

Black Sea Security: Reviving U.S. Policy Toward the Region

Testimony Of James J. Townsend before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Europe

October 27, 2021

Chairman Shaheen, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the Subcommittee on Europe, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Black Sea Security: Reviving U.S. policy toward the region.

The US faces a threat from Russia along a frontier, beginning in Alaska and ending in Southern Europe at the Black Sea—the anchor of NATO’s southern flank. Along this line, almost daily Russian forces test the defenses of NATO Allies and Partners. Russia also employs hybrid, or “grey area” tactics such as cyber-attacks, disinformation or aggressive military exercises to bully or intimidate these nations. Just last week Russian combat aircraft were intercepted close to the Alaskan border probing our defenses.

For the Russians, a critical part of this frontier is the Black Sea region; not just because it is home to Russia’s Black Sea fleet and an important trade route for Russian exports, but more importantly as a defensive buffer and bastion that protects Russia from threats emanating from the south and from which Russia can project power outwards into the Mediterranean and the region surrounding the Black Sea.

The restoration of Russian military capability in the Black Sea is well documented since the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Russian-occupied Crimea now encompasses significant ground forces, combat aircraft, and new naval vessels, all protected by advanced sensors and missile systems. Included in this Russian modernization are six new KILO-class submarines equipped with Kalibr-class cruise missiles which can strike deep into Europe. This deep strike capability was famously demonstrated in 2015 when Russian Kalibr cruise missiles were fired 900 miles over Iran and Iraq and into Syria from Russian ships in the Caspian Sea. From this protected bastion, the Russians have been able to reestablish its naval presence in the Mediterranean which is felt as far away as Libya.

This geopolitical balance in the Black Sea wasn't always this way. In 2007, the Black Sea was ringed by nations who were either NATO Allies or Partners on the road to membership. Today, that political geography has changed dramatically with Russian forces partially occupying the two NATO Partners, Ukraine and Georgia, to keep them out of the Alliance, and a NATO ally, Turkey, whose bilateral relationship is stronger with NATO's adversary Russia than with most NATO Allies.

This geostrategic shift has not been lost on the US or NATO, but action taken to strengthen deterrence in the region has been slow and composed of half-measures. Unlike in the Baltics immediately after the invasion of Ukraine, no NATO battlegroups have been deployed to the region or NATO command structure put in place to rebuild deterrence. Instead, NATO provided a "tailored forward presence" based on Romanian efforts to establish a Headquarters unit and a multinational brigade that could be offered to NATO in the event conflict erupted.

The US was more proactive, periodically sending guided missile cruisers into the Black Sea to establish presence. The US also began to conduct air and ground exercises with regional allies, rotate forces and air assets into Romania and invested millions to improve training areas in Romania and Bulgaria and upgrade Romanian air bases, especially the large Mihail Kogalniceanu (MK) airbase used as a hub for US force deployments. As Secretary of Defense Austin's recent trip to the region demonstrates, the Biden Administration recognizes its importance; however, what long term priority the Administration will give US force presence in the Black Sea region is still unclear.

Unlike the Nordic/Baltic region, the complex politics and history of the Black Sea region make it difficult to develop either a regional or a NATO approach to strengthen deterrence. NATO initiatives to establish a presence in the Black Sea usually run afoul of Turkey, which considers itself the guardian of the Black Sea. To minimize Allied presence in its backyard, Turkey blocks NATO Black Sea initiatives by reassuring Allies that the Turkish Navy has the Black Sea well in hand. Recently, the Turks have cited not wanting to unsettle the Russians as their reason for blocking NATO efforts. Romania presents a bright spot by taking responsibility for its own defense, dramatically increasing defense spending to purchase the Patriot missile system, the HIMARS artillery system and F-16s. Bulgaria too is slowly rebuilding its military capability but is hampered by a history of low defense spending and political unease with appearing anti-Russian.

NATO Allies individually are helping to strengthen NATO presence in the Black Sea. Along with the US Navy, the UK, the Dutch and France periodically send warships to "show the flag", most famously the HMS Defender and the Dutch ship Evertsen which were the subject of harassment by Russian air and naval units. Just last week, two B-1 bombers were intercepted over the Black Sea by Russian combat aircraft as Secretary of Defense Austin was visiting the region.

Given the threat posed by this growing Russian buildup, the NATO and US responses have been comparatively light when compared to the response in the Baltic Sea which included NATO battlegroup deployments along with major air and sea exercises. Such a seemingly lower priority given the Black Sea has likely not escaped the attention of Moscow.

It has not escaped the attention of Beijing either. While much of my testimony today has focused on the Russian military buildup, China has entered the region as well, not as a military power but as a financial and economic one, taking advantage of the underdeveloped areas of Southern Europe to build infrastructure, ports and railroads with strings attached. China's Belt and Road Initiative has permeated the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean regions, from Turkey and Greece, into Italy, Egypt and the Balkans, where Chinese trade and financial deals have bought them political leverage influencing decisions even in the EU.

It would be dangerous to continue giving the growing Russian dominance in the Black Sea region a low priority. This Russian perception emboldened Russian naval forces to act with impunity in 2018 when they fired on and captured Ukrainian naval vessels in the Sea of Azov without fear of retribution, confident that Russia had a free hand in the Black Sea. The longer we and NATO wait before we make a serious investment in Black Sea deterrence, both militarily and economically, the harder it will be to do so as conflict nears...or impossible to do so as conflict erupts.

To counter and deter Russian activity in the Black Sea region the US and its Allies at NATO need to develop a strategy that encompasses not just military actions but economic, political, and developmental assistance, such as the infrastructure-focused "Three Seas Initiative", to reduce the areas of economic and developmental weakness in the region that Putin and Chinese President Xi exploit. What I provide below are six suggestions for the military component of such a strategy:

- **Keep a focus on Europe and the threat from Russia even as we turn to the Indo-Pacific:**
 - As pressing as the challenge is in the Indo-Pacific, the US should not lose focus on the Russia threat in Europe. As the Administration drafts its Global Posture Review, US military posture in Europe should reflect a high priority to strengthening deterrence in the Black Sea region.
- **Rebalance NATO force posture in Europe**
 - Since 2014, NATO command and force structure has focused on the Northern flank; this now needs to be rebalanced with a focus on strengthening NATO's southern flank. The rebalancing should include NATO making the Black Sea regional plan a high priority for accelerated completion as well as upgrading its "Tailored Forward Presence" in Romania by replacing the Romanian multinational brigade with a NATO Battlegroup. Additionally, the Romanian-run Headquarters Multinational Corps South-East should become a standing NATO regional command to lead the expansion of NATO activities in the region to help strengthen its southern flank.
- **Increased presence of NATO and US forces in the Black Sea region**
 - While NATO and the US and its Allies have recently increased deployments to the Black Sea region, the rhythm and number of NATO and Allied deployments and exercises can still be increased so that there is almost a permanent presence of

NATO forces in the region. The sophistication of NATO and US-led exercises can be increased as well, particularly scaling up the annual SEA BREEZE exercise to a larger and more complex one like the Russian Kavkaz exercise. All Allies with navies, including the Standing NATO Maritime Groups, should rotate deployments to the Black Sea to provide a constant naval presence, thereby demonstrating NATO unity while also sharing the burden of the deployments.

- **Improve maritime domain awareness and intelligence collection and analysis in the Black Sea region**
 - NATO still has an incomplete picture of Russian military activity in the region. Romania could host a Black Sea intelligence fusion center to develop a common operating picture of Russian activity in the Black Sea, analyzing intelligence collected from NATO, Partner or Allied assets such as drones or P-8s periodically deployed to Romania, so that NATO better understands Russian operations.
- **Repair Relations with Turkey**
 - As difficult and frustrating as current relations are with President Erdogan, the US and Turkey need to repair their formerly close relationship. This will take time, but Turkey is the key to control of the Black Sea; Turkey's return to the Western fold would be a blow to Putin. To do this, we must help the Turks find a way out of the corner they've painted themselves in by buying the S-400 and being expelled from the F-35 program. We must also find a way to meet the Turks halfway in their tech transfers desires as part of their potential purchase of the Patriot air defense system. Finally, we should accelerate the time when we can wind down honorably the US military relationship with the Syrian Kurds (the YPG) in the fight against ISIS. The US training and equipping of the Syrian Kurds is the biggest obstacle in repairing relations with Turkey.
- **Security Assistance**
 - Romania and to a lesser extent Bulgaria are the core of NATO's deterrent force posture in the Black Sea. Partners Georgia and Ukraine, even while partially occupied by Russian forces, can still play an important role in Black Sea security. However, despite improvements in defense spending, these four Black Sea nations need financial assistance to acquire assets that could greatly improve their ability to strengthen deterrence. The Administration should consider sending to the Congress a tailored, targeted, multi-year security assistance funding package that helps these four Black Sea Allies and Partners to acquire capabilities such as reconnaissance drones, ASW platforms, mining and anti-ship missile systems that will significantly increase their ability to complicate Russian Black Sea fleet operations.

I have provided six suggestions to improve NATO deterrence in the Black Sea region. But what is especially important is the development of a strategy that involves our European allies and the EU that can weave military and economic/financial initiatives together to help this region develop

and overcome political and economic weaknesses that Russia and China exploit. It is not too late to develop such an integrated strategy and bring Allies, Partners, NATO and the EU along to help implement it. But such a strategy will not work without US leadership. It does not have to be the US that shoulders this burden alone, but it does fall to the US to lead the way.

I look forward to your questions.