

NATO's Role in the Wider Black Sea Area

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NATO's Current Presence in the Wider Black Sea Area

The scope of actors currently engaged in the Wider Black Sea Area (WBSA) is unparalleled for the region. It includes not only states but a number of international organizations, blocs, and alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. NATO arrived at the Black Sea shortly after the alliance's creation, with Turkey's accession in 1952. However, the Black Sea never played a significant role in Cold War conflicts, remaining a peripheral region.

Since the end of the Cold War, much has changed. NATO gained freer access to the WBSA with the dissolution of the USSR, its major adversary. Most of the states in the WBSA rapidly expressed an interest in working with NATO through the framework of its "Partnership for Peace" program, and many followed up with more intensive partnership agendas. NATO-led military exercises have even taken place in the Black Sea.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the post-9/11 era, have influenced the WBSA to a certain degree and, arguably, NATO's role in the region. Bulgaria and Romania joined the alliance in 2004, advancing NATO's expansion into the Black Sea. NATO's operations in the Balkans and, even more, in Afghanistan made the WBSA central to the alliance's main concerns. Ukraine's and Georgia's applications for NATO Membership Action Plans (MAPs) have also contributed to the WBSA's significance.

Still, does NATO really have a greater presence in the region now than it did before? Even such a simple question can have very different answers. From one point of view, the fact that NATO now has three members in the WBSA instead of just one, by itself indicates a growing presence. Also, as noted, the alliance participates in various military exercises in the region, something that was not possible just a few years ago. Finally, the WBSA now consists entirely of NATO members, NATO aspirants, and

NATO partners. This has led some to observe that the Black Sea is becoming a “NATO lake.”

From a different standpoint, however, NATO is just one of many influential security actors in the region, some of whom are not necessarily pro-NATO. The security vacuum that emerged in the WBSA with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR still exists. While it is being filled by a range of security initiatives, new challenges have emerged. The region is very diverse when it comes to political models, economic levels, ideology, and military capabilities.

One might argue that NATO’s Black Sea flank is being constructed neither in its final nor ideal form. It probably remains one of NATO’s weakest regional dimensions. The alliance’s only outpost in the region for decades, Turkey continues to play a vital role in NATO’s Black Sea posture. However, Turkey is reevaluating its role in the region and is seeking a different security identity. While there is nothing to suggest that it will leave NATO or downgrade its participation in the alliance, Turkey is clearly taking a second look at its place in Euro-Atlantic cooperation, specifically its relations with the United States, NATO’s greatest power. The set of factors affecting this ongoing debate include Turkey’s becoming a stronger player economically and turning into a “regional superpower” militarily; its ambitions with regard to Turkic states and ethnic groups in the region; the U.S. war in Iraq and the influence it has on the Kurdish separatist movement; its being kept at the doorstep of the European Union for too long (with neither the United States nor NATO being able to help in this regard); energy and generally broader cooperation with Russia; and growing Islamism. All these factors contribute to a specific position for Turkey with regard to NATO’s presence in the WBSA, with Ankara claiming that regional states are capable of providing enough security for themselves.

This assessment, however, does not seem to correspond to reality. There have been quite a few regional security initiatives in the WBSA in recent years, including two that Turkey has supported: the Black Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) and “Black Sea Harmony.” Both of them, though, are far from being efficient and viable tools for enhancing regional security and addressing existing and emerging challenges. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation organization (BSEC) and the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development are not as active as they could be and, in any case, are poorly equipped to address the broader security concerns of the region. This leaves NATO, with its resources and potential, as the only viable collective security mechanism for the WBSA.

As Turkey reconsiders its regional role, the new Black Sea NATO members, Bulgaria and Romania, are still learning to be part of NATO’s working security arrangement. Moreover, both of them clearly lack the resources to independently promote a Euro-Atlantic presence in the region. As NATO continues to work with and through its three existing Black Sea members, it may want to consider other potential members in the region that could enable the alliance to play a more active regional role.

The Russian Federation has rather ambivalent relations with NATO. On the one hand, it is involved in an unprecedented number of joint activities with NATO. It enjoys special status as a privileged partner of NATO and has a large mission at NATO headquarters. At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, then-Russian president Vladimir Putin attended as a very special guest (a privilege many others have been denied).

On the other hand, many in the Russian political elite, military, and public are deeply suspicious of NATO. They do not see NATO as a partner, let alone as an ally or friend. Moscow has objected to all recent waves of NATO's eastward enlargement and remains an even stauncher opponent of Ukrainian and Georgian membership. The Russian ruling class has initiated a wide-scale and well-organized anti-NATO campaign in both Russia and neighboring states. At the same time, no coherent or clear explanations have ever been given for why Russia sees NATO as a threat and, specifically, why it sees future enlargement as a menace to Russian interests. A rosy scenario for the future of NATO-Russia relations seems unlikely; among other things, Russia remains determined to prevent NATO from playing a more active role in the WBSA.

The Wider Black Sea Area and NATO: Questions for the Immediate Future

Still, there is much NATO could do to address the immediate security concerns of the WBSA. NATO is in a position to provide the right type of security, one that is of high quality and corresponds to most of today's challenges, including "soft security" threats. Based on Euro-Atlantic values and standards, NATO-led security would bring not only physical safety, judged by numbers of tanks and war planes, but also a broader sort of security, which would allow for the protection of human rights, free and fair elections, free press, economic growth, and social development. It would help the states of the WBSA address grave environmental and energy challenges and the illegal trafficking of humans, drugs, and weapons. NATO is also likely to continue serving as an active agent for democracy promotion, a role that should be highly welcomed throughout the region.

Several critical factors and developments will influence NATO's role in the WBSA in the coming years. NATO's transformation, namely its adaptation to the security situation generated by the end of the Cold War, is still far from over. It takes time for an organization like NATO to define its new mission, functions, and methods. We are continuing to witness not only NATO's conceptual search but also its institutional evolution. Discussion within the alliance is often heated, which is natural as each member has its own interests and agenda. At the same time, even with all its challenges and difficulties, NATO is not an organization in crisis. In fact, its current problems should lead to an even stronger NATO. As it stands, the alliance is the only effective and reliable mechanism for securing the Euro-Atlantic space.

Second, the future of NATO and its role in the WBSA will be determined by the outcome of the ongoing discussion about the alliance's expansion in the region. NATO members appear to be far from reaching a consensus on this matter. Such a consensus should be found relatively soon, however, as its absence is limiting NATO's potential in the region while halting the security aspirations of the candidate states.

Third, debates on NATO activities lying outside its traditional area of responsibility are of great significance. The eventual result of NATO's mission in Afghanistan will be pivotal. NATO's future role in the WBSA will depend on what sort of lessons the alliance takes away from its experience in Afghanistan. An isolationist attitude will lead to a more limited and restrained NATO stance on the WBSA. On the other hand, if NATO concludes that it should stay the course in reaching outside its traditional area,

becoming a more assertive global player, and remaining a security player in the wider Middle East, this would automatically lead to calls for a more active role for the alliance in the WBSA.

Finally, much will depend on NATO's relations with Russia. It will be crucial to see if Russia can become NATO's friendly partner in the Black Sea area or if it will continue to oppose the alliance in the region.

At the moment, NATO does not have a clear strategy or vision for the WBSA. One could speculate why: ongoing internal debates on NATO's mission in today's world; continued adjustment to earlier waves of enlargement; preoccupation with NATO's current mission in Afghanistan; and a desire not to irritate Russia, which still considers much of the WBSA its own backyard. A strategy should emerge sooner rather than later, however. Without one, NATO is doomed to act blindly in the region. The time has come for the alliance to decide on the significance of the WBSA for Euro-Atlantic security, the regional challenges it faces, and the methods that could be used to counter those challenges and bring greater security to the Black Sea.

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