

Policy Brief  
Special Edition

September 2021

**Author**

Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe



# NATO and the Black Sea in 2030: With or Without Ukraine and Georgia?

---

## About the Author



### Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe

Professor of International Relations, Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: [sacikmese@khas.edu.tr](mailto:sacikmese@khas.edu.tr).

Sinem Akgül Açıkmeşe is a Professor of International Relations and Jean Monnet Chair holder on Hybrid Threats in the EU at Kadir Has University (KHAS). She holds a BA in International Relations as well as an MA in European Union-International Relations from Ankara University. She studied at the European Institute of London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) for her MSc degree in European Studies. She has completed her PhD in European Studies-International Relations at Ankara University (2008). She was a Jean Monnet fellow at LSE (2001-2002), Turkish Academy of Sciences fellow (2002-2008), visiting PhD student at London School of Economics (2005-2006), Sasakawa Young Leaders fellow (2005-2007), visiting scholar to IGCC-University of California-San Diego as a US Department of State Fellow (2007), Black Sea Young Reformers fellow (2010-2011), visiting researcher at Stellenbosch University (2016), visiting scholar at Harvard University (2017) in support of her research on Security Studies, EU foreign and neighbourhood policies specifically from a security perspective, European integration, enlargement and Turkey-EU relations. Prof. Açıkmeşe has a teaching experience of about 20 years, at various institutions including Ankara University and TOBB-University of Economics and Technology on a full-time capacity before she joined KHAS in 2011. She is currently the associate editor of *European Review of International Studies*, Governing Board Member as well as the Secretary-General of the International Relations Council of Turkey (IRCT) and served as a Member of the Governing Council of the International Studies Association (ISA) (2018-2020). She has coordinated and took part in several international research and exchange projects including EU-FP7 Marie-Curie Actions, Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships and Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Actions.

### FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This Working Paper is funded by the Defence and Security Foresight Group, which receives funding from the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program designed to facilitate collaboration and mobilize knowledge between the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and academia and other experts on defence and security issues. Through its Targeted Engagement Grants, collaborative networks, scholarships, and expert briefings, MINDS works and collaborates with key partners to strengthen the foundation of evidence-based defence policymaking. These partnerships drive innovation by encouraging new analyses of emerging global events, opportunities, and crises while supporting a stronger defence and security dialogue with Canadians.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper aims to explain the current dynamics and the potential future form of NATO's Black Sea strategy. The overarching questions are: first, to what extent has NATO been an influential player in the region?; and second, how would a robust NATO Black Sea strategy look in 2030? In order to answer these questions, among various variables, this paper will only look into NATO's relations with Ukraine and Georgia as littoral countries that aspire to receive, and that have been promised, NATO's membership. Accordingly, it will look at NATO's current policies, especially after the Georgian war in 2008 and since Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 when Russia expanded its presence in the region in a more aggressive manner. Thereafter, in order to forecast NATO's robust Black Sea strategy in 2030, this paper will include three scenarios: 1) Ukraine and Georgia as members; 2) Ukraine and Georgia as non-members and less-integrated; and 3) Ukraine and Georgia as non-members, but deeply integrated into NATO's structures.

## **BACKGROUND: THREE TRAJECTORIES OF NATO'S THE BLACK SEA POLICIES**

Black Sea is of vital interest to NATO, since it is surrounded by littoral allies, Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey; by NATO's partners, Georgia and Ukraine; and by Russia as the primary security threat for the Alliance. Thus, NATO's policies towards the region progress on three trajectories.

On the first pathway, controversies about enlargement notwithstanding, NATO formulated benevolent policies towards Russia since the end of the Cold War until the Russian annexation of Crimea and its attacks against Donbas in 2014, as part of its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and through the NATO-Russia Council. However, since the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territories including Crimea, NATO has been following a dual-track policy towards Russia, including "dialogue" and "deterrence" (Anastasov 2018). In NATO's 2030 document, the diagnosis is that "Russia will remain the main military threat to the Alliance" (NATO Reflection Group 2020: 25).

On the second pathway, NATO shapes the regional policies with recourse to the assets and capabilities of its Allies, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania. As the oldest ally in the Black Sea since 1952, Turkey presents many opportunities for NATO by having the second-largest army in the Alliance, by contributing to several NATO operations, hosting the NATO Land Command, and, more recently, by assuming the charge of the NATO High Readiness Force. Turkey also poses certain challenges, with strained relations over Turkey's acquisition of S-400 defense systems from Russia and the limitations of passage on NATO vessels through the Straits according to the 1936 Montreux Convention. Alongside Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania are the implementers of NATO's Black Sea strategy; first, as partners for over a decade after the Cold War, and then, as members since 2004. Currently, Romania hosts the NATO enhanced air policing mission. Bulgaria hosts the Peacekeeping Training Centre. Both have assumed responsibilities in NATO's Tailored Forward Presence since 2016.

The third trajectory covers NATO's relations with Ukraine and Georgia as non-NATO littoral countries, who have joined the PfP in 1994. Both countries have set NATO membership as their strategic objective. They participate in Intensified Dialogues with the Alliance. However, they have not yet been invited for Membership Action Plans, which is the crucial stepping stone for membership. In the meantime, NATO has been assisting those countries through NATO-Ukraine

Commission and NATO-Georgia Commission as they go about the relevant security sector reforms required for membership. Still, a major factor that determines their fate and integration with NATO have been the Russian military presence in the Black Sea and Moscow's resistance to their integration in Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union (EU).

## **CURRENT CONTEXT: COUNTERING THE RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE BLACK SEA**

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the military balance in the Black Sea shifted drastically. NATO began to increase its presence further in the region as a response to Russia's aggressiveness. Even though the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 could have provided an impetus for strengthening NATO's policies towards the Black Sea region to balance Russian assertiveness, the Alliance limited itself to declare support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. NATO remained almost silent when Russia established land bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. However, it became more evident with Russia's Crimea annexation that Russia aims at maintaining control over its immediate neighborhood through irredentist strategies and uses multiple means to increase its influence (Schmidt 2017). The seizure of Ukrainian navy vessels entering the Sea of Azov via Kerch Strait in November 2018 was another clear sign that Russia became the strategic game-setter in the Black Sea region.

With full control over Crimea, Russia has expanded its various Anti-Access-Area Denial (A2AD) assets. These capabilities have enabled Russia to monitor NATO's military activities in the region, thereby increasing the deterrence potential of Russia (Minich 2018). Simultaneously, Russia modernized its Black Sea fleet by including additional submarines, frigates, and missiles mostly in its Sevastopol base, which has facilitated Russia's engagement in the Syrian civil war (Schmidt 2017). Minich (2018) suggests that "ships of the Black Sea Fleet have fired Kalibr missiles at targets in Syria" and that "Russia supplied Bastion systems from Crimea to Syria". In other words, that Russia can project more power in the Black Sea region has repercussions in adjacent regions, whether in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, or even the Baltic region.

Russia also increased the number of its military personnel in Crimea, which hosts the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet and two radar stations located at Sevastopol since 2014. Russian forces were numbered at about 28,000 in 2017 and still reported as such by Russia in addition to the 3000 personnel in the Donbas region (Binnendijk 2020: 9, IISS 2121: 212). In the spring of 2021, Russia expanded its military presence in Crimea as well as on the northern and eastern borders of Ukraine (The Guardian 2021). Thus, Russian might in the Black Sea has become a significant source of insecurity for NATO.

At the Warsaw Summit of 2016, NATO decided to design Tailored Forward Presence in the Southeast part of the Alliance in order to counter Russian power in the region (NATO 2016). This mission encompasses land components in Romania, maritime component using Bulgarian and Romanian ports and an air component led by UK Typhoon fighter aircraft deployments (Schmidt 2017). Allied vessels have since been entering the Black Sea more frequently for patrolling purposes and for collective regional and multinational military exercises. Furthermore, as explained in the Military Balance 2021, "Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in Ukraine's East" has altered the threat perceptions so much that the European NATO members in 2020 "have increased

their defence expenditure “reaching 1,64% of GDP, up from 1,25% of GDP in 2014” (IISS 2021: 5).

In addition to strengthening the military posture of NATO through its Black Sea Allies, NATO aims at supporting the defense capacities of littoral partners. At the Wales Summit of 2014 and at the Warsaw Summit of 2016, NATO leaders endorsed packages for Georgia and Ukraine, to boost their defense capacity and foster their cooperation with NATO (NATO 2014; NATO 2016) so that they could be better prepared for future membership, as promised at the Bucharest Summit of 2008 (NATO 2008) and at subsequent NATO meetings. As non-NATO littoral states, Ukraine and Georgia also contribute to NATO’s military operations and exercises, in their efforts to prove that they are worthy partners. Ukraine has participated in Operation Resolute Support-Afghanistan with thirteen personnel and KFOR-Kosovo with forty personnel, whereas Georgia sent 860 personnel, one infantry battalion to the Afghan mission (ISS 2121: 186, 211).

Although NATO strives to act as a security provider in the Black Sea, it appears that there is a capability-expectation gap relative Russia’s leadership and great power claims in the region. That is to say, NATO cannot form a robust Black Sea strategy in which it assumes regional security actorness. Among other variables, NATO’s future strategies rely on NATO’s relations with Ukraine and Georgia, since they are the states most vulnerable against Russian aggressiveness.

## **FUTURE SCENARIOS: IS THERE A THIRD WAY?**

NATO’s Reflection Group (2020) recommended in its 2030 projections that “NATO should seek to expand and strengthen partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia as vulnerable democracies that seek membership and are under constant external and internal pressure from Russia”. And so, the door is not closed for their membership for near future. However, NATO has not yet offered Membership Action Plans to those countries. Thus, the highly likely scenario is that both countries will not be members in the short run. So, what are the implications of their membership and non-membership both for NATO, and for Ukraine and Georgia per se? Is it possible to devise a third way between membership and non-membership?

***In Scenario 1, Ukraine and Georgia are members by 2030.*** This is the best-case scenario for Ukraine and Georgia since both countries would be under the collective defense guarantee of NATO under Article 5. For NATO, their membership would entail a greater risk of defense and hard balancing against Russia’s any aggressive behavior in the future, despite NATO’s enhanced power projections in its southeast. According to Larsen (2021), “defending a country the size of Ukraine or as remote as Georgia puts in doubt NATO’s ability to deploy the substantial in-theater and backup forces and equipment this would require.” Accordingly, this is a scenario that would feature opposition from certain members such as Germany and France, since they would not risk Russian aggression as well as a greater burden of defense-spending for the region. Scenario 1 is also undesirable for Russia, because the accession or even the offer of a Membership Action Plan would mean Russia’s loss of control and prestige.

***In Scenario 2, Ukraine and Georgia are not members by 2030, and integration with NATO remains at the minimum level, without further adjustments.*** This is the worst-case scenario for

Ukraine and Georgia. They would neither be protected by Western security structures at the desired level nor be satisfactorily supported in their security-defense sector reforms by NATO. Both would be vulnerable to Russian aggression and Georgia would be locked into the South Caucasus. For the region and for NATO, this creates an undesired outcome, since the balance of power would remain strongly in Russia's favor and there is the risk that the Black Sea turns into a Russian Sea. Obviously, this is the best possible scenario for Russia since it would consolidate its great power status in the region and its leadership role as the "protector of Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia" (Flanagan et al 2020: 24).

***In Scenario 3, Ukraine and Georgia are not members by 2030, and integration with NATO deepens with further adjustments.*** Though it may not be the most-desired outcome, this situation would be acceptable for Ukraine and Georgia in the medium run since they would still have the opportunity to transform their armed forces and put the structural reforms in place to be consistent with NATO's standards and to receive the support of the Alliance. Moreover, with more NATO presence in the region as a whole, they would be more secure even though the risk of Russian aggression would still exist. For NATO, despite the lack of consensus given the opposition of Baltic members, this would be the best solution for maintaining Alliance cohesion. On the one hand, it would alleviate the security risks of the region by boosting the defense postures of Ukraine and Georgia as well as through the full implementation of its Tailored Forward Presence. On the other hand, it would consolidate its dual-track approach with Russia by also keeping the dialogue channels open. Russia would regard this option as the second-best, yet not the most desired. It would retain significant leverage in the Black Sea region.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATO AND CANADA**

For a robust NATO strategy in the Black Sea, Scenario 3 offers the best balance between risk and benefit, and it has also been the official policy of NATO so far which has been reflected in NATO 2030 document, which promises increased engagement with Eastern partners, Ukraine and Russia (NATO Reflection Group 2020). However, to keep Georgia and Ukraine as close partners and not to antagonize Russia, several policy prescriptions follow:

- NATO should not hesitate to emphasize on any occasion its open-door policy towards the non-NATO littoral partners.
- Instead of a "membership action plan" in the near future, NATO should revise its assistance packages and prepare a new or revised roadmap for enhancing defense capacities and resilience of both Ukraine and Georgia. NATO should guide both countries' armies in their continued transformation from a Soviet legacy to a more modernized one. Canada could take the lead in drafting such a middle-way roadmap, not in the form of a MAP, but in the form of a modernization/enhancement plan, which could also be incorporated in Canada's UNIFIER Operation.
- Military exercises for issues of low-politics, such as for dealing with illegal trafficking through the Black Sea, could be a way to increase the involvement of Ukraine and Georgia in NATO-led operations. Canada could take the lead in proposing such exercises in order to enhance practices of military regional cooperation.
- NATO should keep its dialogue channels with Russia open despite perceiving it as an adversary. That said, NATO's push back against Russian militarization and provocations in the Black Sea is inevitable for the Alliance. This delicate balance of not antagonizing Russia, but not freeing its hands in the region, could be maintained by Canada's leadership and diplomacy.

- A regional sub-grouping should be formed between littoral members of NATO and non-littoral partners, which could serve as a platform for exchange of opinion and for discussing potential threat scenarios. Canada could serve as the interlocutor.

## REFERENCES

- Anastasov, Pavel (2018). “The Black Sea Region: A Critical Intersection.” *NATO Review*. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2018/05/25/the-black-sea-region-a-critical-intersection/index.html>. Accessed: 9 July 2021.
- Binnendijk, Anika (2020). Understanding Russian Black Sea Power Dynamics Through National Security Gaming. RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3000/RR3094/RAND\\_RR3094.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR3000/RR3094/RAND_RR3094.pdf). Accessed: 9 July 2021.
- Flanagan, Stephen J. et al (2020). *Russia, NATO and Black Sea Security*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (2021). *The Military Balance 2021*. London: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- Larsen, Henrik B. L. (2021). *Why NATO Should not Offer Ukraine and Georgia Membership Action Plans*. War on the Rocks, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/why-nato-should-not-offer-ukraine-and-georgia-membership-action-plans/>. Accessed: 11 July 2021.
- Minich, Ruslan (2018). *Russia Shows its Military Might in the Black Sea and Beyond*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-shows-its-military-might-in-the-black-sea-and-beyond/>. Accessed: 11 July 2021.
- NATO (2008). *Bucharest Summit Declaration*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm). Accessed: 11 July 2021.
- NATO (2014). *Wales Summit Declaration*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm). Accessed: 11 July 2021.
- NATO (2016), *Warsaw Summit Communique*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm). Accessed: 11 July 2021.
- NATO Reflection Group (2020). *NATO 2030: United for a New Era*. [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf). Accessed: 11 July 2021.
- Schmidt, Ulla (2017). Advancing Stability in the Black Sea Region. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2017-11/2017%20-%2020159%20CDS%2017%20E%20rev.%201%20-%20BLACK%20SEA%20-%20SCHMIDT%20REPORT.pdf>. Accessed: 9 July 2021.
- The Guardian. “NATO Tells Russia to Stop Military Buildup Around Ukraine.” 13 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/13/nato-tells-russia-to-stop-military-buildup-around-ukraine>. Accessed: 9 July 2021.