



G | M | F The German Marshall Fund
of the United States
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategy

Regional Perspectives from a 2019 Workshop

Stephen J. Flanagan and Irina A. Chindea

For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/CF405

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© Copyright 2019 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

Support RAND

Make a tax-deductible charitable contribution at
www.rand.org/giving/contribute

www.rand.org

Preface

On March 22, 2019, the RAND Corporation and the Bucharest Office of the German Marshall Fund (GMF) of the United States, in cooperation with the Aspen Institute Romania, organized a workshop on “Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Strategy: Regional Perspectives” in Bucharest, Romania. The workshop brought together a group of 24 experts and former officials from Europe and the United States for nonattribution discussions on four topics of relevance to the strategic context in the Black Sea: (1) Russia’s strategy in the region; (2) Russian military and soft-power instruments; (3) Western goals and interests; (4) elements of Western strategy. This report summarizes the dialogue among participants on each topic. It also includes background on the geopolitical context provided by the RAND and GMF organizers, which prompted a series of questions framing the dialogue.

This workshop and research were sponsored by the Russia Strategic Initiative of the United States European Command (EUCOM) and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community.

For more information on the RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center, see www.rand.org/nsrd/ndri/centers/isdp or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

The RAND project team expresses its deep gratitude to Alina Inayah, director of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation and the Bucharest Office of the GMF, and Mircea Geoana, president of the Aspen Institute of Romania, for their partnership in orchestrating the workshop discussion; and to Larisa Rotraru of GMF Bucharest for her superb efforts in enlisting an outstanding group of participants and managing all aspects of the workshop logistics. James Hoobler from RAND also made valuable contributions to the workshop. The GMF strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. For more information on the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, see www.gmfus.org/program/black-sea-trust-regional-cooperation.

Contents

Preface	iii
ONE	
Introduction	1
Key Points	1
TWO	
Russia's Strategy in the Black Sea Region	3
THREE	
Russian Military and Soft-Power Instruments	6
Military Developments	6
Soft-Power Tools of Malign Influence	7
FOUR	
Western Goals and Interests	9
FIVE	
Elements of a Western Strategy	12

Introduction

The Black Sea region is a central locus of the competition between Russia and the West for the future of Europe. The region experienced two decades of simmering conflicts even before Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia has used military force against other countries in the region four times since 2008. Moscow is also utilizing informational, economic, energy, and clandestine instruments to advance its goals. Other states in the region have distinct and sometimes conflicting interests that they want to protect, which has made development of a coherent Western strategy to address Russia's diverse challenges elusive.

Against this background, the RAND Corporation and the Bucharest Office of the German Marshall Fund (GMF) of the United States, in cooperation with the Aspen Institute Romania, organized a workshop on "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Strategy: Regional Perspectives," in Bucharest, Romania on March 22, 2019. The workshop brought together a group of 24 experts and former officials from Europe and the United States for nonattribution discussions of four interrelated questions: (1) What is Russia's strategy in the Black Sea region? (2) How do Russian instruments of influence and military developments support that strategy? (3) What are the key interests that other Black Sea littoral states want to advance and protect? (4) What are the elements of a sustainable Western strategy to protect those interests?

This paper summarizes the dialogue among participants on each topic. It also includes background on the geopolitical context provided by the RAND and GMF organizers, which prompted a series of questions framing the dialogue.

Key Points

- The Black Sea region figures prominently in Russia's overarching goal to restore influence and control along its periphery, lost since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to limit Western influences and integration of regional states into the Euro-Atlantic community.
- Russia's occupation and militarization of Crimea, modernization of the Black Sea Fleet, and expanded forces in the Southern Military District have strengthened its leverage in the region and power projection capabilities into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant.
- Moscow's overall objectives are tailored to conditions in each country in the region, with goals of keeping various neighbors in states of nonalignment or insecurity relative to Russia and the West and open to Russian economic, political, and malign influences.

- The differing and often divergent interests of countries in the Black Sea region make it difficult to frame a unified, sustainable Western strategy to counter malign Russian influence and intimidation in the area.
- An effective Western strategy must first be more successful in countering Russian information operations, malign influence, and hybrid threats.
- A credible military deterrent posture need not match Russia militarily. Deployment of advanced air and coastal defense systems in Romania and Bulgaria to counter Russian offensive missile threats, expanded NATO exercises, and continued Western assistance to Ukraine and Georgia in the development of their national defense capabilities could enhance regional deterrence.

Russia's Strategy in the Black Sea Region

Whether the Black Sea region is the focal point of Moscow's strategy in Europe can be debated. However, workshop discussion underscored that the region figures prominently in President Putin's overarching goal to restore Russia's influence and control along its periphery, lost since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to limit Western influences and the integration of regional states into the Euro-Atlantic community. As one of the participants noted, the two biggest historical catastrophes in the Russian nationalist narrative were the 1856 Crimean War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. It took Russia 22 years to regain its status in the Black Sea after the 1856 Crimean War, and the same time elapsed between the demise of the Soviet Union and Russia's resurgence in the region. The Black Sea has historically been the gateway to the most vulnerable part of Russia. One participant contended that Russian strategic documents do not articulate a clear strategy for the Black Sea region and that the buildup of naval and ground forces reflects traditional approaches to achieving its political goals.

Putin has embraced a nationalist approach and justified the militarization of Russia's strategy as being designed simply to defend against Western political destabilization and sophisticated military threats. Through incremental gains Russian strategy seeks to transform the Black Sea—as well as the Sea of Azov—into virtual internal waterways, where Russia can have the kind of freedom of action it has achieved in the Caspian Sea.

The Black Sea supports Russian interests well beyond the geographic limits of the region. It is the springboard, and the Turkish straits are the gateway, to Russian military power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. It is also the nexus for capturing energy markets in southeastern Europe and on into the heart of the European Union. The Russian resurgence is also a response to diminished U.S. and Western engagement in the Middle East, where Moscow both seized the initiative and filled a void through renewed diplomatic engagement and its military operations in Syria. Several participants contended that security along its periphery is Russia's priority. Another argued that Ukraine is much more important to the Kremlin than Syria, which is serving to distract the West while Moscow advances its interests closer to home.

Moscow's overall objectives are tailored to conditions in each country in the region, with goals of keeping various neighbors in states of nonalignment or insecurity relative to Russia and the West and open to Russian economic, political, and malign influences. Its strategies vary accordingly.

- Separating Turkey and Bulgaria from NATO and EU policies through economic and energy incentives is a key element of Russia's strategy. Information and media influence operations in those countries seek to foster positive attitudes toward Russia and downplay its growing military capabilities.

- Russia is also seeking to exacerbate tensions and mutual suspicions in Turkey's relations with the United States and the European Union in order to further erode Turkey's Western orientation. While the expected completion of the TurkStream pipeline in 2019 will deepen Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas, Russia has billed the project as bolstering Turkey's geopolitical importance and ambition to become a major hub for Russian gas deliveries to Europe. Construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in southern Turkey by the Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom will further deepen Turkey's dependence on Russian energy and technology and has become another source of friction with the EU.
- Similarly, Russia has held out the prospect that the proposed TurkStream 2 pipeline could make Bulgaria a hub country for Russian natural gas. Bulgaria lacks the prerequisites needed to become a hub country, but could become a transit country.
- Moscow has attempted to make EU and NATO countries feel guilty about their actions in Ukraine by fostering the notion that Western interference in Ukrainian politics and pushing the country to seek NATO membership provoked Russia's military intervention. Yet in 2013 fewer than 15 percent of Ukrainians expressed support for NATO membership, and none of the leaders of the Euromaidan revolution was advocating this step.
- Russian actions in the Sea of Azov support its strategy in the Black Sea, toward Ukraine, and in deepening of control over Crimea. Russia's arbitrary delays of commercial shipping through the Kerch Strait and seizure of Ukrainian naval vessels and personnel are designed to isolate eastern Ukraine, hinder commerce, and foster political and social instability. Furthermore, Russian actions are designed to threaten Ukraine with loss of control of land on the eastern shore of the Sea of Azov between Crimea and Mariupol in order to create a land corridor between southern Russia and Crimea.

Russia has pursued what one participant dubbed as a “neocolonial” approach to relations with the Caucasus. Through limited investments and the periodic use of military force, Moscow has gained political hegemony and military access. Moscow has achieved dominance and near total freedom of action in the Caspian Sea and sought to underscore this status when it launched missiles from the Caspian against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in Syria. By fostering protracted conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine through local proxies, Russia has flaunted international law and Helsinki Principles, changed borders by force, and deployed Russian troops in captured territories, thereby forcing population displacements. Moscow has deliberately multiplied the number of open conflicts in the region to expand its leverage with the West in negotiations to resolve them, accumulating as many bargaining chips as possible, even on issues it considers low priorities. These lower priority issues can then be exchanged for concessions on real priorities. Moscow then presents itself as the indispensable arbiter in settlement of these conflicts, resulting in expanded Russian influence over the future political systems and economies of targeted countries. Russia's seizure of Crimea resulted in strategic territorial gains, development of a military bastion, and significant enlargement of its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea. In the Caucasus, Moscow seeks to retain the status quo and maintain *droit de regard* over the foreign policies of countries in the region.

Russia is also seeking to reshape regional security arrangements. Here, it finds a willing partner in Turkey, which still clings to the notion that it can work with Russia as a peer in joint management of the Black Sea by the two governments' navies, as they had done in the

1990s. This notion has become untenable following the Russian seizure of Crimea and expansion of its military capabilities there and elsewhere in the region. Russia is far more powerful militarily and sees Turkey as a junior partner in the Black Sea and in the management of the conflict in Syria. One participant argued that Turkey should not be seen as having a coherent Black Sea strategy, but rather that Turkish policy toward the region has been shaped reactively and erratically, according to shifts in Ankara's policies with regard to Syria, Russia, and the United States.

Russian Military and Soft-Power Instruments

Military Developments

The occupation and militarization of Crimea are central to achieving Moscow's goal of establishing a base for regional power projection, where long-range cruise missiles and coastal defense systems can threaten Western forces throughout the Black Sea and beyond. Since 2015, Russia has deployed Bastion mobile coastal defense missile systems and the most advanced air defense missile system in Russia's inventory, the S-400 *Triumph*, to augment other capabilities. The reactivation of early-warning radar stations and deployment of advanced electronic-warfare equipment also support the development of a more effective Russian Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) network. There are also unconfirmed reports from Ukrainian sources that Russia has made preparations to restore nuclear weapons storage sites in Crimea for possible support of missile and strategic aviation forces.

From Crimea, Russia is in an enhanced position for regional power projection, including staging helicopter airborne and amphibious landings into Odessa, the northern edge of the Danube Delta near the Romanian border, and on to Tiraspol and Transnistria in Moldova. There was debate as to whether Russia's military buildup in the Black Sea is sustainable over the long term, and several participants argued that its short- to medium-term target is Ukraine. Keeping in mind Russia's capacity and likely intention to carry out a future incursion into Ukraine, several participants urged leaders in the region and the West to be vigilant and not to miss the moment to undertake a vigorous response to Russian aggression, as happened in the case of the illegal seizure of Crimea and the occupation of the Donbas region.

Naval developments in support of Russia's goals include both power projection and sea control, not just sea denial capabilities. Since 2014, Russia has added six corvettes, six *Kilo*-class submarines, and three *Admiral Grigorovich*-class missile frigates. These new corvettes and submarines are equipped with supersonic 3M-54 *Klub* anti-ship systems and 3M-14 cruise missiles, and the frigates are fitted with *Kalibr* antiship missiles with a range of 400 miles and Buk missiles with a range of 40 miles, among other weapons. Russian antiship cruise missiles can now range over the entire Black Sea, while defensive missile systems are estimated to be able to cover about 40–50 percent of the sea. To support its sea control ambitions and development of an A2/AD network in the region, the Russian Navy has increased deployments of surface ships and submarines from the Black Sea and Northern Sea Fleets, including the *Kuznetsov* carrier battle group, to the naval base in Tartus, Syria, and to the eastern Mediterranean; it has also deployed *Bastion* antiship cruise missiles, S-300 and S-400 missile defense systems, and aircraft with air-launched cruise missiles in Syria.

In a form of psychological warfare, Russia is attempting to foster the perception that its A2/AD capabilities form an impenetrable or ironclad bubble in order to paralyze NATO decisionmaking in a crisis and to undermine alliance cohesion in the region. Several independent analyses have suggested that while Russia's air defense systems are formidable, they do have gaps and are vulnerable to advances in Western offensive capabilities.¹

In his March 2, 2019, speech on the future of Russian military strategy, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov said Russia's armed forces must maintain both "classical" and "asymmetrical" potential in waging modern war, which some viewed as a reaffirmation of Russia's continued pursuit of what it calls "new generation" warfare. He cited the Russian intervention in Syria with a small expeditionary force, combined with information operations, as providing lessons for defending Russian interests beyond its borders. He also suggested that the military should have a greater role in coordinating the nonmilitary elements.²

Workshop discussion went on to address why, given clashing interests and growing tensions, there has not been a wider war in the region. Several participants argued this is because Russia has been able to achieve its goals by other means including influence operations, covert and overt nonmilitary and military actions (including cyberattacks), and other hybrid techniques. Others said this suggests that Moscow may not be prepared to risk a confrontation with NATO. There was a debate as to whether hybrid threats should be viewed as an alternative to or a prelude for more robust military action, but these alternatives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. That is, hybrid measures can serve to test resolve while shaping the environment, as well as maintaining the option of escalation, depending on the reactions of other actors.

Soft-Power Tools of Malign Influence

Russia is employing a wide array of soft-power instruments, including propaganda and media influence, to undermine transatlantic unity. In the Black Sea region, Russia is skilled at taking advantage of the shortcomings in democratic development and governance vulnerabilities to distort political discourse in many countries. Russia is equally adept at exploiting financial ties, ownership, and formal/informal political links to media outlets to support the dissemination of Kremlin propaganda in the region. Russia uses imports as a lever to support approved client actors in regional states, while it exports corruption as a matter of policy, serving both to enrich intelligence elements and facilitate their expansion in regional political and economic systems.

One participant outlined how Moscow's information playbook employs techniques that include sensationalism rather than facts; binary black-and-white portrayal of Russia in positive terms and the West in negative terms; sarcasm; baseless historical parallels and generalizations; and heavy citation of Russian officials and news agencies. Russian news articles have a slant, while opinion pieces express explicit bias. Sputnik-style media outlets simply disseminate Kremlin narrative, while others offer content that is more tailored to national audiences

¹ See Robert Dalsjö, Christofer Berglund, and Michael Jonsson, *Bursting the Bubble Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications*, Stockholm, FOI - Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019, FOI-R--4651--SE.

² See Roger McDermott, "Gerasimov Unveils Russia's 'Strategy of Limited Actions,'" Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 31, March 6, 2019.

and their consumption habits. In some cases, such as Bulgaria, which does not have extensive ties to Russian media, the impact of Russia propaganda is constrained. In others, such as Georgia, where 18 percent of the population gets its news from Russian sources, it is much more widespread. Similarly, Moldova has a high number of Russian-language channels, and Kremlin media has prominence that supports Russian influence. Armenia is also anchored in the Russian media orbit because it inherited extensive media ties to Russia, and Russian media is popular in the country.

In Turkey, Russia is benefiting from the collapse of mainstream and popular media under government repression. With only government-controlled media available, many Turks, even those with a strong Western orientation, have turned to Sputnik Türkiye for print news and to Radio Sputnik (RSFM) and RT for Turkish-language news broadcasts. RT and Sputnik Türkiye remain militantly secularist, fueling societal divisions in Turkey to the benefit of Russia and President Erdoğan. In some instances, Russian media outlets have timed the publishing of damaging news stories to undermine Erdoğan or Turkish relations with the United States.

Russian propaganda in southeastern Europe has been most successful in social media focused on popular rather than elite opinion. Russia has used websites such as Facebook to propagate fake nationalist and true anti-European messages that seek to undermine European integration, as well on play on fears of marginalization, liberalization, migration, and Islam, while presenting Russia itself as the standard bearer of conservative values. Romanian users of Facebook are targeted with a lot of anti-EU rhetoric rather than pro-Russian propaganda, which is so well concealed that it is easy to miss. Russian information efforts have also successfully altered Romanian public opinion on Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD), turning what was seen as a security guarantee into a perceived security liability and provocation. Moscow's internet trolls play to the pro-Russia sentimentality of lesser educated Bulgarians. In Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova, Russian propaganda seeks to exploit the conservative sentiments of certain segments of the society, while in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Moscow's media messages are more often designed to promote policies that benefit Russian interests.

In the cases of Moldova and Ukraine, deterrence or self-censure resulting from Russian rhetoric were also identified as risks by several participants. As a result of Russian propaganda, Ukrainian and Moldovan politicians often refrain from pursuing measures that protect the national interest so as not to provoke Russia. The fear is that adopting policies that protect or promote Ukrainian or Moldovan national interests too forcefully will provoke Russia, which will become even more aggressive than it already is—and in any war that resulted, Ukraine or Moldova would lose.

Western Goals and Interests

The Black Sea littoral countries have both overlapping and divergent interests that they want to protect from Russian hostile interference. Domestic political factors as well as the countries' membership in or level of association with the European Union and NATO influence the degree of overlap and divergence in interests. However, as one of the participants in the workshop astutely observed, there is often very little common ground and convergence of interests even between countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, both of which are members of the EU and NATO. While Romania actively blocks Russian influence in the region, Bulgaria has often yielded to Russian pressure.

Romania's main interest is to protect the process of "westernization" (as opposed to the "Russification" efforts conducted in the country in the early years of the Cold War). Romania is very aware that its military forces are not large enough to successfully deter or oppose a Russian military intervention. The country can, however, protect its "Western" orientation and the "westernization" process that has been unfolding since 1989 from Russian propaganda and the disinformation operations targeting the country. Although some experts consider Romania to be "Russia-proof" and immune to Russian propaganda, this statement is likely to hold true at elite level, while the general population is susceptible to anti-EU and anti-Western rhetoric spread on traditional and social media by Russian influence operations carried out in the country.

Moldovan and Romanian governments are concerned with the protracted conflicts in the region and are attempting to find policy solutions to un-freeze the situation in the breakaway Transnistria region, where, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (*The Military Balance 2019*),¹ Russia continues to maintain approximately 1,500 troops, including 441 peacekeepers who are there under agreement with Moldova, and another 1,100 other troops that Moscow contends are guarding old Soviet Army munitions depots but which are also protecting the separatist government. Moldova is struggling to frame its national strategy to balance its interest in further European integration while minimizing further tensions with Moscow. Russia is actively undermining Moldova's sovereignty through the use of propaganda, the corruption of political leaders, and the occupation of Transnistria. The current Moldovan leadership is not very keen, however, to negotiate with Russia on the status of Transnistria. President Igor Dodon's pro-Moldova policy is seeking at best an association agreement with the European Union or a fourth path for the country (neither pro-West nor pro-East nor in favor of reunification with Romania) and engages in a so-called de-geopoliticization of the country by keeping the focus on social and economic issues instead of thorny political matters.

¹ See International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Russia and Eurasia," *The Military Balance 2019*, p. 209.

Limited security cooperation with Western organizations such as NATO, which provides technical assistance to Moldova on security-sector reform, is pursued in ways that develop limited interoperability with Western armed forces but do not develop its military capabilities significantly. While President Dodon tried twice in 2017 to block Moldovan military personnel from participating in exercises in Ukraine with Ukrainian and NATO forces, he was overruled by other elements of the government.

Moldova and Ukraine share a number of key interests and should consider more closely coordinating their policies toward Russia and the region. Because Moldova is an important stepping stone in the settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, it shares with Ukraine some geopolitical opportunities and vulnerabilities. For instance, although Moldova is a landlocked country, it has an international port of Giurgiulești on the Danube 130 kilometers from the Black Sea, which is accessible to foreign vessels. The port presents an economic opportunity for Moldova to increase access to international markets but also vulnerability from a security perspective since Russian naval vessels could use it as a point of forced entry into the country.

Before the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Ukraine lacked a clear Black Sea strategy. However, the loss of Crimea and the Donbas conflict galvanized Kyiv's strategic thinking. Ukraine currently focuses on several strategic objectives: the development of natural gas resources; maritime security in the Black Sea; and preventing the disruption of maritime traffic, as happened in the aftermath of the October 22, 2018, Azov incident, when Russian coast guard and naval vessels violently intercepted four Ukrainian naval vessels making a legal passage through the Kerch Strait, impounding three Ukrainian vessels and inflicting damage on others, and arresting 24 Ukrainian personnel.

Ukraine is acutely aware that the maritime dimension represents the highest vulnerability of the country vis-à-vis Russia. Also, the resulting change in threat perception in the country following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the fomenting of an insurgency in eastern Ukraine translated into a new prioritization of accession to the EU and NATO membership. Ukraine would like to see an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea region as well as more solidarity among NATO allies concerning developments in the region.

In the current political environment, Turkey's national interests must be assessed by taking into account President Erdoğan's personal political interests with which they coexist. After Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Turkey ceased to be the dominant naval force in the Black Sea. Moreover, the deployment of significant Russian forces in Syria since 2015 and Moscow's dominant role in the Syrian endgame further constrain Ankara's options. However, Ankara continues to harbor great ambitions and significant involvement in the region.

Although a rapprochement in Turkey's relations with the West to balance Russian activities in Georgia and Ukraine would have been expected after the 2008 war, it has in fact deteriorated, as seen in the increasing difficulties in Turkey's relations with NATO and the United States, as well as the virtual collapse of Turkey's EU accession process and of its special relationship with the EU. Furthermore, with domestic politics in Turkey having taken an undemocratic, nationalist turn in recent years, President Erdoğan has appeared more at ease engaging with President Putin than with European and U.S. leaders. Turkey's growing dependence on Russian natural gas and other sources of power make it more difficult for Turkey to counterbalance Russian power in the Black Sea region.

Azerbaijan behaves in a cautious manner in its relationship with Russia. When it comes to natural gas, it stays away from traditional Russian markets. In recent years, Azerbaijan

rescued the “Southern Corridor” by providing the strategic concept for its development and injecting oil revenue into gas export projects when the EU failed to provide a strategy and the necessary capital investment for the project. In the context of its involvement in the southern energy corridor, Azerbaijan does not compete against Russian natural gas. Also, as long as Russian elites do not become economically involved in Azerbaijan and aim to take away a share of the country’s prosperity, Azeri elites are likely to tolerate Russian political involvement.

In Georgia, Russian troops are positioned within a few hundred meters from the East-West corridor that crosses the country. Georgia is concerned that Russia could surgically snip this corridor without a full-scale invasion in the course of the so-called process of borderization, or the critical advance of a few hundred of meters each year of Russian barbed wire lines from South Ossetia into Georgian territory.

Elements of a Western Strategy

The differing and sometimes divergent interests of countries in the Black Sea region make it difficult to frame a unified, sustainable Western strategy to protect common interests and counter malign Russian influence and intimidation. Romania is looking more to what is happening to the north and northeast in Ukraine and Moldova, while Bulgaria is more concerned about developments to the south, including what is happening in Turkey, migration from Syria, and a resurgence of the radical Islamist threat. Nevertheless, most participants agreed at a conceptual level on the importance of crafting and implementing a coherent common strategy, even though there was limited agreement on what the actual elements of such a strategy should be.

The main impediment to defense cooperation among states in the region is the lack of a common threat perception similar to the one the Baltic and other northern European states share. For example, Bulgaria was not supportive of the Romanian proposal in the run-up to the 2016 Warsaw Summit to expand NATO naval exercises in the Black Sea. For its part, Turkey insists on maintaining the status quo in the region, acting as if it is still Russia's peer in the naval power. In contrast, Ukraine and Georgia are more acutely concerned about the Russian threat, welcomed the Romanian proposal, and support Romania's advocacy of an increased NATO military presence and expanded regional defense cooperation. Thus, the policy preferences of these two NATO partners (Ukraine and Georgia) are more aligned than are the stances of the three allies (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) in the region.

Furthermore, even as the Baltics and Poland have benefited from a relatively broad EU and NATO acceptance of the looming Russian threat to northern Europe, key EU and European NATO governments show little interest in Black Sea security. Several participants argued that the United Kingdom, France, and Germany are more focused on current policy crises such as Brexit, migration, and stabilizing conflict areas in the Middle East and Africa than on the concerns of southeastern European countries.

This lack of a common threat perception translates in NATO force levels in the Black Sea region that most participants felt are inadequate for a credible deterrence. NATO's tailored forward presence is quite limited, and the more capable European governments seem uninterested in contributing troops to the multinational brigade in Romania or augmenting the NATO maritime presence; the U.S. military presence in Romania is largely a bilateral arrangement.

The lack of common threat perception also stems from the divergent views among Western European nations as to whether the Black Sea region is an integral part of Europe and the European Union or is merely in the EU's "neighborhood." Those governments that see the Black Sea region as part of Europe and the EU support policies that promote stability, prosperity, and security in the region, while those that view the region as being only in the "neighborhood"

focus on policies limited to stability and avoid pushing back on provocative Russian activities. The latter approach could actually promote long-lasting instability in the region by encouraging Russian assertiveness and outright aggression.

Another hurdle to achieving a common Western strategy concerns the East-West divide in military capabilities. Most of the former Eastern Bloc countries in the Black Sea area have dated military equipment with capabilities that are not on a par with those of Western NATO members.

In light of the U.S. suspension of Turkey's involvement in the F-35 program, the divide in military capabilities is likely to widen in the summer of 2019, when Turkey is likely to be subject to U.S. sanctions for taking delivery of the S-400 missile system it acquired from Russia. The deployment of the S-400 could also put Turkey on a path to further military cooperation with Russia.

Some participants argued that U.S. retrenchment, which started prior to the Trump presidency, is also a factor. U.S. credibility in the region has been waning. There is a general perception in the region that Russia has a coherent strategy, while the United States does not speak with one voice and has become less predictable and more transactional in its engagement in the region. In the absence of active U.S. leadership and a clear commitment to the region, there are few prospects that the littoral countries and other European NATO members would be able to craft a coherent strategy vis-à-vis Russia.

An additional impediment to crafting a common strategy to deal with Russian aggression is the damaged perception of the West in some countries in the region. As international politics have become more chaotic, the standing of the EU and NATO among the countries in the Black Sea has diminished. Persistent Russian attacks and influence operations against the West are partly to blame, but Brexit, U.S. trade policies, the deterioration of relations with Turkey, and declining secularism and growing nationalism in Turkey were also cited as contributing factors. In the aftermath of the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, questions were raised at regional level regarding the usefulness of a pro-Western stance when the West did nothing to protect Georgia and Ukraine in their hours of need. In this context, prior to developing a coherent strategy, the West needs to actively restore its damaged reputation and get relations with Turkey, which for decades was seen as a beacon of westernization in the South Caucasus, on a better course.

Several participants observed that there is no purely military solution to security in the Black Sea. An effective Western strategy must first do better in competing with Russia for the aspirations of citizens in the Black Sea region. This requires more effective and better integrated strategic communications efforts, as well as efforts to counter cyber and hybrid threats.

There is also a need for more a credible and sustainable military deterrent posture. Romania and Bulgaria cannot confront Russia by themselves, and Turkey's commitment to the alliance in a future crisis with Russia has become uncertain. NATO and like-minded partners in the region may not need to match Russian military capabilities across the board. One way to enhance deterrence could be to deploy advanced air defense and coastal defense systems in Romania and Bulgaria to counter the effectiveness of Russian offensive missile threats across the Black Sea. Continued assistance to Ukraine and Georgia in the development of their national defense capabilities, as the United States and other governments are doing, also contributes to regional deterrence. One participant also suggested that NATO allies would do well to ponder what they might be willing to do to assist Ukraine and Georgia in the event

of further Russian military aggression, including issuing a serious warning backed by credible threats of retaliation.

Another participant suggested that a possible starting point for improved regionalization would be ad hoc strategic bilateral partnerships on mutual priorities and an attempt to think about cooperation flexibly and creatively, with opt-ins and opt-outs for potential spoilers, while bringing in NATO and the EU where and when possible. There was also discussion of whether existing mechanisms for regional cooperation, such as the Southeast European Defense Ministerial (SEDM), could be utilized to pursue limited new regional initiatives on common concerns. Others called for more visible EU and Western engagement in the region on nonmilitary issues, including reenergized peace negotiations, economic projects, regional infrastructure, and integration initiatives.

Finally, there was discussion of finding ways to move the fight outside the Black Sea region. There are other regions and issues where Russian interests are vulnerable. Like-minded allies and partners might try to identify those vulnerabilities, and then let the Kremlin know that further aggression in the Black Sea region will be countered in other areas of concern.