In the event that Türkiye continues to maintain good relations with Russia rather than taking a stronger deterrent stance against Russian hegemonic ambitions in the region, NATO could consider the careful exploitation of the Montreux Convention's provisions. If immediate reinforcement of NATO naval presence in the basin becomes necessary, non-littoral Alliance members could sail civilian point-class commercial vessels into the basin and have them modified for combat capabilities at one of the Black Sea shipyards.<sup>71</sup> This would present its own set of technical challenges but would circumvent Türkiye's ability to block military vessels from passing through its straits.

Given Türkiye's tendency toward neutrality between Russia and the Alliance and Bulgaria's persisting pro-Russian sentiments, NATO integration of the littoral states should not be taken for granted. Anti-NATO sentiments within the Bulgarian population and conflicting views on NATO integration within its governing body could hinder the Alliance's strategic need for a strong Black Sea presence. As a result, NATO should take measures to strengthen littoral states' resistance to Russian disinformation and hybrid campaigns, which have permeated the information space and have generated anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments. While Bulgaria is of higher concern in this regard, Romania should not be overlooked. The growing informational and political influence of AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians), which promotes anti-Western narratives aligned with Russian informational campaigns,<sup>72</sup> could also represent a strategic fault line.

Türkiye's feelings of being an outlier within NATO and the European political and economic sphere must not be exacerbated. Therefore, its military acquisitions from Allied members should be facilitated through private diplomatic and economic concessions. Türkiye's military and economic power, coupled with its desire for neutrality between NATO and Russia, create a complex security dilemma for the Alliance. While burdensome, initiatives aimed at reducing Türkiye's economic and military cooperation with Russia can be essential for solidifying the Alliance's Black Sea presence and strengthening its Southeastern flank.

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<sup>70</sup> "Russia Navy's Plans to Equip Its Ships with Anti-drone Capabilities," *Global Defense News: Army Recognition Group*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2023/russia-navy-s-plans-to-equip-its-ships-with-anti-drone-capabilities/>.

<sup>71</sup> Hooper, "In a Russia-Ukraine Peace, Montreux Convention Will Stress NATO Black Sea Peacekeepers."

<sup>72</sup> Oana Despa and Bianca Albu, "In 'Echo-Chambers' of Nationalist Romanian Party, Russia's Favourite Narratives," *Balkan Insight: Reportig Democracy*, October 8, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/08/in-echo-chambers-of-nationalist-romanian-party-russias-favourite-narratives/>.

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