



Contemporary Challenges for Bulgaria in the Changing Black Sea Security Environment

Bozhidar Ivanov  ()

Bulgarian Naval Academy, Varna, Bulgaria

<http://www.naval-acad.bg/>

ABSTRACT:

The author presents the results of a study on the evolving security environment in the Black sea region. The focus is on Russia's Black Sea security policy and the ways in which it combines kinetic and non-kinetic instruments in its hybrid strategy. The militarization of Crimea, in particular, led to the positioning of assertive Russia as the dominant military power in the Black Sea, with all the consequent negative repercussions for littoral and other states in the region.

ARTICLE INFO:

RECEIVED: 12 MAY 2022

REVISED: 13 JULY 2021

ONLINE: 25 JULY 2022

KEY WORDS:

Black Sea, security, Russian Federation, hybrid threats, A2/AD



Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0

Introduction

This article aims to analyze and present the specifics of the Black Sea region in terms of security and stability. The next task is to consider only Russia's influence by using a hybrid warfare strategy on the Black Sea regional environment and how it affects Bulgaria as a country from that very region and also as a member of NATO and the European Union (EU). A limitation of the article is that it will not provide an analysis of the ongoing war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

1. Background of security aspects in the Black Sea region

The Black Sea region always has been a geostrategic knot due to its position as a crossroad between Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Eastern Magreb, with heavy historically based heritage in terms of security space. It comprises a limited access maritime space connected with the World Ocean, the Straits, and coastal areas. The main Black Sea region unites only the six countries considered coastal to the Black Sea - Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. The boundaries of the region in the wider context can be shifted considerably in relation to the specific cultural, historical or geographical perspective. In order to better reflect the current security dynamics in the Black Sea region and the challenges it presents to Bulgaria in particular, the focus should be on the processes taking place in the wider Black Sea region, uniting the coastal states and the hinterland, extending through the Eastern parts of the Balkans to South Caucasus and Moldova (Figure 1).

The real picture of the Black Sea as a security area has changed over time as a function of the balance of powers in the region and its military significance for wider opposition. It has often been a place with turbulent processes in terms of a security space being part of a grosser geopolitical confrontation in the Caucasus, the Balkans, Central Europe, and the Eurasian steppe.



Figure 1: Black Sea region.

On the other hand, there have been periods of fragile stability in the region due to in passing hegemony of one of the regional powers, such as the Ottoman or the Russian Empire, or the Soviet Union, succeeding in imposing domination or control in the Black Sea.

After the end of the Cold War, there was a period of pan-European efforts to overcome historically-based divisions among the countries from the region and to create a completely new approach to the security environment based on integration and coordination, application of common rules and institutions, in attempts to settle down a new European security order. On the opposite, there are currently processes of increasing militarization and complete freezing of the project for political and economic integration in the Black Sea, which can be characterized as unfavorable for Bulgaria.

Whereas tensions in the region have been present since the initial stages of the Cold War, the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia catalyzed the current unstable situation in the Black Sea, in conjunction with the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014. After the decay of the Soviet Union, the accumulation of prolonged local and regional tensions, growing insecurity and perceptions of threats, and militarized international geopolitical competition have continually made the Black Sea an unstable and high-risk region. Violence, opposition, and aggression have become typical features of the region since the end of the Cold War.

It is clear from the above that the security of the Black Sea region is a function of the balance and current state of regional powers such as Russia and Turkey, as well as the level of interest of global players and their geopolitical behavior and attitude towards the region.

The Euro-Atlantic enlargement program in the Wider Black Sea region (particularly concerning Georgia and Ukraine), launched in the first decade of the 21st century, protracted regional conflicts, and Russia's fears of encroachment on NATO's interests have led to a significant increase in tensions in the region. The conflict between Russia and Georgia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008 highlighted growing instability and insecurity in the region, along with the failure of European conflict prevention and management mechanisms. In 2014, Ukraine's internal political crisis, accompanied by geopolitical competition between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community, led to Russia's decision to annex Crimea and launch an armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. As a result, the wider Black Sea region has become a cornerstone in trying to maintain a balance of security between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community.

2. Hybrid Warfare

There is no single definition of "hybrid threat." The first scientific studies in this field were conducted at US military colleges in 2008, in connection with the analysis of Hezbollah's involvement in the Lebanese war in 2006. Special attention was paid to combining non-traditional tactics with conventional military tactics and the simultaneous use of modern weapon systems. Experts used the term "hybrid warfare" in regard to Hezbollah, or "complex irregular warfare."

In the following years, a significant number of developments followed, but instead of consolidating opinions on the nature of the term, the opposite effect was achieved – for the most part, they deviated from each other, introducing the term “hybrid threat” as opposed to “hybrid warfare.” In order to easily distinguish between the two terms, one can apply the conceptual apparatus developed by Clausewitz. In this aspect, the hybrid threat aims to disintegrate the triad of “state, people, and army.” The object of influence is the will of the people to support the policies pursued by the state and the operations conducted by the armed forces. In addition, the ability of the state leadership bodies to make adequate and timely decisions in accordance with the current strategic situation is affected. Hybrid warfare, for its part, would be defined as affecting and hindering the ability of the country’s conventional armed forces to conduct military operations.

The employment of hybrid strategies can be perpetrated with the use of a mixture of conventional and non-conventional means. Usually, at initial stages are predominantly used the non-kinetic ones. They can pursue either preparing the operational environment for the follow-on conventional full or limited-scale conflict or try to achieve the desired end state directly, i.e., only through ‘hybrid’ actions. In the second case, it is highly likely that conventional military measures will follow if non-kinetic ones do not lead to success, or at least not at the desired pace. The conflict in Ukraine exemplifies that. In other words, using non-conventional methods does not exclude using conventional capabilities. So, the hybrid threat is not at all harmless and should not be underestimated just because the danger cannot be physically felt or seen at its early stages.

For the purposes of this article, the NATO and the EU definitions for the hybrid threat will be used. According to NATO experts, a hybrid threat should be understood as the use of a strategy based on a complex, adaptive, and often highly integrated combination of both conventional and unconventional means of influence by both states and non-state actors. These actions are carried out in the whole spectrum of instruments of national power (if the opposing party is a state), namely political; military; economic; social; information; and infrastructure, as well as cultural; scientific and technological; physiographic; legal, ethical, and moral, aimed at destabilizing the opponent. As with states and non-governmental organizations as aggressors, hybrid warfare is aimed primarily at the “weak spots” of the opposing state. Also, there should be pointed out that the opposing actors share one “battle space” with all its domains. The overall analysis and assessment of hybrid threats show that most often, the attacker will use a specific model of the hybrid impact that will be unique to each country.

3. Implication of Russia’s hybrid strategies in the Black Sea region

Using its experience in monitoring, evaluating, and analyzing the behavior of global powers, such as the United States and China, it can be concluded that today Russia is pursuing a comprehensive approach to achieving its national interests beyond its borders, intensively applying the non-kinetic component of

“hybrid warfare” by using a wide range of subversive tools in order: to ensure that specific policy objectives are achieved; to bring about the division and weakening of NATO; to undermine the pro-Western governments of sovereign states in the post-Soviet space; to create preconditions for the use of military force; to annex territories of sovereign neighboring countries of strategic importance; and to ensure access to European markets, dictating conditions favorable only to it.

Experts are unanimous, despite some nuances in their perception of the “hybrid warfare,” that Russia currently uses a number of tools to demonstrate power and influence, with a focus on the non-military component, in order to secure its interests in an area spreading out far beyond its geographical borders. The use of hybrid strategies by Russia has increased significantly in modern times. This growth is a new milestone in Russia’s overall bulking capabilities and a key factor in the Kremlin’s drive to oppose the West.

3.1. Non-kinetic elements of the hybrid strategy

In 2013, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, said that non-military means were used four times more often in modern conflicts than conventional military ones. Of course, Russia’s resources to wage a hybrid war are not endless, and there are many obstacles that Russia, like any other country, faces in carrying out multidimensional foreign policy. The hybrid approach of Russia normally is not effective to the same degree in all sectors of its sphere of influence. From the analysis of events, it can be concluded that the main features of the Russian hybrid tactics have the following characteristics:

- *Economical*, that is in terms of resources from the abstaining in the application of conventional power. While acknowledging that winning a protracted war with NATO using traditional methods and means is most probably a utopia, Russia is seeking ways to achieve its interests without overt employment of pure military means. Of course, Russia still has the conventional and nuclear capabilities in its toolbox but apparently prefers to use them only as means of deterrence in its hybrid strategy. In general, Russia at this stage prefers to minimize the use of conventional military assets, or if it has to use them – to employ their non-kinetic component and in limited areas. For example, the implication of cyber or active electronic attacks are typical examples of the ways Russia gains advantages from the use of unconventional force;
- *Human-oriented*. Russian strategic think-tank experts monitor and take advantage of the importance of an approach that focuses on influencing the population through information operations, proxy groups, and other operations to achieve joint effects;
- *Permanent*. In general, the hybrid war’s main feature is breaking the conventional time-based distinction between states of war and peace. The reality of hybrid warfare is the presence of one state of conflict with constant-

changing intensity and characteristics. Hybrid war strategies are permanent, with the presumption that, at times, they may turn sharper and more intense or even into a full-scale military conflict.

The potential hybrid war waged by Russia is foreseen to seek the achievement of a minimum of three goals, namely:

- Use of hybrid techniques to influence politicians and politicians of Western Europe and other regions. This goal has been achieved with significant numbers of concealed and difficult to be proved techniques and is currently a huge challenge for many European governments. Here, the Kremlin does not seek to use hybrid strategies as a substitute for conventional military action or as a precursor to military intervention. Instead, it aims to ensure that political outcomes in specific countries serve its national interests. The most vulnerable to these “shaping” techniques are countries with fragile and compromised legal and anti-corruption practices;
- Seeking and establishing ways for justifying an open, conventional military operation. Russia’s mute annexation of Crimea has raised fears that the Kremlin may seek to employ a similar hybrid strategy for creating a pretext with the employment of conventional means in other areas of its interests, for example, the Baltic states. Russia could seek to inflame discord among Russia’s minority population in a country like Estonia by creating a scenario that portrays the Estonian government as repressive and then using it to justify possible Russian military intervention in the country to protect the rights of the Russian minority.
- Occupying territory without the use of overt or conventional military force. The annexation of Crimea was the result of the successful achievement of such a goal launching the topic of Russia’s “hybrid strategies.” Russia used some similar tactics before its 2008 invasion of Georgia. As a result, the resulting “frozen conflicts” in Ukraine and Georgia hamper these countries’ efforts to integrate with Western Europe.

Russia’s worldwide interests nowadays are primarily achieved and secured through hybrid operations. Russia possesses a number of mechanisms and levers for conducting a non-conventional component of hybrid war in relation to that, such as:

- *Political influence.* Russian leaders fluently use traditional diplomacy means, on the one hand, in order to back up and maintain friendly to Russia political parties and key leaders in Russia’s area of interest, organizing high-level meetings in Moscow to achieve the desired agenda, and on the other – to compromise the positions of political leaders who are more critical of Moscow.
- *Economic influence.* The main targets of this line of effort are European policies, where Russia implies both direct and indirect economic means. Moscow has used energy as an instrument of its foreign policy when, for example, it cut off natural gas supplies to Ukraine in the winter of 2006 and

2009 in order to force Ukraine to sign a more beneficial agreement for Russia on the price of sales and transfers to Western European gas;

- *Information operations.* Russia is very effective in using StratCom in order to instill its political messages in the current daily agenda in many European countries. Media channels, such as Russia Today and Sputnik News, are considered the prime vectors of this approach. Russia also implies television programs to its target audience, funds lobbyists in order to underline its points of view, and uses numerous trolls, bots, and fake news generators in the web space. The purpose of these information operations is, above all, to “blur” reality and to question objective truths. These media outlets seek to form the strategic level debate in support of the Kremlin’s agenda.
- *Intermediaries (proxies).* Mediators are often groups that are strongly committed to Russia’s interests and goals. One typical example of Kremlin mediators is the “Night Wolves” motorcycle club, an ultranationalist organization led by a personal friend of President Putin. Russia is also seeking to use the emerging protest movements in Europe to achieve its goals;
- *Cyber threats.* Russia has highly qualified information technology personnel capable of conducting events defined as “cyber warfare” at its disposal. This allows it to infiltrate Western information systems in order to gather valuable information. The information is then used to influence elections and achieve other political results outside of Russia. In addition to illegally acquiring official and other sensitive information, Russia could use much more advanced cyber tools in order to influence incrementally or to manipulate in a concealed manner the information systems for supporting the social and political life of Western countries;
- *Illegal actions.* Russia has the ability to use traditional espionage as part of its hybrid strategies, as well as to use bribes, extortion, and other related means to influence vulnerable political figures to advance its interests. Russian Special Forces, for example, have proved critical capability for capturing Crimea and helping local nationalists and separatists in Donbas. According to experts in this field, there are indications that they are most likely to operate “on the ground” in several NATO member states.

These “soft power” tools are not left stand alone. Russia’s conventional capabilities and, in extreme cases, nuclear forces back them up thus forming a complex arsenal for deterrence and waging a full-scale hybrid war.

3.2. Kinetic component of the hybrid strategy

Regarding the threat posed by the conventional component of Russia’s hybrid strategy, the annexation of Crimea turned out to be critical to the military balance in the area of the Black Sea. Through the Crimean peninsula, Russia gained control over one of the most significant maritime security areas (after the Straits) in the Black Sea. Operationally wise, this is capturing a decisive physical

point of the strategy of Russia at the Black sea theater. In such a way, Russia has the advantage of dominating the rest of Ukraine's Black Sea coast militarily. Additionally, by obtaining control of the Kerch Strait, Russia took away the access of Ukraine through its Sea of Azov ports to the World Ocean, turning it essentially into a landlocked country albeit with a sea coast. In a broader context, Russia is able to gain military outreach from the Crimean peninsula over a big part of the Black Sea region, namely the South Caucasus coast, Moldova, and possibly Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced in March 2015 that Russia had deployed "Bastion" (SS-C-5 Stooge in the NATO nomenclature) mobile missile coastal defense anti-ship systems in Crimea. On August 12, RT announced that Russia's most advanced air defense missile system, the C-400 "Triumph" (SA-21 Growler), had been stationed on the peninsula to increase the air defense capabilities of the SA-300 "Antey" batteries (SA-23 "Gladiator") and the anti-aircraft missile and artillery systems "Pantzir." The ongoing renovation of Soviet-era bunkers, the restoration of early warning radar stations, and the deployment of high-tech electronic warfare systems have made Crimea the center of an almost impenetrable A2/AD (Anti-access / Area denial) zone in the Black Sea (Figure 2).

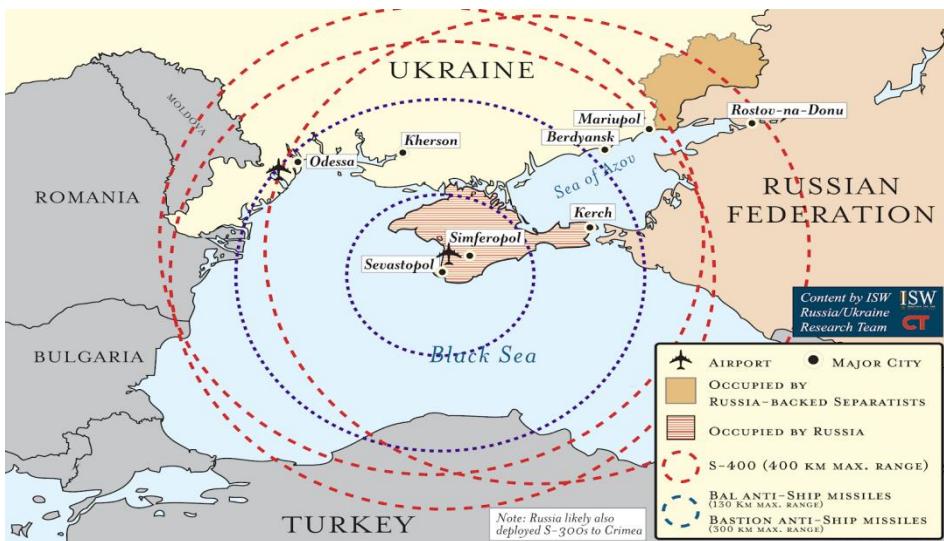


Figure 2: Crimea-based Ant-Access/Area-Denial Capabilities of Russia.

Thus, Russia has managed to reach its main goal in this theater – to create a reliable military deterrent force capable of opposing NATO in the Black Sea region. In this regard, General Gerasimov, Chief of General Staff of Russia, claimed that Russia had regained military supremacy in the Black Sea, which was lost with the end of the Cold War and by the late 1990s in favor of Turkey. Supporting that thesis, Russian military analyst Dmitry Safonov notes: "Crimea

is a strategic element of Russia's defense capability. Who controls the peninsula, controls all the waters of the Black Sea, and everything that happens on the territory of neighboring countries. Russia will be able to send its fleet at any moment and stop any possible threat."

To link the above facts into an ongoing naval strategy, security experts Wayne Hughes and James Holmes argue that the construction of a fleet-based A2/AD zone capable of conducting effective operations in littoral waters and enhanced, if necessary, with near and far minefields, areas for deployment of submarines in reconnaissance-strike variant, coast-based air support, interacting with the country's air defense formations and electronic warfare systems, is the most effective, efficient and most difficult to overcome method for control of coastal waters and parts of the maritime environment of the theater.

On the other hand, the link between Russia's capabilities and intentions can be read by carefully examining the difference between what Russia's A2/AD zone in the Black Sea can actually achieve and what the Kremlin wants NATO to believe it can through leveraging the unconventional component of hybrid warfare. Although the capabilities of Russia's weapons systems have advanced significantly, they do not represent an insurmountable barrier to NATO.

Summary and Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis presented here, one can deduct further consolidation of the diverging NATO and Russian military positions in the Wider Black Sea region and a stronger interest to security issues in the regional countries, such as Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Frozen conflicts will continue to develop through their own dynamics and under the influence of the confrontation of regional and global forces. By annexing Crimea, Russia is gained a dominant position in the Black Sea. Although there is currently no prospect of a face-to-face military conflict between NATO and Russia in that region, developments in the Black Sea security environment suggest an increased risk of unforeseen clashes in the form of military incidents. Russia, although it has adopted the widespread use of the tools of the non-kinetic component of hybrid warfare, cannot achieve its main goal, which is to be attractive and liked by its target groups. This is primarily due to the lack of traditions and experience in the successful conduct of unconventional events, and secondly – pragmatism and the impending pursuit of its national interest.

To recapitulate, it can be pointed out that currently developing processes in the Black Sea are increasing the uncertainty in the Wider Black Sea region. In fact, independent states like Bulgaria have a security deficit in relation to the more powerful states. The countries of the post-Soviet space also have such a security deficit, as they are de facto in the area of interest and influence of a more assertive Russia. Russia itself has problems with its perceptions of security because it believes that NATO is crossing the borders of its areas of interest. In addition, NATO and the EU do not find comfortable in relation to their security the fact that Russia managed to position itself as the dominant military power

in the Black Sea region. The major role of insecurity and instability has been played by contrasting threats, as well as misperceptions in the growth of the Black Sea security crisis. The Euro-Atlantic community has traditionally underestimated Russia's concerns, while Russia overestimates the Euro-Atlantic community's ability to pose a military threat. Today, the Black Sea region is affected by a number of interrelated negative trends in the development of security processes: the long-term transformation of conflicts leads to protracted conflicts in the region, which merge with state and even interstate competition; regional geopolitics is shifting towards confrontation and is characterized by militarization and the accumulation of weapons in the Wider Black Sea region. Regional governance and security integration projects have disintegrated, and there has been a decline in transparency and trust and growing uncertainty about mutual security intentions, all of which present some severe challenges for Bulgaria to address.

References

- ¹ Loic Burton, "Bubble Trouble: Russia's A2/AD Capabilities," *Foreign Policy Association*, October 25, 2016.
- ² Christopher S. Chivvis, "Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare" and What Can Be Done About It," *Testimony of the RAND Corporation Before the Committee on Armed Services United States House of Representatives*, March 22, 2017.
- ³ NATO, "Bi-SC Input to a New Capstone for the Military Contribution to Countering Hybrid Threats," August 2010.
- ⁴ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model," PE-198-OSD, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., 2016.
- ⁵ Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, February 26, 2013.
- ⁶ Dmitry Gorenburg, Michael Kofman, and Roger McDermott, "Russia's A2/AD Doctrine," 2013.
- ⁷ Charles King, "The Wider Black Sea Region in the Twenty-First Century," in: *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21st Century: Strategic, Economic and Energy Perspectives* (Washington DC/Vienna: Center for Transatlantic Relations/Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 2008), 1–5.
- ⁸ Bleda Kurtdarcan and Barın Kayaoğlu, "Russia, Turkey and the Black Sea A2/AD Arms Race," *The National Interest*, March 5, 2017.
- ⁹ Neil John Melvin, *Rebuilding collective security in the Black sea region*, SIPRI Policy Paper, 2018.
- ¹⁰ A. Petrov, "RF Limits Any Enemies' Illusion: The Expert Talks about the Importance of Groups of Troops in Crimea," *Ekonomika Segodniya* 7 (November 2017) (in Russian).

- ¹¹ Valeri Ratchev and Todor Tagarev, “Bulgaria’s Black Sea Dilemma: NATO Ally or Russian Gateway?,” in *Black Sea Battleground*, Jamestown Foundation, January 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/bulgarias-black-sea-dilemma-nato-ally-or-russian-gateway/>.
- ¹² Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia pours more military hardware into ‘fortress Crimea’,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 14, 2017.
- ¹³ TASS, “General Staff: Russia–Turkey balance of force in Black Sea has changed over years,” September 14, 2016.
- ¹⁴ George Vişan and Octavian Manea, “Crimea’s Transformation into an Access-Denial Base,” Romania Energy Center, July 14, 2015.
- ¹⁵ Matthew J. Wemyss, “The Bear’s Den: Russian Anti-Access/Area-Denial in the Maritime Domain,” Research report (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air Command and Staff College, Air University, May 2016).
- ¹⁶ Georgi Gotsev, “Adapting the Non-Military Component of the Defense System to the New Security Environment,” Proceedings of the Annual Scientific Conference of the National Security and Defense Faculty (Sofia, G.S. Rakovski Defense and Staff College, May 2016), Part II.
- ¹⁷ Simeon Nikolov, “What is “Hybrid War” and Is It Applicable Here?” *Expert*, September 18, 2014, https://www.expert-bdd.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1523:2014-09-18-21-30-50&catid=19&Itemid=41. – in Bulgarian.

About the Author

Captain (Navy) Bozhidar Rumenov Ivanov is the Commanding officer of a Patrol (frigates/corvettes) squadron in the Bulgarian Navy, conducting research on maritime security toward a Ph.D. degree. E-mail: brivanov@gmail.com
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8720-8637>