

NATO's Expansion in the Black Sea Region and Russia's Response (2014-2024)

BY

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DEDICATION

To my parents **Mirza Muhammad Kabir Tabasum Jarral** and **Zahida Parveen**, my spouse **Farah Jhangir** and my sisters who have been my constant source of love and encouragement throughout my academic pursuits.

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List of Abbreviations

A2/AD	anti-access/area-denial
ARC	Autonomous Republic of Crimea
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSEC	Black Sea Economic Cooperation
BSF	Black Sea Fleet
BSR	Black Sea Region
BSSA	Black Sea Security Act
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EDF	European Defense Fund
EDI	European Deterrence Initiative
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
eFP	Enhanced Forward Presence
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
HMS Defender	Her Majesty's Ship Defender
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
MAMBA	Modular Advanced Missile-Backed Artillery
MAP	Member Action Plan
MLRS	Multiple Launch Rocket System
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NRF	NATO Response Force
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
REPowerEU	Renewable Energy Power Europe Union
RSC	Regional Security Complex
RSCs	Regional Security Complexes
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
S-400	Surface-to-Air Missile System 400
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SM-3	Standard Missile-3
tFP	Tailored Forward Presence
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
WW1	World War I
WW2	World War II

Abstract

In 2014, Russia gained control of Crimea which strongly impacted regional geopolitics, since this allowed Moscow to enter the Black Sea and bulks its influence everywhere. Combined with Russia gaining Crimea and NATO deepening its involvement in the region, Ukraine's ambition to join NATO became a major reason that led to regional tensions and, in the end, a full war. This research seeks to examine the political and security changes in the Black Sea Region between 2014 and 2024, especially paying attention to Russia's actions in response to NATO's eastward growth and what its overall strategic plans might be. To conduct this research, the qualitative comparative case study methodology mixes primary materials, archival records, academic writings and official policy reports. Key findings illustrate that Russia believes that NATO's influence in the Black Sea makes it an existential threat, so it has become more aggressive toward neighboring countries there. Much of what NATO does is guided by the need to protect against threats and stop Russian forces from expanding. This study finds that the ongoing conflict has thrown regional peace into uncertainty and causes lasting security issues. This research underscores that a balanced policy is needed to handle security fears and encourage talks among all involved, so as to avoid escalation in the Black Sea Region.

Introduction

The seizure of Crimea in 2014 has sparked the geopolitical competition between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea Region (BSR) by altering the political balance and accelerating tensions in the BSR. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 only heightened historical reprisals and further intensified a power struggle between Russia and NATO. Central to international concerns over security, Black Sea is positioned to bring Europe and Asia together at a key channel of military and energy routes and simultaneously with the regions of the Middle East. Instead, annexation threw many established security systems into profound disorder, leading to increasingly massive military investments and uneven political realignments that have lasting consequences for the area's stability and which influence both a European safety and global power roles. The diplomatic relations are more complicated as it sucks the major powers in territorial disputes with the desire to have influence over those Ukraine, Georgia, and Türkiye, especially Türkiye, because of the dominant resource control objectives.

Responding to what was perceived as an encroachment on its own sphere of influence, Russia has put in place a cacophony of military, political and diplomatic moves against NATO's influence in the region. Moscow has regarded as an attack to its regional sovereignty and direct challenge to its national security at the expansion of NATO, including of countries on Russian borders. The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the manners of Russia response to the proliferation of NATO into the BSR after Russian annexation of Crimea. In particular, it will look at the strategic motives for Russia's actions, the nature of the military adjustments, its diplomatic work, and the fate of this confrontation on the level of regional and global stability. After Crimea was annexed, Russia has increased dramatically its presence in the BSR by modernizing its navy and further fortifying key coastal areas including Crimea itself. But Russia's expansion of its naval fleet, comprising cutting-edge submarines, destroyers and coastal defense systems, is meant to prove control over those vital maritime routes and that it should dominate this strategically vital area. Outside, Russia has staged military drills and raised its profile in the disputed waters, making a point to deter NATO and its allies. Both bilaterally and multilaterally — through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization — Moscow has used politically to build ties with non-Western countries and counter NATO's influence.

Russia has worked diplomatically to undermine NATO's cohesion by exploiting internal fissures, and spreading narratives that Western imperialism and foreign interventionism are at work within NATO's expansion in the BSR. Of greater concern to Russian planners is the growing militarization of the BSR, together with its growing strategic alignments, which foreshadow a broader contest for control over Eastern Europe and post-Soviet space. This geopolitical standoff goes far and wide affecting the security architecture of Europe far and wide, the balance of power at the global level, and increasing complexity as NATO and Russia try to avoid deterrence and maneuver in the wider region and with the force of international law. Russia has reacted to NATO enlargement in the same way as any other powerful nation it regards as threatening. It ensured that it would not be out-gunned and it sought to regain the dominant position it believed it deserved in decision making processes concerning its own security and the security of Europe as a whole. This study reviews current literature, policy documents and the analysis of expert opinions in order to provide a complete scope of the current security environment in the BSR. To initiate the academic discourse, it also hopes to expand the scope of strategic studies and expand the literature on international relations and power relations in a contested region.

Problem Statement

The conflict in the BSR has potential to get instigated as hegemonic struggle between NATO and Russia. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, there has been witnessed a qualitative increase in military intensity and diplomatic activity by NATO and Russia. The development of NATO policy towards the BSR has elicited varied effects as a catalyst to the geopolitics and the general security complex in the region. This study finds that the principal effects resulting from NATO expansion in the BSR i.e. enhanced significance of the BSR, rivalry between NATO and Russia, conflict hotspots, escalation of armed forces and strategic transit. This leads to insecurity of some geostrategic and geopolitical interests of Russia. To that, Russia has reacted in a way by raising military stakes, extending its relations and operation of military ventures. Therefore, there is the possibility of consequences flowing from the conflict of interest between NATO and Russia in the BSR, such as enhanced tension and vulnerability within the region, security risks, economic implications, human cost and geopolitical shift of the BSR. The issue therefore stems in analyzing the nature and strategic consequences of Russia to NATO enlargement.

Research Objectives

- To study the sources of geostrategic and geopolitical factors of NATO expansion in the BSR.
- To evaluate the Russia's respective strategies in achieving their stated objectives in the region.
- To analyze the potential long-term geopolitical implications of continued NATO expansion and Russian opposition in the BSR.

Research Questions

- i. Why has NATO been extending its troop presence eastward towards Black Sea ever since 2014?
- ii. Why NATO's enlargement along the BSR perceived as a threat to Russia?
- iii. How did this matter influence Russia's policies in the BSR?

Literature Review

For a research work to be effective, it should rely on the analysis of earlier studies because this forms the basis and gives useful understanding of previous efforts. It gives the researcher the chance to examine other important aspects of the main discussion. For this reason, numerous articles, web pages and reports etc. are examined in this research work.

Literature review is thematic in nature which is divided in three different parts. First part explores the historical account and rationale behind NATO's expansion in the BSR. Second part covers the Russia's response towards NATO's expansion in the BSR and third part covers the potential consequences of NATO-Russian conflict in the BSR. The identified categories of the literature review are mentioned in the following table:

NATO's Expansion in the BSR	Russia's Response in the BSR	Consequences of NATO-Russian Confrontation in the BSR
NATO's Expansion After the Cold War by Jan Eichler	Black Sea and NATO in the Age of Access-Denial by Francis Taylor, Octavian Manea	NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia by Kimberly Marten
Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategy by Stephen J. Flanagan and Irina A. Chindea	Black Sea Security Deadlocks: NATO-Russia Confrontation by Maryna Vorotnyuk	Security in Black Sea Region Before and After 2014 by Aslihan Anlar
NATO, 09 Jul. 2016	Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategy by Stephen J. Flanagan and Irina A. Chindea	Russia and its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions by Kristian Åtland and Ihor Kabanenko
A security strategy for Black Sea report by Atlantic Council	Russia's Militarization of the Black Sea: Implications for the United States and NATO by Hodges, B., Horrell, S., & Kuz, I.	Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force by Igor Delanoe
Toward a NATO Black Sea strategy by I. S. Joja,	How Geopolitical Competition in the Black Sea is redefining regional order by Dalay Galip, and Natalie Sabanadze	Russian-Turkish Relations in the Wider Black Sea Region: Cooperation and

		Competition by Pavel Shlykov
Not one inch: America, Russia, and the making of post-Cold War stalemate by Sarotte, Mary Elise		A Sea of Trouble. Black Sea Security Policies Between NATO and the European Union by Oana Elena Brânda
		NATO–Russia security challenges in the aftermath of Ukraine conflict: managing Black Sea security and beyond by S. Cross.
		Rising tensions in the Black Sea – lessons for NATO by M. Oleksiejuk
		Russia vs NATO @ Black Sea: Addressing Russian Military and Hybrid Pressure on NATO in the Black Sea Region by Columbia School of International and Public Affairs

Source: The researcher has developed the table.

The growth of NATO, along the BSR has been major post-Cold War shift since the end of the Cold War. The region is very important on account of its geographical location as a transport link between the Caspian, Mediterranean and Aegean Sea, thus it has a good opportunity to carry out trade with the Middle East. For this reason, Eichler said that NATO's growing interest in the BSR has been under the guise of democracy promotion as well as security cooperation in addition to energy diversification.¹

¹ Jan Eichler, "NATO's Expansion After the Cold War", Springer, 2022.

Flanagan and Chindea added that NATO has increasingly focused on the BSR in its security agenda, including dedication of more forces and equipment to the region.² At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO created the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic states and Poland, and adapted the tailored Forward Presence (tFP) concept for Romania and Bulgaria³. Although this approach was an asymmetrical one, and there were dedicated more attention and resources to fix it in the Baltic region than the BSR. In the same way, NATO's eastward expansion has affected the BSR by drawing new members with a Black Sea coastline including Romania and Bulgaria into the organization.⁴

Iulia-Sabina Joja argues that NATO must take prompt and direct action to keep the Black Sea region safe, as it is growing less secure. She talks about the significance of the region in stopping Russian actions, primarily following the Ukraine war. According to the author, everything in NATO now involves the activities of individual countries such as Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria. She seeks cooperation among nearby nations, stronger security by sea and greater support from Ukraine and Georgia to make sure the Black Sea basin remains safe in the future.⁵

The author, M. E. Sarotte, focuses on *Not one inch: America, Russia, and the making of post-Cold War stalemate* to explore how relationships between the countries shifted during the post-Cold War era and why expanding NATO to the east was so hard for both. Based on several recent sources and many interviews, Sarotte reports on the 1990 comments of U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in which he promised Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not go further eastward. It explains that support for democracy in Eastern Europe and dealing with Russia presented difficult issues for Presidents Bush and Clinton. Sarotte states that the decision to enlarge NATO and various American policies at that time hurt relations with Russia and laid the foundation for conflicts to follow; taking a different action might have made it possible for Europe to cooperate more.⁶

² Stephen J. Flanagan and Irina A. Chindea, "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategy", RAND Corporation, 2019.

³ NATO, 09 Jul. 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm

⁴ Report by Atlantic Council, "A security strategy for Black Sea", December 15, 2023.

⁵ Joja, I. S. "Toward a NATO Black Sea strategy", Middle East Institute, 2024.

⁶ Sarotte, Mary Elise. *Not one inch: America, Russia, and the making of post-Cold War stalemate*. Yale University Press, 2021.

This piece, “How Geopolitical Competition in the Black Sea is redefining regional order”, by Chatham House investigates how Russia’s increased presence has affected the BSR. By trying to dominate, Russia brought the region’s countries closer to joining Western political and security groups. Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey are boosting NATO collaboration, for instance through the Mine Countermeasures Task Group. Turkey secures the region’s safety, particularly by applying the Montreux Convention to manage the actions of foreign navies in Black Sea waters. According to the article, the Black Sea is linked to places like the Eastern Mediterranean and promoting a strong Western approach that increases Ukraine’s defense and encourages the EU and NATO to play a bigger role is important to stop Russia from further advancing.⁷

In turn, NATO’s expansion near the BSR has been an issue that Russia feels threatened by, thus it reacts. As claimed by Taylor and Manea, Russia regards NATO enlargement towards the east as a threat to the strategic stability and is implementing efforts toward strengthening its military, and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capacities, especially in the BSR.⁸ The increasing military assertiveness in the region compounded by the Russian occupation of Crimea, the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine, has seen Russia enhancing its defense in the region due to the deployment of NATO forces in the region. More particularly, Russia’s reaction to NATO’s operations in Black Sea area has been defined by the pursuit of strategies for counterbalancing NATO, upgrading its military power and asserting its hegemony in Black Sea area.⁹ This response seems to be a response to the situation of NATO enlargement and presence closer to the Russian borders including new tensions and competition in the BSR.

In “Russia, NATO and Black Sea Security”, Stephen J. Flanagan looks with other RAND Corporation researchers at the various methods used by Russia to keep the region independent from the West and under its own influence. They applied hybrid methods of fighting and also expanded their military, mostly after taking over Crimea. Moreover, after examining how Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan acted differently, the West found it difficult to build

⁷ Dalay, Galip, and Natalie Sabanadze. “How Geopolitical Competition in the Black Sea is redefining regional order.” *Chatham House* (2024).

⁸ Francis Taylor, Octavian Manea, “Black Sea and NATO in the Age of Access-Denial”, Editura Universității din București, 2018.

⁹ Maryna Vorotnyuk, “Black Sea Security Deadlocks: NATO-Russia Confrontation”, PIC Promotion of the Intercultural Cooperation, 2020.

unity in its policy. The authors suggest that focusing on strengthening defenses and stabilizing the country through better weapons, in addition to peacefully collaborating with Russia in the political, economic and information sectors, should be the main policy.¹⁰

In their report, Hodges, B., Horrell, S., and Kuz, I. mention that Russia is focused on the Black Sea to build its power and energy supply, mainly from the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa. According to the report, improvements in Russia's Black Sea Fleet and Southern Military District unsettled the whole region and led to the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022. Though the authors say complications may occur due to the war, Russia intends to stick to its plan in the Black Sea, so the US and NATO are encouraged to take action. Senior officials recommend having more NATO troops, maintaining permanent bases with soldiers on rotation, protecting from attacks in the air and sea and improving intelligence and surveillance. Furthermore, the report notes that ensuring economic safety is crucial and suggests that efforts are jointly carried out with the European Union, regional groups and nearby partners to protect energy and food security in the region from Russia.¹¹

Galip Dalay and Natalie Sabanadze studied how Russia's actions in the region have made the Black Sea a point of conflict among countries. Among Russia's violent acts are taking over Crimea, assisting separatists and building up its military. They say that through these actions, the countries accidentally helped with their integration into Western organizations by raising their involvement in NATO and continuing to matter due to their relationship with both NATO and Russia. The authors insist that the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean are now part of the same security area, so a united Western strategy should help to improve Ukraine's defense and deepen the EU and NATO's involvement to fight against Russian attempts to spread.¹²

There is evidence that the work of NATO in the Black Sea greatly affects international politics and the level of security in the region¹³. First, as a result of the conflict, NATO

¹⁰ Stephen J. Flanagan and Irina A. Chindea, "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategy", RAND Corporation, 2019.

¹¹ Hodges, B., Horrell, S., & Kuz, I. "Russia's Militarization of the Black Sea: Implications for the United States and NATO", Center for European Policy Analysis, 2022.

¹²Galip Dalay and Natalie Sabanadze, "How geopolitical competition in the Black Sea is redefining regional order", Chatham House, 2024.

¹³ Kimberly Marten, "NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia", Springer, 16 April 2020.

now considers the Black Sea to be crucial to its security efforts in the east. The Russian Navy benefits from the Black Sea as it is the primary passageway to the Mediterranean. Second, the activities NATO carries out in the BSR are seen as provocative by Russia which believes that NATO's Eastward expansion is hostile ¹⁴. The region has great importance to Russia, so it is trying to strengthen its defense through buildups similar to those of NATO.

Third, conflict centers as Crimea and Eastern Ukraine remained under Russian accurate control to restrict the Euro-Atlantic integration of the neighboring countries. These conflicts have been managed under the pretext of Russian interests, therefore causing destabilization in that region.¹⁵ Forth, the littoral states of the BSR are now upping their efforts to increase their military capabilities due to Invasion of Russia in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.¹⁶ Most importantly, Moscow has upgraded its military facilities in the area, a fact attributed to Russian fear with NATO expansion. Fifth, Black Sea is Russia's thoroughfare, it has Crimea as a supply base and Türkiye as a pivot, so Russia's long-term goal is to create a warm-water maritime component forward in the Eastern Mediterranean to counter the U.S. and NATO expansion to the east.¹⁷

Brânda has described some possible implications of NATO and Russia confrontation in the BSR for the latter's stability.¹⁸ The confrontation of NATO with Russia in Black Sea space threatens to deepen the conflict and create additional turbulence. The political rivalry and military standoff between the two can provoke the worsening of the security situation. The conflict can create security threats for countries in the region hence contributing towards feel of insecurity among them being the countries in the BSR. This means that military forces could destabilize the region while elements of military activity in the area could be a trigger for military events. Moreover, it possesses potential to alter economic activity within the BSR in terms of trade, investment and overall economic growth . Due to this, there will be instability in the economy because

¹⁴ Aslıhan Anlar, "Security in Black Sea Region Before and After 2014", Scoala Nationala de Studii Politice si Administrative (SNSPA), 2017.

¹⁵ Kristian Åtland and Ihor Kabanenko, "Russia and its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions", Taylor and Francis, 17 Dec 2019.

¹⁶ Igor Delanoe, "Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force", CAN Analysis and Solutions, June 2019.

¹⁷ Shlykov, Pavel. "Russian-Turkish Relations in the Wider Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Competition". *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 2, October 2018.

¹⁸ Oana Elena Brânda, "A Sea of Trouble. Black Sea Security Policies Between NATO and the European Union", Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies, 2019.

of contractual and investment risks brought about by the conflict. Furthermore, the conflict could lead to humanitarian crises, population displacement and human rights abuses. It will also threaten civilian populace in the region and create humanitarian crises. There exists the possibility that confrontation of such a scale between NATO and Russia in Black Sea zone could provoke the processes of geopolitical shift and redistribution there. Such situations may compel some countries into adoption of polarity or complicated diplomacy relation structures with radical effects on regional peace.

Sharyl Cross details possible security issues for both NATO and Russia after the Ukraine war in the article “NATO–Russia security challenges after the Ukraine conflict: managing Black Sea security and beyond.” Sharyl Cross examines the recent conflicts between NATO and Russia, focusing on why the BSR is so vital. By taking over Crimea and intervening in the Baltic region, Russia has made NATO change its plans for defending the area. It shows how war and disorder in the Middle East and their results could threaten the security of both Europe and America. Cross argues that decisive actions during a crisis, ongoing discussions and a new policy for NATO would help members stand against Russia without escalating into conflict.¹⁹

M. Oleksiejuk in the Pulaski Foundation analyzes the impact of rising tensions between NATO and Russia on the volatile situation in the Black Sea Region in a policy brief titled “Trouble in the Black Sea – Lessons for NATO”. After taking over Crimea, Russia’s increased military influence in the region has caused both countries to become aggressive, perform different threats and create problems between them. It was highlighted in the document that creating a similar strategy for the Black Sea requires more effort than creating one for the Baltic. It suggests NATO should promote cooperation between states in the Black Sea, be more aware in oceans and raise its budget for defense technology. According to the article, close coordination and prompt actions in NATO are necessary to ensure stability in the BSR and to deal with Russia.²⁰

The report, called “Russia vs NATO @ Black Sea: Addressing Russian Military and Hybrid Pressure on NATO in the Black Sea Region,” written by SIPA, discusses how

¹⁹ Cross, S., “NATO–Russia security challenges in the aftermath of Ukraine conflict: managing Black Sea security and beyond”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 15(2), 151–177, 2015.

²⁰ M. Oleksiejuk, “Rising tensions in the Black Sea – lessons for NATO”, Casimir Pulaski Foundation, July 28, 2021.

Russia and NATO are shifting their position in the BSR. It argues that Russia carries this out with traditional battling, up-to-date game plans and by spreading false reports to reduce NATO's power and influence in the region. It is mentioned in the report that trouble in the BSR includes a lack of resources at sea and a decrease in communication between NATO partners there. Those steps may include having regional security forces share knowledge and expertise, host group war games, build stronger infrastructure and team-up to gather and share information. Based on the results, NATO must speak as one to keep the region secure and stop Russia from threatening the BSR²¹.

Research Gap

The academic work on the research area illuminates the ongoing geopolitical developments and military transformation that Russia's annexation of Crimea initiated in 2014. The ongoing conflict creates major analytical gaps for understanding its distinctive broader and deeper consequences. A detailed investigation of the evolutionary trends in regional security architecture and engagement throughout Black Sea along with Eastern Mediterranean and related regions should be explored further. Moreover, there is a plenty of research about NATO and Russia in the BSR from Western scholars but there is rarely seen contribution from Pakistani scholars on this specific topic and understanding this conflict through the prism of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Thus, this study applying the RSCT framework seeks to contribute in the present literature on the NATO-Russian confrontations particularly in the BSR.

²¹ Columbia School of International and Public Affairs, "Russia vs NATO @ Black Sea: Addressing Russian Military and Hybrid Pressure on NATO in the Black Sea Region", October 7, 2024.

Hypothesis

This paper suggests that since the year 2014, the enhancement of NATO military activity and capacity-building programs in the BSR have catalyzed a similar volume of corresponding and escalating Russian military efforts, thus laying the groundwork to worsen regional security conditions. In order to check this hypothesis, the study develops three fundamental propositions: 1) that the upsurge of deployments and training missions by NATO in Romania and Bulgaria leads to augmented Russian naval activities and military drills in Crimea; 2) that normalized NATO partnerships with Ukraine triggers Russian hybrid or kinetic warfare such as intrusions, cyber-attack, or disinformation; and 3) that balancing behavior by Türkiye between NATO and Russia results in less aggressive and diplomatic Russian action. These assertions are tracked using process-tracing model through the chain of NATO action and Russian perception of threat, strategic analysis and response thereafter. Such causal framework allows the study to go beyond descriptive accounts, and presents a critical assessment of the causal mechanisms involved in the NATO operational approach and its counter-action in Russia through the BSR.

Theoretical framework

The undertaken research is based on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The theory of Regional Security Complexes is one of the prominent contributions by Copenhagen School of thought propagated by Barry Buzan, an eminent scholar of Copenhagen School, to argue the security phenomena in diverse regions of the world. In his early work, *People States and Fear* published in 1983, Barry Buzan outlined the idea of the regional security. He then along with Ole Weaver further advanced this concept in *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security* in 2003.²² The RSCT holds particularly importance in International Studies as it brings out the middle range of analysis, and connects both micro and macro level of analyses. Use of both micro and macro level analysis enables a more convenient and appropriate approach to the analysis of several countries and region based on the geographical context and their experience. It is a theory that has attributes from realist, liberal and constructivist theories. It uses the power polarity idea of realism and the international system of

²² Barry Gordon Buzan and Ole Wæver, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 40.

liberalism. For analysis of the formation and functioning of Regional Security Complex (RSC), it employs constructivist concepts referring to regularities of enmity and friendship, rather than power. This makes the theory compatible with realism, liberalism and constructivism. In RSCT, international events are carefully dissected empirically at a regional level and regions are referred to as Complexes to show that member state security concerns are intertwined. RSCT is especially valuable for interpreting and comparing global political processes and determine whether the regional or global factors prevail. The RSCT uses some of the ideas of Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism which are helpful to explain the events much better. Use of each theory is also functional and selective: Realism would be used to describe the security dilemma, and the military balancing and strategic competition between NATO and Russia, which are very apparent in the use of missile defense systems and force posturing. Institutional norms, cooperation structures (e.g. Partnership of Peace, EOP), and the multilateral diplomacy factor are interpreted with the use of liberalism as NATO expands to include other states, such as Romania and Ukraine. Constructivism can assist in the examination of the influence of identity, narratives based on the historical understanding of the past, and political rhetoric on the understanding of threat and alliance, and it is particularly prominent in the case of Russia and Georgia and Russia and Ukraine. Composed of using these frameworks together to form an interdependent composite, the analysis applies frameworks following specific combinations in complementary fashion: that is, power-security rivalry focusing on Realism; institutional processes to focus on Liberalism; and ideational-perception parameters to focus on Constructivism. Such explanatory application of multiple theories enhances the analytical ability of the study without compromising the theoretical clarity.

A regional security complex (RSC) depicts an area where states within it link their security through internal regional interactions instead of external influences. There are certain attributes of RSC including Boundary, Polarity, Anarchic Structure and Social Construction. The security of each state depending on its neighboring states constitutes a core feature of an RSC. The security of neighboring countries depends on one another because events occurring in one national territory produce immediate effects in

neighboring borders. For instance, the security situations in Ukraine have affected the security of the neighboring states. According to Buzan and Waever, the key elements defining Regional Security Complex (RSC) structures and necessary characteristics of anarchy include both power relations and mutual friendship and hostile interactions. Polarity defines regional security dynamics by assessing the number of dominant entities in a given region which falls into unipolar to bipolar through tripolar to multipolar scales. Regional polarity analysis needs to be distinguished from global polarity analysis. In the BSR, there are two dominant poles i.e. NATO and Russia. NATO members like Romania and Bulgaria are more tilted toward NATO, while Türkiye being the member of NATO does not allow direct confrontation with Russia and is not a part of any of the poles. The case of Ukraine and Georgia is also important. Both are not the members of NATO but they are in good relations with NATO. Russia is another pole having historical claims in the region. Furthermore, for an RSC to develop, an anarchic structure must be present. The fundamental requirement for an anarchic subsystem exists when there are at least two independent units present. Failure to form a distinct region would result when the RSC lacks autonomous units, since outside powers could interfere. In the BSR, NATO and Black Sea regional states are independent units and an anarchic structure is also present here. Moreover, the study of amity and enmity patterns is also important in a Regional Security Complex (RSC). States within defined regional settings exchange interactions that place them at different places between friendly to adversarial relations on a single spectrum. The evolution pattern of these relationships strongly depends on previous occurrences and such path-dependent development best explains current inter-state interactions in the BSR. NATO-Russian confrontation in the BSR is a historical phenomenon where patterns of friendships and enmity are present among Black Sea countries, making it a unique region comprising of different social constructions.



Figure 1: Pictorial presentation of Regional Security Complex.

This study attempts to verify certain axioms of the RSCT through the dynamic environment in geo-politics, geo-economics and geo-strategy pertaining to the BSR which has emerged as the new world theatre of operation in the last two decades. The goal here is to achieve clearer perception of the multifaceted process of NATO enlargement in the area and Russian reaction with a subject of security. According to realism, NATO action after 2014 expanding into the BSR represents a move by the West to contain the ability of Russia to have a hegemonic power. Here, the power polarity concept is seen, considering that NATO and Russia are now competing for power in the said region. Realists would concern themselves with the arms race, and military alliance and power demonstration by both the NATO and Russia. On the other hand, from the liberals' view, the kind of expansion is examined through cooperation among countries and institutionalism. Furthermore, NATO's attempts to envelop more Black Sea countries are considered the endeavor to transform this area into genuinely democratic countries with a collective security system. Use of the concept of an international system is made here which emphasizes on the role provided by multilateral organizations and treaties as key features of this region's stability. Whereas, Constructivism would focus on the selves, rules as well as structures between NATO, Black Sea nations and Russia. RSCT recognizes the BSR as Security Complex that

embraces the security issues of its members states closely interconnected.²³ Russia's reaction and NATO expansion are indeed the part of the densely intertwined regional security dynamics that should not be analyzed independently. It assists to unveil the relationships and dependency of the security issues in the BSR on the global ones.

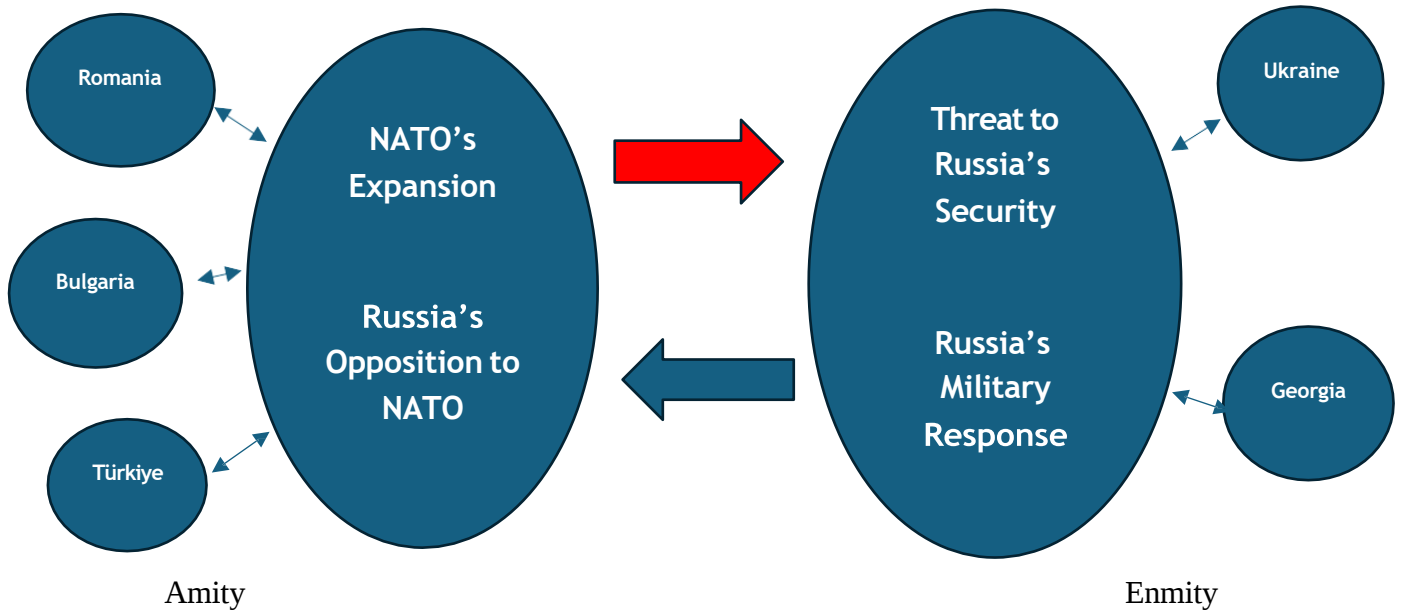


Figure 2: Enmity and Amity Patterns in the BSR

Info graph is designed by the researcher. This paper not only uses RSCT descriptively but also as an analytical construct to identify the security interaction between NATO and Russia in the BSR. The strategic changes in the region are explained using the core pieces of RSCT; amity/enmity patterns, regional polarity, penetration of power and security interdependence. The amity/enmity diagram provided in the study is not only illustrative but also analytical, as it will be used to trace the shifting patterns of alliance pattern in the years 2014 to 2024. As an example, the declining relationship between Russia and Ukraine (after Crimea), as well as the ambiguous status of Türkiye, can enable us to label and conceptualize the difference in Russian reactions in terms of threat perception.

²³ David A Lake, "Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World", 1st, Penn State University Press, 1997, 12.

Likewise, the regional polarity change of the loose post-Cold War equilibrium of the establishment of the NATO hegemony contributes to the fact that it was part of the defensive response to seek back influence. In this paper, the notion of external power penetration as proposed by RSCT is also applied in explaining the institutional involvement of NATO with non-members such as Ukraine and Georgia which Russia considers to be intrusive. The assumptions of RSCT are tested in each empirical chapter as it compares the experiences of various states in the BSR group in terms of ordered groupings of their state position on the amity/enmity continuum in realizing specific strategic consequences.

Research Methodology

The proposed study will use qualitative analysis methodology to address the causal linkage between the expansion by NATO in the BSR and Russian strategic responses between 2014 and 2024. This study targets five leading BSR countries: Romania, Tyrkia, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Georgia. The choice is deliberate, as the countries indicate both a range of NATO memberships, full membership (Romania, Tikrit, Bulgaria) and aspiring members (Ukraine and Georgia). This choice offers to compare the position and policies of NATO in a structured fashion across these subregional backdrops, and the subsequent reaction Russia takes in military, political, and hybrid ways to the strategic weight and alignment of each of the states.

The central technique used is process tracing which enables deconstruction of causal processes between the actions of NATO and responses of Russia. This strategy will not just be about correlation, but about finding out the chain of affairs: NATO decision → perception of threat by Russia → strategic planning internally → tangible response (e.g. military buildup, hybrid war, diplomatic reprisal). Process tracing is used in every case separately in order to reveal patterns, turning points and deviations throughout the region.

Such official documents as communiques of the NATO, statements of Russian government, and proclamations of international summits which are publicly available will be used as the predominant documentary primary sources in this research. They are complemented by secondary sources in the form of authoritative think tank reports (e.g. RAND, Carnegie, ICDS) and scholarly articles. There were no interviews and on-field data. In light of which, the thesis does not intend to present primary research

conducted in the field and instead focuses on open-source strategic and institutional documents; which are traced utilizing a structured, process-tracing approach. The secondary sources represent highly-rated think tank reports and policy reports issued by RAND Corporation, Chatham House, Carnegie Moscow Center, Pulaski Foundation, and ICDS. They perform thematic coding of all sources, and categories are constructed on the main variables: (1) the nature of NATO activity (deployment, political support, joint activity); (2) the level of intensity (routine, escalatory, symbolic); (3) the way the response was delivered by Russia (military, hybrid, diplomatic), the timing, and the degree of its response.

As a measure of ensuring that the study is analytically robust and transparent, it incorporates an assessment of the sources; an assessment based on its origin, credibility, and ideological leaning. As an example, Western think tanks, such as RAND, could represent Atlanticist interests whereas Russian websites like Valdai or Sputnik could carry the Kremlin line. Triangulation of claims is completed through various perspectives so as to reduce bias. Methodological limitations are also recognized which are mainly the inaccessibility to classified documents and the absence of elite interviewing and reliance on translated Russian sources. These constraints are mentioned clearly and results are explained closely when information can be subjected to language, access or position of an institution. In general, by integrating comparative case analysis, process tracing, and systematic source coding, such methodology allows a systematic and theory-guided account of how the different forms of NATO engagement in the BSR, especially in Romania, Türkiye, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Georgia, influenced the shifting strategic behavior of Russia. This strategy is a direct address to the criticism of the aspect of descriptiveness and guarantees analytical transparency, regional focus, and methodological consistency of the study.

NATO strategic actions in the BSR between 2014 and 2024 are incorporated as independent variable in this study. These operations are operationalized into three measures: (1) Military Deployments namely, installation of Aegis Ashore in Romania, rotational forces in Bulgaria and naval patrols; (2) Joint Military Exercises and Training Programs namely, Sea Breeze, Sea Shield, and Black Sea Harmony; (3) Institutional and Political Endorsements namely, Enhanced Opportunities Partnership granted to Ukraine, and NATO declarations of support. They are calculated in terms of type

(deployment, exercise, institutional), frequency, scale (number of troops or ships) and place.

The dependent variable is the response of Russia strategy towards the presence of NATO. It is operationalized as: (1) Military Countermeasures, which would comprise the deployment of Iskander missiles, upgrades on Black Sea fleet, and drills e.g., Operation Ocean Shield and Caucasus; (2) Hybrid Responses, as cyberattacks, disinformation, and the inclusion of private military contractors e.g., Wagner Group; and (3) Economic/Political Response, which would comprise sanctions, trade sanctions, and energy coercion (ex., Nord Stream 2 leverage). Depending on NATO actions, such reactions are distinguished according to the intensity (routine, escalatory), level (military, cyber, economic), and time. The analysis of these variables by use of a method of process-tracing codification and classification establishes the causal association between NATO activities and Russia moderated reaction to states in the BSR. It reinforces the depth of the analysis of the thesis and conforms to the rationale of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which emphasizes interdependent security actions at the regional level.

Significance of Study

Black Sea has always been of great importance based on political as well as geographical aspects, because the region is located in the crossroad between Europe and Asia and is linked to the important sea ways. An examination of expansion of NATO and the reaction from Russia is important in understanding the security architecture in the BSR. NATO's military and Russia's activity define the security conditions and stability of peace affecting eastern Europe. Energy resources and transport corridors of Black Sea are also important. The involvement of NATO and Russia's response has consequences for energy supplies such as pipelines, transit routes, and whole economies. This study's results may be useful for NATO member states, Russia, and Black Sea countries to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the present approaches. As will be seen in the following, by identifying the nature of incentives that marked NATO's enlargement and Russia's actions, more rational approaches to conflict prevention, crisis management and regional cooperation may be established. Furthermore, the use of the RSCT framework to examine this case enriches the body of knowledge in international relations by applying concepts demonstrably

present in the theory. Thus, the research shows how practitioner's approaches of realism, liberalism, and constructivism can be accommodated to frame the intricate security concerns that has enhanced theoretical appreciation of the region's security architecture.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is somewhat restricted in the geographic focus and it examines NATO actions and reactions by Russia in the BSR only. It does not apply in other areas where NATO and Russia come into contact. The review is conducted from 2014 concerning the events after the Crimean annexation by Russia. Certain individuals and actions as well as certain events previous to 2014 are not focused specifically in this work. Besides the above, the study employs archival data which involves the use of official documents and reports. Field data and researches or comprehensive interviews may not be possible at times.

Organization of Study

Introduction: It is comprised of research methodology along with theoretical framework to give an overview of the whole research work.

Chapter One "NATO's Expansion in Black Sea Region: Historical Background" discusses the history of NATO's expansion in the BSR including major events.

Chapter Two "NATO's Expansion in Black Sea Region" discusses the reasons behind NATO's Eastward towards the BSR.

Chapter Three "Security Threats of NATO Expansion to Black Sea and Russia's Reaction, 2014–2024" discusses the Russia's response towards NATO's expansion in the BSR.

Chapter Four "Potential Consequences of NATO-Russian Confrontation in the Black Sea Region" illustrates the aftermaths of Russia-NATO confrontation in the BSR.

Conclusion It is a concise study of the research work including important research findings along with recommendations.

Chapter One

The Historical Context of NATO's Expansion in the Black Sea Region

For a very long time, Black Sea Region was baffled and miscellaneous in its great diversity of cultures, inspirations, and interests. This basic Black Sea basin, meeting spot and fault line between distinct civilizations, faiths, ethnic groups, nations and minorities still sits at the edge of all historical and contemporary empires. “So central yet so peripheral” is how Neal Ascherson even describes this area, calling it “the wellspring of civilization and barbarism”, but now American and European policymakers no longer think of it as peripheral because of the more recent conflicts between Russia and the West.²⁴ All in all, it is already broadly admitted that Black Sea is so much a junction of strategic viewpoints as to be scarcely even recognized except in legal phrase. Being on the cross roads of Europe and Asia, specifically Eurasia, the BSR is amongst the most important regions of the world.

This chapter is divided into five sections as follows: i) The Historical Overview ii) The Post-World War 1 Scenarios, iii) Post-World War 2 Scenarios and iv) Post-Cold War Scenarios v) Conclusion.

1.1 The Historical Overview

In terms of having coastlines, six or even fewer countries i.e. Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Georgia can be considered as such members of the BSR in the conventional sense. But the six governments above as well as Albania, Azerbaijan, Greece, Armenia, Serbia and the Republic of Moldova are the organizational members of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) established in Istanbul in 1992. Since political trajectories and political realities across the wider south-eastern Europe are varied, it is very complicated to share a single Black Sea regional identity, democratic and authoritarian, reformist and reactionary, real states and imagined ones.²⁵ The North, East and South of Black Sea are surrounded today by cold belts of cold disputes and uncertainty. Looking at Crimea, Ukraine, Georgia and

²⁴ Ascherson, Neal. *Black Sea: Coasts and Conquests: From Pericles to Putin: The Birthplace of Civilisation and Barbarism*, London: Vintage, 2007.

²⁵ King, Charles. “The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus”, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 8.

its separatist areas, Russia, the South Caucasus and even a mystified Türkiye, it just how vulnerable a region is to ferocity and unpredictability. The three Black Sea NATO members have very different political and cultural backgrounds, though they all choose a pro-Western strategic option. Türkiye is the only Muslim majority state of the Euro-Atlantic system to have joined the Alliance in 1952 with Greece. In 2004, as a part of the eastern expansion after the Cold War, Romania and Bulgaria, both joined NATO. Bulgaria has historically had closer sympathetic relations with Russia than with most other nations, and that is the case today also on account of its Slavic cultural legacy. As the last three decades, Romania also became one of the most fervently anti-Soviet, pro-US, pro-NATO capital on European landmass.²⁶

In the BSR, there have historically been numerous empires fighting to control it, the best example being the six years of war fought by the Ottoman Empire and the Russians from 1768 to 1774, which is best seen as the expansion of NATO. As the result of this conflict, the treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca granted the ports of Kerch and Azov better access to the BSR to Russia. It also secured for itself the right to defend the Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire, as the ostensibly independent Crimean ruling elite was subjected to Russia. Since 1783 Russia became a rising Black Sea power in response to the waning Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was not a powerful force early in 1853. Europe was just as much about the power balance as it was about anything else. By 1768, other than unrelenting military conflict with Russia, the Ottoman Empire had weakened with rebellions in Serbia, Greece, Egypt and Kurdistan, along with many other places. Then, however, the Ottomans had evolved into a leading market for the major European superpowers, and into a prize that required defense against Russia, the principal foe. The Ottoman Empire didn't take part in post Napoleonic Vienna conferences or Concert of Europe, or in general European politics. By now it had taken shape as the Eastern Question. In joining the Straits Convention in 1841, the album kingdom acted as a subsidiary of European system, rather than as a member of the European state system.²⁷

²⁶ Naumescu, Valentin. "NATO in Black Sea region: Unpredictability and different levels of commitment among the three coastal allies." *The Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/La Revue de dialogues inter-régionaux* (2020).

²⁷ J. C. Hurewitz, "Ottoman Diplomacy and the European State System", *Middle East Journal* XV, 1961, p. 151.

From 1853 to 1856 a brutal war breaks out between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Russia excelled at the fleet, but the fleet was its weak element. The British and French navy had no match in Black Sea, although Russia yet had a powerful naval base there at Sevastopol. Nikolai was thoroughly sure he could singlehandedly defeat the Ottoman navy and armies on the one hand, and was fully aware that some other forces would not allow him to advance the conquest of the Danube, or the Turkish Straits. At this point, he had lost some feeling of conviction because he attacked parts of Ottomans, but did not get support of the major countries. His intention to divide the "sick man of Europe" had long been on discussion with British Ambassador Seymour. But their geopolitical rivalry kept them apart over how to slice up the Ottoman Empire. The British wanted a weak Ottoman Empire, not broken. Meanwhile, Russia wanted to rule the straits and Istanbul from the straits. The conflict never had the kind of geopolitical payoff Russia hoped for because Britain and France lined up with the Ottoman Empire.

Besides the mentioned, Russians and Ottomans competed in the economy as both were exporting wheat to Europe. One third of all foreign trade in Russia was with Britain in 1851. Through the passing years, Russia's relative standing in the economy was taken away from the Ottoman Empire. In 1849, however, the Ottoman Empire was buying considerably more British commodities than the Russian Empire, yet in 1827 the British Empire imported three times as much in goods to the Russian Empire as to any of the other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Bear in mind too, the subject of religious rifts within the Christian sector of the Ottoman era. Something of major concern became who should have authority over such places as the Church of the Nativity and a number of other major early Christian sites in and near Jerusalem and adjacent. The dispute was between the Orthodox (Greek) and the Catholic (Latin) churches. But the seemingly trivial question was, who, or what, would hold the key to the Great Church of Bethlehem, and who or what would have the honor of holding the offerings in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. While the Ottomans had been pleased to be able to control both churches there was clearly tension on both sides and they therefore had to appease both parties. The French in their turn produced a series of Firmans from the time of Süleyman the Magnificent in order to support their claims. Nevertheless, Russia claimed the right to protest by virtue of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca of 1774, which was followed by the Treaties of Bucharest, Akkerman, Edirne,

and Hünkâr Iskelesi of 1812, 1826, 1829, and 1833, respectively, concerning the Orthodox subjects of the Porte.²⁸ Orthodox individuals of the Porte, with 13.5 million members, were far more numerous than the Catholics. In addition, they outnumbered the Catholics in Jerusalem. The number of tourists to Jerusalem in 1850 was very small i.e. there were fewer than 6% of the city's population who were Catholic, and their pilgrims were a small fraction of the total number visiting the city.²⁹ Also, France's case was stronger from a legal staple because of compliances, the last being which was in 1740. But the Latins were unable to do their duty and were then given unique firmans by the Greeks. So, in a way, the Greeks had more rights.³⁰ Take the first example, where France asked the Porte to return particular places back to the Orthodox Church. This Christian altercation angered the Sultan in February 1852, and he tried once and for all to work things out, issuing two firmans, promising the Greeks that their rights would not be violated, and handing over the keys to the Latins. There was no delay by Russia in protesting. Seeing that they couldn't come up with a solution that would work for France and Russia, the Ottomans felt compelled to wage war in Istanbul, diplomatically. Even commissions were established and all credentials closely scrutinized; it was hard to meet the needs of both sides. Almost all historians now believe that the question of sacred sites justified the Crimean War. It is customary in contemporary Turkish historiography to say that the Ottoman Empire was saved from Britain and France because of imperialist animosity, or alternatively that this was the result of imperialist fraud to conceal the imperialist aspiration of tsarist Russia to take the holy sites. Even these things are said to be true, yet one has to remain calm and view the Ottoman Empire's action with the same cynicism. According to many Turkish historians, the Ottoman state deserved neither to be considered hegemonic nor interventionist, nor is it a legitimate subject of intervention, and even saw itself as a last island of humanity.³¹

Stated simply, great powers' geopolitical interests clashing with religion and economic differences between Russia and Ottoman Empire had a war. On the fear of Russian hegemony in this region, Britain and France sided with Ottoman Empire. It followed,

²⁸ Roderic Davison, *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774–1923: The Impact of the West*, London: Saqi Books, 1990, pp. 29–59

²⁹ Brison D. Gooch, "A Century of Historiography on the Origins of the Crimean War", *The American Historical Review* 62(1), p 35, October 1956.

³⁰ David Goldfrank, "The Origins of the Crimean War", London and NY: Longman, 1994, pp.

³¹ Mustafa Armağan, *Osmanlı: İnsanlığın Son Adası*, Istanbul: Ufuk Kitapları, 2003.

therefore, that Russia could wrest from the Ottoman Empire the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits.

1.2 Post World War 1 (WW1) Scenarios

Things turned really dramatically around with the collapse of both empires at the end of World War I (WW1). In other ways the chart of such an area was redrawn. The Treaty of Sevres was signed in 1920, but did not succeed. Thanks to its safer strategic placement Türkiye was able to safely request the Lausanne Treaty to handle the growing tensions in Europe in that region. Lausanne Peace Treaty established the Republic of Türkiye on basis. By 1936, the Montreux Convention, signed that same year, ensured the safe travel of warships of Black Sea states not in war with Türkiye and gave Türkiye the right to supervise the straits.³² Under this Convention, the commercial vessels do not have the freedom of passage but have liberty of passage through the Turkish Straits, whereas the passages of the war ships have some restrictions corresponding to the character of vessels and State which they are under and whether the ships are of Black Sea littoral States or not. With a capacity of 45,000 tons among 15,000 tons per vessel, no military ships from other countries' governments were permitted in Black Sea, and they were only allowed to stay there for 21 days.³³ For Russia, however, there were both advantages and some disadvantages to this convention. Navel dominance of Russia was preserved by restrictions on navel activity of the non-Black Sea countries, but the country also inhibited its own navel expansion.³⁴ This convention made it necessary for Russia to keep on good terms with Turkey so that it could pass successfully through Bosphorus and Dardanelles to reach Mediterranean.³⁵ However, the terms of this convention are sometimes building some skepticism, specifically during the crisis situations as the case in Syrian Civil War. In this case, Russia did have Türkiye straits in order to send troops in Syria however this worried the NATO members because they were restricted in this by the terms of the Montreux Convention.

³² Boris Toucas, "The Geostrategic Importance of Black Sea Region: A Brief History", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2017.

³³ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022.

³⁴ James E. Douglass, "The Role of the Montreux Convention in International Maritime Law," International Law Association (2018).

³⁵ Dunn, David H. "Russia, Turkey, and the Bosphorus: The Montreux Convention in the Context of Modern Geopolitics." Geopolitics, 2020.

1.3 Post World War 2 (WW2) Scenarios

Toward the end of World War II (WW2), Türkiye tensed with the Soviet Union, which pressed on Türkiye to renegotiate Montreux Convention terms in order to get Soviet access to the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. This allowed the Soviet Union to build its military presence in the area and to support Türkiye in its fulfillment of requests to provide military installations on the territory of Türkiye. This is called the Turkish Straits crisis. During that period, Türkiye appealed to the US of America to support itself against Soviet pressure, the US responded by sending its warships that put pressure on the Soviet Union and succeeded in backing down. It was one of the impetuses of the Truman Doctrine of 1947, in which Türkiye and Greece were accepted into NATO membership in 1952 to limit the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean Sea. At this point, NATO more or less joined the BSR with Greece and Türkiye its two main members. The power balance in Black Sea was uneven, with the US, Türkiye, the USSR and NATO during the Cold War. From 1976, Türkiye allowed Soviet built aircraft carriers in Ukraine to sail through the straits. From a Western perspective, the region became less strategically significant when the Soviet Union disbanded, but from a Russian perspective of near abroad, it remained so. The capture of the most important strategic issue consequent to the end of the Cold War lies in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 committing Ukraine to removal of its nuclear weaponry and subsection of military guarantees of its territorial integrity by the United Kingdom, Russia and the US. Even though nuclear weapons were removed from the Ukraine under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, relations between Russia and Ukraine had been worn. A question about the Crimean Peninsula was the most important. That was gifted by the Premier Nikita Khrushchev of USSR in 1954 in recognition of Ukraine's merger with Russia. It also had its military spaciousness, Russian military resources and a facility in Sevastopol, which was very important for Black Sea Fleet's activities. Russia had 100,000 Russia personnel, 60,000 service members, 835 vessels including 28 submarines in Sevastopol. None of this was done with the intention of forcing Ukraine to either recognize the right to exist or not of this crucial city. Its act was equally motivated by a strong logic of national egotism for Crimea, which gave Russia the ability to use its already established political influence over Crimean leaders and exercise more pressure on Ukraine. The 1997 Ukraine-Russia Friendship Treaty gave Russia and Ukraine 81% and 19% of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. It also allowed Russia

to extend its 20-year lease of the Sevastopol facility (offered to Ukraine in return for its debt being mostly paid off and energy prices being lowered) until 2042 in 2010.

1.4 Post Cold War Scenarios

Russia knew the BSR and its former Soviet republics were in its grasp, but was simply not strong enough to exploit its will. After the so-called Color Revolutions in Georgia (2003–2004) and Ukraine (2004–2005), gradually more powerful Russian regional policy started to quickly change the situation by replacing more exposed leaders to Russian influence and interests with Western and Euro-Atlantic friendly leaders.³⁶ At the same time, three of the six Black Sea littoral states were made members of the NATO as the alliance itself stretched to include Bulgaria and Romania in 2004.³⁷ Bulgaria and Romania were located in Russia's naval zone it was important due to their strategic location on Black Sea, that allowed the Russian Navy to operate, the country's trade routes, and access to warm water ports. Before joining NATO, the nations had good relations with Russia, and joining the alliance changed the loyalty of these countries to the West. In this strategic area the influence of Russia was affected badly. As for her view on the strategic hold, Russia observed the possibility of the establishment by NATO in Black Sea area of military facilities, including such facilities as missile defense systems, air bases, naval ports.³⁸ When it came to regional affairs, Russia chose a more forceful position because it felt NATO was showing up all too often near its own borders. Such proceedings were such interference in Russia's natural sphere of influence and, therefore, Russia took strong action to reestablish its influence and reinforce its military presence in Black Sea. Georgia and Ukraine built relationship closely with the alliance in anticipation of joining NATO. In 2008, the Bucharest Summit Declaration declared importance of Black Sea to Euro-Atlantic security and NATO began thinking of the region as such. In Bucharest, there was fierce argument about whether Georgia and Ukraine should be admitted into the Member Action Plan (MAP). However, only Germany opposed the MAP, because that was already anxious about Moscow's unfavorable response to engaging two neighboring countries on the

³⁶ Way, Lucan. "The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions". *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 55–69.

³⁷ Marten, Kimberly. "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating Its Consequences in Russia." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 401–426.

³⁸ Johnson, Dave. "Russia's Approach to Conflict: Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defense." *NATO Defense College (NDC) Research Paper*, no. 111/15, April 2015.

membership path, as they were. When Russia's concerns about Ukraine and Georgia's possible memberships became wasted, it responded forcefully. Russian energy, even though it involved the pipelines that ran through Ukraine as well, was a tool used for the control of Ukraine as Russia in 2006 and 2009 stopped delivering natural gas to Europe with seasonal exceptions to Ukraine and raised the price for Russian energy. In August 2008, Russian military troops entered Georgia to fight with the Georgian forces, and threaten to seize the capital city of Tbilisi, after beating Georgia's struggle to retain control of the breakaway territory. Russia also soon accepted for the independence both of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in contravention of a cease-fire pact. Since then, it has expanded control over Georgian territory, and continues to organize both areas.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 is the second most important event. In the wake of the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union, there began a powerful nationalist movement in Crimea that wouldn't recognize part with Ukraine and instead became closer to Russia. Yuri Meshkov led this, seeking to re-integrate the area into Russia, and had very robust political relations with Moscow. As was the case with Ukraine at the time, such a limitation of power through policy was able to fix the problem. Kuchma gave Crimean elites attractive financial inducements in exchange for loyalty to Kyiv, but wouldn't use force against the protestors. Additionally, the disagreement of Kremlin decision makers — starting with then President Boris Yeltsin, who had vocally opposed the separatism of Crimea — was also a boon for Kyiv.³⁹ The 1994 start of the first Chechen war became an additional driving factor of Russia's own defense of territorial sovereignty of neighbors. In 1997 the bilateral treaty on Friendship, cooperation and partnership was signed, officially and finally recognizing the existing borders of Ukraine. Ukraine's 1996 constitution, which included a 100-member parliament in Crimea granted it independence. Despite the official name of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, its institutes have very few liberties in the administrative, political and economic fields. They did not have the power to do anything legislative. It should be also added that central government of Ukraine had remained strong arm of influence to the political situation in Crimea, which took ally of the president full veto rights in the Crimean parliament findings. In addition, Sevastopol was formally one of Ukraine's 27

³⁹ Merezko, Oleksandr. "Crimea's Annexation by Russia – Contradictions of the New Russian Doctrine of International Law." *Zeitschrift für ausländisches öffentliches Recht und Völkerrecht* 75, no. 1 (2015): 167–194.

regions although it should not be considered as formally being part of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea according to Ukraine's constitution. But there was only one other city that had the same separate-status type that allowed it to form its own local council. From the Soviet era, Sevastopol was a locked city and the home of Black Sea Fleet, and so enjoyed that special status.

Regularly, Russian politicians and media had rightly raised the question of the rightfulness of Ukraine's sovereignty on Sevastopol as the city was administratively separated from the rest of Crimea in 1948 and, when a territory was directly liable to the Soviet Central Government. However, the Soviet Constitution forced that modification and Sevastopol remained a legitimate part of the Crimean region. After the friendship treaty was signed and during Kuchma's presidency (1994–2004), Crimea performed towards the political, economic and social consolidation into an independent Ukraine. This highly valuable process came to an end after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004–2005 when Russia decided to strengthen its presence in the area. At that time, Moscow's actions indicated that it recognized the internal assortment and unsettled issues in Crimea as profitable instruments to have an effect on Kyiv's strategic decisions. Therefore, Moscow, already loath to pay them, began funding or launching another pro-Russian group, parties, media sources, etc. An open display of disagreement between then prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko and then president Viktor Yushchenko left the Ukrainian state weakened, and the Russian presence helped Russia in the chase of a more vigorous foreign policy. Russia's strategies worked very well. In 2006, that was made especially clear when thousands of furious Russians from Crimea choked off a NATO-Ukraine military exercise in the area. After the 2010 voting, the freshly elected president of Ukraine was able to impose authority over the political landscape in Crimea in Viktor Yanukovich. His first domestic visit represented his mindfulness of the subtle nature of the Crimean issue, but the capital of the region, Simferopol was his destination. The calm of the area was provided by important variations to the Crimean political landscape. In mid-2010 the Party of Regions, pro-presidential, won a triumph victory in the local parliament elections, taking 80 percent of seats, and Yanukovich appointed people from his hometown of Donetsk to key positions. The greatest moment was the Russian-Ukrainian agreement in Kharkiv in 2010, whereby the Russian Black Sea Fleet was allowed to stay in Crimea to 2042 in exchange for a massive cut in payments Ukraine pays to Russia for natural gas. Black

Sea Fleet has a very special place amongst the Russian political tools to Crimea. Previously, the fleet's share in the Sevastopol City Budget was 15 percent of the whole revenues. Secondly, it facilitates arranging propaganda and cultural processing inside the city. But true strong pro-Russian opinions continued to dominate Crimea right through the years and even after the region was stabilized since 2010. The area remained essentially a part of Russia's media and cultural reality. Russian television channels were a main information source for two thirds of the populace. In Crimea there were six Ukrainian-language schools compared to 555 Russian language ones. In addition, ten Russian universities made campuses in Crimea, including Moscow State University with a large campus in Sevastopol. It represents particular case of a very grave and unanticipated one of Russian strategy in general towards the state and likewise a severe setback to the image of Vladimir Putin itself. In 2014, February, Russia intruded in Crimea because of the fall of Yanukovich's regime. As the easiest source of Moscow's influence over Kyiv in crafting the desirable Ukraine's geopolitical future and strengthening Russia's hold, this area was used. Moscow used Crimea as a bargaining chip in negotiating with the Ukrainian government, offering it privileges for pro-Russian groups to join the country's governing body. It was also with a respect for federalism that the federal associated in state Moscow wanted to bring to the work on the new constitution. Moscow aimed to rein in the prospects that Kyiv would become part of NATO and strengthen ties with Russia through federalism, as it took control of the Crimea from Ukraine.⁴⁰

Russia launched a military attack on Crimea to reach its aims. The whole peninsula had been occupied by Russian troops throughout March 2014. On March 6 the Supreme Council of Crimea agreed to ask to be allowed to join Russia. In a referendum set for March 16, the council presented two options i.e. Crimea has to return to Crimea's 1992 constitution of which it approved the peninsula's significant autonomy, or join Russia. But no check mark was given for Crimea remaining under Ukraine's constitution as a part of Ukraine. There were no reliable international monitors around when the referendum was conducted in an unhygienic fashion. 96.7 percent of the voters decided to join Russia, in an 83 percent turnout. The figures were doubtful, considering that the peninsula had an ethnic Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar population of around 40 percent.

⁴⁰ Wojciech Konończuk, Russia's Real Aims in Crimea, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 13, 2014.

On March 18 representatives of both regions signed the Treaty of Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia. On day three, Putin endorsed this treaty. The UN Charter, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the Security Assurances for Ukraine of 1994, Budapest Memorandum of 1994, and the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, Partnership between Ukraine and Russia are all documents broken by Russia when it captured Crimea from Ukraine. Moscow said that it was worried about the condition of ethnic Russians in Crimea, even though there was no justified evidence that it was under risk. The Russian administration tried to defend the poll and occupation as self-determination, although the voting was extremely dubious. But Putin may also be trying to do it for internal reasons. By 2012, when he came back to the office, the economy was in worse shape than in his first two terms (2000 to 2008). As far as Russian nationalism is concerned, his re-election appeal was focused on that. Seizure of Crimea was popular among the Russian public. In fact, Putin's rating went up.⁴¹

Anger at NATO's expansion into Soviet-ruled lands had long been a cause of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Russia's leaders including President Vladimir Putin have said the U.S. and NATO broke promises they made in the 1990s that they would not expand into former Soviet territory. Before NATO's 2008 summit, Putin warned that Ukrainian inclusion into NATO would be seen by Russia as an encroachment. The same year Russia made his willingness to use military force evident by going to war against Georgia. Ukraine, not a NATO member, stepped up ties with the alliance through joint military exercises and in 2020, obtained enhanced opportunity partner status, a designation for close nonmember allies. Russia also found Ukrainian reaffirmation of the country's goal of NATO membership to be provocative. All of this caused Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁴² The Ukraine conflict is a profound crisis which has drawn huge amount of attention from around the globe on its causes. A critical perspective attributes primary responsibility to the US and its allies. The decision, in April 2008 to push Ukraine and Georgia towards NATO membership, ensured a clash with Russia was inevitable. Driven by the Bush administration and maintained by all the following U.S. administrations—Obama, Trump and Biden—tensions continued to grow, with the U.S. being supported by its allies. U.S. discounted Russia's warnings

⁴¹ Steven Pifer, *Crimea: Six years after illegal annexation*, Brookings, March 17, 2020.

⁴² Jonathan Masters, *Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia*, Council on Foreign Relations, February 14, 2023.

that NATO expansion into Ukraine would cross a grave security threshold and pursued relentlessly the goal of encircling the country in the Western zone of power, sparking acute friction on the Russian border.⁴³

Russia was a hegemonic power in the 18th century, an overextended force during the Cold War, and a fatigued power after 1991. In order to outspread its power over the Turkish Straits, would the Kremlin continuously boost its military existence in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, put more pressure on Bulgaria to decrease NATO's presence and plan a Turkish-Russian reconciliation? As Russia's key geopolitical competitors, NATO and the United Governments have mainly succeeded individual European states since 1853. Crimea serves as the country's military source. Moreover, Türkiye also serves as its pivot and the Turkish Straits as its strategic throughput.⁴⁴ The eventual goal is to gain access to Eastern Mediterranean and establish a military presence in this area as a counterbalance to the U.S. and NATO's eastward expansion and their existence in the Aegean and Central Mediterranean.

Conclusion

NATO's expansion in the BSR is one of the most important and awkward geopolitical news of the post-Cold War era. NATO's enlargement eastward after the Cold War fundamentally rewrote the security map of Eastern Europe and Black Sea. The recent spate of expansion has been directly caused by strategic imperatives combined with the desire, particularly of former Soviet states and Eastern European countries, to cohesively belong within Western security structures. But it has also increased the tensions with Russia and has added to long lasting conflicts and instability in protracted manner.

The historical evolution of NATO's Black Sea strategy exposes many complicated elements shaping regional interactions. The Partnership for Peace programs alongside other NATO initiatives started after both the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. After joining NATO Bulgaria along with Romania and Türkiye installed themselves as essential Black Sea military positions which provided the alliance with critical operational advantages to protect regional stability while fighting potential threats. The

⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War." Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), Summer 2022.

⁴⁴ Boris Toucas, "The Geostrategic Importance of Black Sea Region: A Brief History", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2017.

area enhanced its importance because it functioned as both an essential energy transmission artery and as a crossroad uniting Europe with Asia and the Middle East. NATO's approval of Ukrainian and Georgian accession applications set a new direction for alliance operations throughout the original membership area. The Bucharest Summit of 2008 marked a turning point for NATO's promise of future access to Ukraine and Georgia when Russia strongly denounced NATO's movement within its traditional sphere of influence as endangering its fundamental national defense. Russia demonstrated its refusal to let NATO advance further into its territorial domain when it seized Crimea in 2014 then began its battle against Ukraine in 2022. The actions conducted by Russia have strengthened West-Russia hostility while turning the BSR into an active strategic dispute zone. In the historical context, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War caused the formation of a new geopolitical circumstance. President Boris Yeltsin wanted Russia to become part of the west and to bring stability in the security environment. Partnership for Peace (PfP) was regarded as an option to end decades of Cold War competition and establish a new basis of collaboration between Russia and NATO. The mechanisms contained in the PfP framework involved consultation, joint exercises, and exchange of information all with an intent to build understanding with the other and mitigate the risk of conflict. This partnership was formalized in 1997 in a NATO-Russia Founding Act which defined a number of areas of cooperation and provided a mechanism of frequent consultations. The purpose of the Act was to fully overcome former confrontation, enhance mutual trust, and stipulate the mechanisms of consultation, cooperation, joint decision-making, and joint performance. Russia is suspended in the PfP program of the NATO. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO put a freeze in all practical cooperation with Russia, however, maintaining the political and military channels. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, NATO made further gains in consolidating its standing, with the assertion that it can no longer regard Russia as its partner.

From NATO's viewpoint their enlargement serves two purposes to develop democracy throughout the expanded borders and achieve regional security through unified defense. Human Rights activists oppose NATO's policy because it intensifies security conflicts while overlooking Russian military needs and generates counteractions destabilizing the region. The BSR has developed into a conflict zone that produces catastrophic outcomes because multiple alliance groups involving NATO and Russia with

participating local governments pursue their interests. For future success one must master these existing tensions and develop spaces where dialogue and cooperation can occur. NATO's expansion throughout Black Sea area determines the broader battle between divergent models which comprise Europe's destiny. Maintaining global power relations and protecting minority states' independence together requires an approach which integrates political agreements to place stability over conflict.

Chapter Two

Dynamics of NATO's Eastward Expansion and its Influence on Regional Actors

Black Sea area stands forward as a key geopolitical setting where Russia versus Western competition decides how Europe will evolve. The Kremlin uses military actions in Ukraine alongside taking Russian territories and strengthening borders to control all of Black Sea. West has developed an advanced defense plan to match Russia's growth in this area by prioritizing the BSR. Since the Cold War has ended, the international power structure now functions differently for good. New regional powers emerged in recent times pushing the US toward losing its position as the top international system power. The Russian Federation leads international change through its counteractions which expand both its regional and worldwide significance as it strives to reestablish its global actor ranking. Vladimir Putin actions against the West sign that Russian people believe their nation ought to rank among the superpowers of the world. Russia works to gain control over the neighboring regions while making them into its direct or indirect vicinity before expanding its influence outward.⁴⁵

This chapter has been organized into following sections: i) Rationale Behind NATO's Expansion in Black Sea Region, ii) NATO's Eastward Expansion and its Dynamics, iii) The Role of NATO Members, iv) NATO's Relations with Ukraine and Georgia, and v) Conclusion. The chapter uses a process tracing approach to examine the processes by which the impact of the military growth of the NATO to the East in Romania and Bulgaria starting 2014 intersected with the changing strategic positioning of the Russia in the Black Sea Region (BSR). Process tracing in the analysis traces the causal chain of events resulting in the process of decision by NATO each of the decisions resulting in successful process such as placement of the U.S. ballistic missile defense systems in Romania, improved NATO Tailored Forward Presence (tFP), and enhanced air policing missions to the Russian responses that were to follow such as modernization of the Russian Black Sea fleet, Bastion and Iskander missile placement in Crimea, and major naval maneuvers. In such a way, the chapter does not give only a

⁴⁵ Captain, Navy, and Ioan Crăciun. "Black Sea's strategic importance and NATO's role in countering the kremlin's military domination." National Institute for Research and Development in Informatics, Bucharest. DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2022.4.04

description of historical events but analyzes the processes of action-reaction between Russia and NATO. And then the chapter also contrasts the actions of the high alignment in Romania to the low alignment and the domestically divided actions in Bulgaria. The analysis allows us to have a subtle perception of ways in which the differences in the behavior of NATO component countries influence the Russian perception of threats and their reaction.

2.1 Rationale Behind NATO's Expansion in the Black Sea Region

As a key junction of East-West and North-South navigation routes Black Sea links US and European geopolitical interests. Black Sea allows easy military influence across Europe into the Balkans and Central Europe as well as into Southern Mediterranean regions, South Caucasus, and Middle East northern areas. Russia began its military actions in Ukraine first by seizing Crimea in 2014 and later by invading Ukrainian territory. Russia openly disrupts both global freedom and regional stability in Black Sea area.⁴⁶ Given this mindset Russia employs military force to block nations of the former Soviet republics from integrating with Western organizations. Russia wants to limit Western impact on neighboring countries while keeping EU and NATO out of its protection zone.⁴⁷ The Kremlin apparently hopes to keep Black Sea within its sphere of influence through a plan of regional destabilization based on a certain operation of the armed forces against Ukraine, the illegal annexation of new regions traditionally viewed by Russia as belonging to itself, the military buildup of these territories as well, as well as direct military threat to the governments of the region in order to prevent their Euro-Atlantic integration as far as possible. But instead, the West is counteracting Russia's growth through a sophisticated defense strategy of emphasis on Black Sea. This makes Black Sea a region that historically would have been seen by the West as being secondary and because of that it gets new strategic value and is becoming more militarized, more unstable and more contested. It urgently requires a new regional status quo to stabilize. Eastward expansion of NATO is one of the reasons to keep the balance of power in the region. NATO does have some interests without a doubt in extending

⁴⁶ Sarcinschi, Alexandra. "Defining the extended black sea region: from geostrategic reasoning to psychosocial representation." in International Scientific Conference Strategies XXI. The Complex and Dynamic Nature of the Security Environment-Volume 1, pp. 135-142. Carol I National Defense University Publishing House. 2018.

⁴⁷ Flanagan, Stephen J., Anika Binnendijk, Irina A. Chindea, Katherine Costello, Geoffrey Kirkwood, Dara Massicot, and Clint Reach. "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security". RAND Corporation, 2020.

them. Security and stability, deterrence against Russia aggression, energy security, economic interests, and democratic values the institutional support are included in these. NATO rationalizes expanding to the east in the BSR because these are the main stances. In addition, the importance of its key members role for implementing its strategies also belonged to the BSR. Also significant here is NATO's regional alliances with Ukraine and Georgia, on which the future of this region will hinge. The BSR presents NATO with some work to do to strengthen their hold in this region. Basing on NATO's military engagements, treaties and military exercises in the BSR, this research attempts to present the NATO's expansion in the BSR alongside its crucial interests, its policy framework, vital strategies and consequences for the overall BSR balance of power.

2.2 NATO's Eastward Expansion and its Dynamics

Black Sea became a Cold War frontier, retracing an imperial rivalry between Russia and Ottoman Türkiye that stretched back five centuries, with a brief interwar lull before the emergence of a bipolar system in the late 1940s. This area was a buffer zone separating the victorious Western Alliance from post-Soviet Russia after 1989. Due to the intricacies of post-Yugoslav crisis as a transition of central and eastern Europe (CEE) in the 1990s, the issues of the BSR are ranked at the distant priority position in the Western strategic agenda. Events in and around Black Sea are likewise always in the constant glare of Western policy makers and key stakeholders, as have been a variety of reasons. But the area has long been seen as a potential Western prize waiting to happen. Following the last wave of NATO expansion, dubbed the Big Bang of the Vilnius group membership, the post-Soviet Black Sea transformation agenda has gradually begun to work its way into both the US and European policy agendas.

2.2.1 Security and Stability

An unstable BSR threatens the security and stability of the North Atlantic community, one of the cornerstones of US foreign policy since 1945. Russian threat in the BSR endangers security of Black Sea states and the Euro-Atlantic region at large, as well as international food security, economic stability, and sustainability of international legal systems. These reflect important interests for both Europe and the US. The region is home to multiple NATO partner nations and three NATO members you name Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye, so any unrest or animosity there would have immediate effect in

Alliance. For the past few years, Russia has mounted an increasingly aggressive and uncompromising media campaign that has matched growing improvement in its military posture. The most recent and likely most serious threat to European security apparatus is boldly undermining the established world order – Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, its conflict with Georgia in 2008, its ongoing destabilizing actions in eastern Ukraine and in this region, Russia is also using asymmetrical ways of warfare, as part of conventional military force, aimed at derailing the countries’ sovereign decision making, democratization, and Euro-Atlantic integration processes.⁴⁸ Most of the post-Soviet protracted hostilities occur in the BSR. Gray zone that some may or may not be nurturing radicalism are drug smuggling and organized crime. Russia’s ability to use all this to intimidate the newly autonomous ex-Soviet Union states politically is easy to understand. Likewise, Russian “bowdlerization” actions in South Ossetia first attracted Georgian government and international community attention in 2010, taking territory and putting in place physical border checks over what is actually under the law only an administrative boundary line.⁴⁹ Given that all of those conflicts have the potential to quickly destabilize the entire area, this is obviously a dilemma for NATO.

The statement of the NATO Warsaw Summit emphasized the significance of the BSR in addition to collective defense and deterrence i.e. “While we condemn Russia’s ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea, we are concerned by Russia’s efforts and stated plans for further military buildup in the BSR”.⁵⁰ At the Warsaw Summit, NATO was invited to deliver on the promises agreed to. The BSR is a theater of NATO’s interest and should be stabilized by NATO. Russia’s Ukraine actions have taken the region’s aggression to new heights — not since the 2008 war with Georgia. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea first through disputed (but now evident) Russian military action, then through referendum and political action in the capital. Since the annexation of Crimea, Russian-led separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine has gone on. Moscow has again denied Russia’s involvement in the conflict, but as so often before, the bulk of the reporting points to the opposite. Moreover, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine further highlights the security situation in the region. This is a flagrant

⁴⁸ Pavel Anastasov, “Black Sea region: a critical intersection”, NATO Review, 25 May 2018.

⁴⁹ Steven Horrell, “A NATO Strategy for Security in Black Sea Region”, Atlantic Council, 2016.

⁵⁰ NATO, “Warsaw Summit Communiqué,” July 9, 2016, article 17.

aggression, and continues to threaten the Westphalian idea of sovereignty, along with the international rules-based order.⁵¹ Due to aforementioned reasons, the security and stability in the BSR is very important for NATO and it is one the reasons behind NATO's expansion in this area.

2.2.2 Deterring the Russian Aggression

Another factor that has persuaded NATO to expand in the BSR strategically important area is deterrence of the Russian aggression here. The various ways in which Russia threatens the region range from irregular to conventional warfare. Over the years, Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine since 2014, its troops in Transnistria (Moldova), the Black and Mediterranean seas, its military buildup extending to the South Caucasus, the occupation of 20 percent of Georgia, its plans to build a naval base in Ochamchire (Abkhazia, Georgia), and a spate of hybrid threats against Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye, Russia's escalating attacks on vital infrastructure in Ukraine's border regions are also increasing the risk to NATO territory, adds Romania and Poland. Until Russia is stopped in Ukraine, there is no reason for it to stop there. In addition, it is no longer a question about the extent to which Russia's strategic intentions are truly, as mounting evidence of the Kremlin's active measures in European nations is proving to be.⁵² As it gradually built up its military power and technological base on the peninsula following its 2014 occupation of Crimea, Russia turned the peninsula into a base for offensive military activities against both the BSR and beyond. The region, albeit growing in vulnerability and militarized Russia across the time, has not been accorded as much strategic value by the transatlantic community as the Baltic region has been. But it comes just after Russia's new hostility toward Ukraine accelerated NATO's efforts to bolster its Black Sea defense posture. Instead, new military assistance to Ukraine and a more robust forward presence in the region would constitute a new strategy of opposing and deterring Russian aggression.⁵³ Black Sea Allies have been actively supporting Ukraine since 2022 and have reinforced significantly their defense systems. And Romania, which is committed to spending 2.5 percent of GDP on military spending, is now investing heavily in military equipment such as the F-15 and F-35

⁵¹ Andrii Klymenko, "The Militarization of Crimea under Russian Occupation," Atlantic Council, October 2015.

⁵² Yevgeniya Gaber, "A New Security Reality Strategic Approaches for the Wider Black Sea Region", The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2024.

⁵³ Iulian Romanysyn, "Ukraine, NATO and Black Sea", NDC Policy Brief, 01-2023.

fighter jets, Patriot missile defense systems, the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) and others. Romania also is investing \$2.7 billion to expand the Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) airbase, the largest in Europe. Bulgaria, apart from committing to spend 2 per cent of its GDP, began a modernization plan which includes investments in vital infrastructure and the purchase of patrol ships, fighter jets and infantry fighting vehicles. In addition, Türkiye has increased its defense budget by 140% and purchased more F16 fighter jets, and in order to make its defense industry self-sufficient is investing heavily.⁵⁴ Bulgaria and Romania have received military funding from the US and its military presence has grown from battalion to brigade in size in Romania. For its part, the US also promised to send an infantry company with armored vehicles to bolster Bulgaria's NATO battlegroup. US lawmakers too proposed Black Sea Security Act, a bipartisan measure calling for Washington to strengthen ties to countries in the region, increase military aid and improve coordination with EU and NATO.⁵⁵ Alongside giving the region a MAMBA missile defense system in 2022, France is also helping in a defense pact with Moldova and leading a coalition to get NATO military instructors deployed into Ukraine. These BSR initiatives should be consistent with pledges by the Allies to increase the number of soldiers and capabilities stationed on the Eastern flank to bolster NATO's primary defense and deterrence missions by further. At the 2020 Madrid Summit, members agreed to expand NATO battlegroups where and when required.⁵⁶ All of this illustrates the NATO's and its allies' commitment to deter the Russian aggression in the BSR.

2.2.3 Energy Security and Economic Interests

Aspects of energy security include market stability and continuity of a range of energy supplies. It's time for NATO to address a crucial, related issue. The dangers that the Russia-Ukraine war will induce the Alliance to get embroiled in a broader clash with Moscow represent an existential challenge to energy security across its southeast flank. Like many of NATO's continental members, the littoral states of Black Sea are heavily dependent on Russian energy and the area is a vital route for the importation of gas and oil to Europe – particularly by pipeline. There the energy supply chain could become seriously disrupted and this could seriously impair the Alliance unity and joint military

⁵⁴ Iulia-Sabina Joja, "Toward a NATO Black Sea strategy", Middle East Institute, July 2, 2024.

⁵⁵ Black Sea Security Act of 2022, S.4509 – 117th Congress, 12 July 2022.

⁵⁶ Madrid Summit Declaration, issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Madrid, 29 June 2022.

capabilities. With more forces in the area, especially in Romania and Bulgaria, NATO has tried to stop Russian aggression. These reinforcements have improved the Alliance's capabilities and sent a clear signal to friends and foes that these host countries' energy systems cannot bear yet even a larger upsurge of people and machines. Italian cities are particularly vulnerable to Russian fuels because they import roughly 40 percent of the hydrocarbons used by NATO nations in Europe, proving their systemic dependency of Russian energy. Obviously, the role of an adversarial energy source has military operations and national security implications.⁵⁷ A glaring example of energy coercion is when Russia suspended gas supply to Poland and Bulgaria in April 2022, not paying if those countries did not pay in Rubles. But Russian energy exports to the rest of European peninsula are still rolling in cash to fund the Kremlin's aggressiveness in Ukraine and other places. A guarantee that NATO member nation counterparts in Europe could have available alternative, reasonably priced energy supply without consideration to the particular geopolitical and geographically unique attributes of the BSR is not possible.

Domestic hydrocarbon production within regional member nations is rising as are efforts outside Russia to locate non-Russian fossil resources. But developing deposits in Black Sea offshore is proving a tough job for Türkiye and Romania. Romania is particularly vulnerable to Russian pressure and is looking for Western partners to reassemble its offshore and land-based reserves. For instance, Romania's older wells need modern technologies to keep producing. One example of such an energy diversification initiative is Türkiye which has boosted its domestic fossil fuel output in Black Sea whilst rapidly enhancing its energy infrastructure, including increasing nuclear power capacity.⁵⁸ More robust storage facilities are needed in NATO Black Sea security posture Turkish and Northern Italian pipeline systems. Additionally, it is important to develop and test proof of concept for alternative routes and modes of transportation including barge, rail and road.⁵⁹ Indeed, renewable energy is going to be exported from the South Caucasus to the European Union. The agreement, which was signed on December 17, 2022 by the governments of Hungary, Romania, Georgia and

⁵⁷ Press release, REPowerEU: Joint European action for more affordable, secure and sustainable energy, European Commission, Mar 7, 2022.

⁵⁸ Grishin, Oleg, Ralitsa Todorova, and Aleksandr Tolochko. "Energy security of Black Sea Region: Geostrategy and geoenergy measurement." *Przegląd Strategiczny* 13 (2020): 439-453.

⁵⁹ Arnold C. Dupuy, "Energy security is critical to NATO's Black Sea future", Atlantic Council, May 12, 2022.

Azerbaijan, involves establishing Black Sea undersea cable. The most important part is to transport renewable power from the South Caucasus to Europe in particular wind energy because Azerbaijan is endowed with large off shore and on shore wind potential. This cable will provide the nations of Black Sea's sides with opportunities for renewable energy production, decarbonization of their energy sources and energy security. The BSR's bordering countries, which include Ukraine, Russia and Romania, are major producers of grain worldwide today as well. Russia's war on Ukraine is threatening the production, price, transportation logistics and trade of grains. Therefore, NATO has judged the BSR as a critical facet of its Eastwards expansion as a trading and export route.⁶⁰

2.2.4 Democratic Values and Institutional Support

As the Alliance requires deeper cooperation with its allies, it seems that NATO began to forge relations with the countries in the BSR. Also in international operations, partner cooperation results in a larger coalition. Before NATO's expansion in 2004, each one of the nations had formal, but remote, ties to NATO. The Partnership for Peace initiative involved all partner countries and was designed to foster real military to military cooperation between NATO and Partners, while the Euro Atlantic Partnership Council was a key forum for talks between NATO and Partner governments. As stated, the major aim has and is maintaining them in Euro Atlantic principles.⁶¹ To exploit the vulnerabilities of Black Sea littoral states the Kremlin has deployed a suite of strategies including economic blackmail, hybrid war and threats to use military force. On top of that, Russia uses political influence and perpetuates conflict and propaganda campaigns, as well as cyberattacks and secret military operations to thwart pro-Western reforms in nations like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. This has caused the countries to experience uninterrupted political crises and much weakened democratic institutions and the corrosion of the rule of law. For that, the BSR questions NATO's status as a frontier of freedom in Europe, thus questioning the very notion of Western democracy. To defend Wilsonian ideas of self-determination, it is imperative to oppose this kind of sharp power. If foreign policies of the key NATO members still adhere to the principles of self-determination and lack of sympathy to autocracy, it should no longer tolerate

⁶⁰Natia Gamkrelidze, "Is the United States Losing Ground in Black Sea Region?" August, 2024.

⁶¹ Rudzīte, Kristīne. "The role of NATO and EU in the developing security in the wider Black Sea region." *Robežu Paplašināšana: Identitātes un Kopienas*: 272. 2005.

endless attempts of Russia to impose autocracy in this region. NATO plays its role in the BSR to preserve democratic values, but USA is doing the same. As another factor of NATO's BSR expansion, the BSR is, in other words, another factor looking at protecting democratic values via institutional support.

2.3 Member States of NATO in the BSR

The BSR has always been characterized by diversification in political and cultural terms. A major obstacle to any NATO action plan in the region lies in the difference between the views of Russia by the three NATO's littoral member countries i.e. Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye with regard to their respective national interests. Today, Black Sea on all sides has become a belt of icy conflicts and instability. And it shows the region's high potential for violence and instability i.e. the South Caucasus, Georgia, Russia, Crimea, East Ukraine, a tumultuous and perplexed Türkiye. National leaders in Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye have at times found themselves alarmed by Russian actions in Black Sea region. Didn't Black Sea keep be called "Russian lake" (as former Romanian President Traian Băsescu once called it in 2005).⁶² Bulgaria's prime minister Boyko Borissov warned that his country would not allow an attack by Russia. But in 2015–2016 recession between Türkiye and Russia, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan revived the idea of Russian lake in order to warn that NATO was not prepared for Black Sea.⁶³ Both Romania and Bulgaria are on the western coast, EU and NATO members. Having both of these crucial memberships in two of the most important political, economic, and military institutions of the Western order is thus assumed to induce stability and predictability at the national level. The three NATO member nations of Black Sea area have disparate political and cultural histories and are joined by a pro-West strategic consensus. In 1952, encouraged by the express strategic imperative to prevent an imminent conflict between the two competing and neighboring non-communist governments, Türkiye, the only Muslim majoritarian country in the Euro-Atlantic system, united with Greece to become a part of the Alliance under the

⁶² Iulia-Sabina Joja, "Dealing with the Russian Lake Next Door: Romania and Black Sea Security," War on the Rocks, August 15, 2018.

⁶³ Sam Jones and Kathrin Hille, "Russia's Military Ambitions Make Waves in Black Sea," Financial Times, May 13, 2016.

Truman Doctrine. Up until recently, Türkiye had a strong locus of Kemalist and secular alignment in its administrative figures.

Romania's faith in NATO, tense past relations with Russia and its independence in trade and energy from Russia all help shape Romania's perspective. Because it believes Russia is exacerbating regional uncertainty with its presence, Romania wants to support a larger NATO presence.⁶⁴ The predominantly positive public opinion towards Russia on the part of the Bulgarians and the advent of Russian information operations have been enabled by mutually beneficial cultural and historical links and the sinking of the traditional Bulgarian media. Still, Bulgaria has a vested interest that makes it less likely to be too critical of Russian actions. Bulgaria depends on Russia for a great portion of its energy and there are continuing discussions about future gas agreements through the TurkStream pipeline. What's more, Türkiye's⁶⁵ NATO commitment and its relations with the US had been shaky from August 2016, when Türkiye was rocked by an unsuccessful coup attempt. It appears that time has momentarily forgotten Turkish worries about Russian competition in Black Sea, at least to the extent of strong energy ties, the need for Turkish cooperation with Russia in Syria, and the Turkish government's aversion to the EU and, more recently, the US.⁶⁶ Important NATO members have differences over the case of Russia in the BSR which effects NATO's new strategies in this region. The case of these NATO members is discussed in detail in the following.

2.3.1 Romania: Concern About Russia's Goals Continuing to be Persistent

Romanian officials have long voiced concerns about Russia's true ambitions in the BSR and further afield. Romania's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Titus Corlăţean, expressed to Deutsche Welle concerns of possible Russian activity near Transnistria after the Russian intervention in Ukraine. Although the US had believed in a very different sort of relationship with Russia, Corlăţean disagreed and argued for "a solid U.S. presence" in Romania, he said, that was "less naive".⁶⁷ The Romanian

⁶⁴ Joja, 2018.

⁶⁵ As Turkey changed its name as Türkiye in 2021, in this study the World Türkiye is used.

⁶⁶ Emmott, R. "Exclusive: Turkey purges NATO military envoys after failed coup". Reuters, October 2016.

⁶⁷ Titus Corlăţean, Romanian foreign minister, "The Russian Threat Is a Reality," transcript of interview with Lally Weymouth, Washington Post, April 30, 2014.

government's perception of Russia's aggressive intent comes in turn, influenced also by Russia's own words and actions. For instance, Moscow has threatened Romania about advances it has made to host NATO soldiers and equipment, such as its plans to host SM-3 missiles as part of that country's role in NATO's missile defense system. Once the missile defense system starts, President Putin threatened openly to put Romania in Russia's crosshairs.⁶⁸ Additionally, Russian authorities have declared that they view Romania as an "obvious threat" to Russian security because it is home to NATO forces and missile defense components.⁶⁹ In reaction to this, Romanian ministers have also discussed Russia's opportunism, tenacity, and many strategies for assault. In June 2018, Romanian Defense Minister Mihai Fifor declared his doubts about Russia's "intervention in the political zone, interference with minorities and economic war," as well as his belief that "I do not think that there's a single day without a challenge" in Romanian airspace or territorial waters.⁷⁰

Further, National Defense Strategy for Romania 2020–2024 states that main threats to national strategic interests regarding ensuring safety of EU and NATO borders, energy security and stability in the BSR are posed by Russian Federation militarization of Crimea and Crimean Black Sea basin, as well as military drills and modernization of its military assets for performance of offensive and defensive missions. That is close to Romania, on the Eastern NATO flank.⁷¹ According to the National Defense Strategy, at least 20% of the defense budget is devoted to purchasing the military hardware, at least 2% to research and development and innovation. In addition, as per the Strategic Defense Analysis 2020 if the force structure were put into effect it will enable the transition to multiyear planning, which would ensure that rising and falling endowment and manpower balances would match the Ministry of National Defense's present and future requirements. It also promised to establish the interinstitutional framework necessary for the National Integrated Management System for Crisis Situations (SNMISC) to be set up and worked effectively and in line with the crisis management systems already in place in NATO and the EU. It also performs the national

⁶⁸ Denis Dyomkin, "Putin Says Romania, Poland May Now Be in Russia's Cross-Hairs," Reuters, May 27, 2016.

⁶⁹ Samuel Osborne, "Russia Calls Romania a 'Clear Threat' and NATO Outpost for Hosting US Missile Shield," The Independent, February 9, 2017.

⁷⁰ "Romania Minister Says Country Facing Cyber-Attacks, Russians", Voice of America, June 25, 2018.

⁷¹ Romania Presidential Administration, National Defense Strategy, 2020-2024: "Together for a safe and prosperous Romania in a world marked by new challenges", Bucharest, 2020, pp. 25–29.

responsibilities adopted in PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and NATO defense planning process, participation in allied missions and operations, command and forces structure in order to better the Alliance's role and capabilities, with a view to unitary, coherent and cohesive support to the Eastern flank.⁷² The growing involvement of Romania into the NATO forces including the deployment of the Aegis Ashore facility changed the geopolitical status of Romania in the RSCT amity/enmity continuum whereby it is now identified as an active front-line state rather than its former peripheral ally status. This change and the growing polarization in the region in favor of NATO generated the type of security spiral very reminiscent of RSCT re-militarization of Crimea by Russia and its own re-equipping of its Black Sea fleet.

Surveying public opinion, a majority of Romanians perceive Russia as a serious threat, yet many have a soft spot for the Russian people and even would admit there are advantages to the strength that Russia possesses. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, Romanians cited Russia as the nation's biggest threat with 57%, which is tied for the highest percentage in the area.⁷³ The public was favorable (60 percent) on the Russian people and the government of the Russian Federation less popular (40–45 percent) and the vast majority of respondents (75 percent) strongly opposed Russian policies, according to a Romanian Academy survey.⁷⁴ But a 2016 Pew study found that 52 percent of Romanians believed one needed a powerful Russia to offset the West's influence. Works to counter the Russian threat has seen Romania ramp up NATO's military buildup in Southeastern Europe. The Romanian government places a high premium on its strategic cooperation with the US since Romanian leaders view U.S. as a reliable bilateral guarantor of Romania's security. In its bilateral dealings, the Romanian administration has also overwhelmingly prioritized fulfillment of NATO security assurances. In particular, the U.S. President Donald Trump first reaffirmed officially, in response to raised allied concerns, the US' commitment to NATO's Article 5 in a June 2017 state visit by the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis to Washington D.C.⁷⁵

⁷² Romania Presidential Administration, National Defense Strategy, 2020-2024, pp. 31-33.

⁷³ Esipova, Neli, and Julie Ray. "Eastern Europeans, CIS Residents See Russia, US as Threats." Gallup.com. April 4, 2016.

⁷⁴ Oancea, Lucian. "Romania and the new Cold War security challenges." PhD diss., Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2017.

⁷⁵ Teodor Stan, "Romania: NATO's Frail Anchor in a Turbulent Black Sea," Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, April 5, 2019.

Romania has feuded with Russia i.e. the ally that helped Romania win its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1877. They differ over current day Moldova and other places where people traditionally interchanged Soviet Union, Romania and Russia.⁷⁶ Ethnically Russian is the majority of the population in Transnistria, a part of Moldova that considers itself a defacto state. Romania is concerned about how far Russia might erode Moldova's sovereignty in Transnistria. For example, Russia might try to provoke a separatist uprising, as in eastern Ukraine. Romania has been spared overt pro-Russian propaganda and information campaigns largely owing to a number of linguistic and historical obstacles. However, observers have pointed out that Russia relies on social media and traditional media and in particular internet trolls to spread nationalist narratives among Romania's wider population and to stoke social and governance fears and anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment.⁷⁷ Second, the energy it produces and stores itself allows Romania to free itself from reliance on any foreign power and to benefit from trade and business relations with Russia. However, some people fear some kind of financial and business activity in Russia. Romanian heavy industry has been the focus of investments from Russian corporations, notably. Overall, as explained with these above arguments, Romania is more open towards the West in light of the language and other global interests, but also feels threatened in front of potential resignation of Russians because Romania is a part of NATO.

2.3.2 Bulgaria: Being Careful with the Juggling of Opportunity and Concern

The official Bulgarian government reading of Russian strategy and posture has explicitly acknowledged concerns about Russia's intentions and capabilities, while at the same time the Bulgarian government has determinedly avoided talk or actions that would put a halter around Sofia's crucial energy and economic ties with Moscow. The Republic of Bulgaria presented in 2011 its National Security Strategy. As a member in that particular regional organization – NATO– it also pointed out threats and risks anticipated to the Republic of Bulgaria and at the same time things that pertain to NATO and EU as a result of Republic of Bulgaria's membership in that organization.⁷⁸ It never once stated that Russia was a national security threat to Bulgaria given that NATO and

⁷⁶ DeGhett, T. "Defense and security: Romania is starting to freak out about Russian designs on Transnistria." Vice News, 2015.

⁷⁷ Binnendijk, Anika. "Understanding Russian Black Sea power dynamics through national security gaming". RAND Corporation, 2020.

⁷⁸ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria, Durzhaven Vestnik, 25.02.2011.

EU consider Russia a threat in this region. In September 2017, Prime Minister Borissov's cabinet agreed to a 2016 national security assessment designating Russia as one of Bulgaria's biggest national security threats. A national security report adopted by the Bulgarian Cabinet includes Russia among its main foreign policy threats. It adds that the goals of a united Europe, free and at peace, is also challenged by Russia's acts as a source of regional instability in our country.⁷⁹ Final parliamentary approval was given to the report which provoked intense debate in the Bulgarian National Assembly, but only among opposition parties. In the national security annual report prepared for 2017 (in fact, adopted by the cabinet in 2018), Russia was not mentioned in the proposed new report at all, even in the section referring to imbalance of forces in the BSR and the Ukrainian issue. According to the report, the "geostrategic security situation in the immediate vicinity of our territory" has taken negative turns, and that the balance of forces in Black Sea has been disturbed, but it does not refer to the source of the threat.⁸⁰ But political differences have exacerbated the policy variation in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Socialist Party, for example, the direct descendant of the communist party that had ruled Bulgaria in the orbit closest to the Kremlin, is still there and remains loyal to something it calls a balanced approach to Moscow. Yet without severing relations with Moscow and fearing reprisals, Sofia's successive governments have sought to adopt a cautious, risk averse approach to balancing Moscow and Bulgaria's Western partners' conflicting demands.

According to the popular opinion the mass of social fractions supports the point that Russia has never had to be an inimical game. In 2017, according to the Pew Poll, 56% of Bulgarians believed that "a strong Russia was necessary to counterbalance the influence of the West".⁸¹ However, favorably, cultural and linguistic links from Bulgarians commonly influence perceptions about Russian behavior. Syndicated Russian media also, especially with the Orthodox church, stitches together Slavic and religious ties and as such many Bulgarians speak Russian so it's natural, they turn to Russian media for international news. Bulgaria is strengthened by its historical education, which stresses the times of convergence not confrontation with Russia.

⁷⁹ Clive Leviev-Sawyer, "Bulgarian national security report naming Russia as threat causes storm in Parliament", The Sofia Globe, September 13, 2017.

⁸⁰ Clive Leviev-Sawyer, "Change of Stance as Cabinet Adopts Report That Does Not See Russia as Threat to EU, Bulgaria," Independent Balkan News Agency, July 23, 2018.

⁸¹ Pew Research Center, "Views on Role of Russia in the Region, and the Soviet Union," in Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe, Washington, D.C., May 10, 2017.

Bulgarians remain indebted in kind to the modernization brought on by communist government and recognize as true that Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire was the handiwork of Tsarist Russia. Bulgaria is also spending money on its efforts to convince Russia to contract TurkStream pipeline's second section to Bulgaria's border, which will leave it largely dependent on Russian gas, rather than Greece. Bulgaria's energy relations with Russia thus are showing down in NATO's long-term interests in this region.

2.3.3 Türkiye: Concerns Are Overpowered by Interests for the Time Being

Black Sea was on the whole seen as a Turkish lake, before the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, because of Ottoman Empire's multidecadal regional predominance in the Balkans and Crimea. Despite that, an ever-growing Russian Empire threatened the Ottoman rule and the worst signs of the fierce clash between the Ottoman sultans and the Russian tsars over Black Sea were the Ottoman-Russian clashes of the 18th and 19th centuries, most notably the Crimean War of 1853–1856. The discourse of the Turkish-Soviet easily influenced the diplomatic process by which the Lausanne and Montreux conventions came into effect regarding the regime of the Turkish Straits after the fall of the two empires after the Great War. The Turks have periodically expressed unease given Russia's ambitions in Black Sea, but after Putin and Erdoğan's very friendly personal ties and overlapping economic interests, the Russian and Turkish relationship has seemed strong in a bilateral sense. Ankara and Moscow remain at loggerheads on other regional disputes in the BSR. For instance, Türkiye was critical of Moscow's moves on the Tatars' position in Crimea and increased the political and economic aspects of relations with Ukraine. In March 2016 during the Ukrainian President Poroshenko's official visit to Türkiye, two nations reached agreement to deepen their military-technical cooperation.⁸² Georgia, meanwhile, had a tense relationship with Russia, and became one of Türkiye's most important strategic allies in the Caucasus. Georgian politicians, however, actively cooperate with Türkiye and Azerbaijan on regional energy and transportation projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi Erzurum natural gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi Kars railway, and Ankara is pushing Tbilisi to deepen ties with NATO.

⁸² See <http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-ta-turechchina-pogliblyuvatimutstrategichne-partne-36833> (22 December 2017).

By June 2016, the official start of the process of normalizing Turkish-Russian relations was Türkiye's President Erdoğan's letter to Russia's President Putin. The two leaders agreed to meet in August in St. Petersburg and in response Moscow reacted favorably to the letter. But while the Turkish-Russian reconciliation movement had a reason to lift its head after the July 15 2016 failed coup attempt in Türkiye, it had been taking a back seat.⁸³ Despite the strong backing of the Turkish position by Moscow, NATO members from Türkiye have very ambivalent and conflicting public response. This all provided yet another big boost to the Turkish-Russian reconciliation, as Ankara became dissatisfied with its ties to the US and the EU.⁸⁴ The percentage of Turkish respondents who said they had a positive opinion of Russia was 32 percent in 2017 and 39 percent in 2019, the Global Indicators Database from Pew Research Center.⁸⁵ And, for instance, according to a regular survey carried out by the Kadir Has University, the percentage of Turks who saw Russia as a threat dropped from 34.9 percent in 2016 to 12.4 percent in 2018, while the percentage who consider the US a threat rose from 44.1 percent in 2016 to 66.5 percent in 2017 before dipping to 60.2 percent.⁸⁶

In addition, there are also some other factors that will determine the relationship in the future between Türkiye and NATO, and Russia. The internal support from Erdoğan is reinforced by the cooperation with Russia, especially on the level of forming relationships and gaining benefits for Türkiye's national interests, which finally skewed Erdoğan's counterbalance to the West, and visibly enhanced the country's strength. However, the relationship between Türkiye and Russia has always been tense, though so have a plethora of improvements and rapprochements. Throughout all of time, Türkiye sees the expansion of Russian dominance as a threat to itself and to the regional balance of power.⁸⁷ In addition, Türkiye is also at risk of getting hit by Russian economic baits not only because of its gas and oil dependence on Russia, but also on

⁸³ Vladimir Putin received a message from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of Russia, June 27, 2016.

⁸⁴ Anika Binnendijk, "The Russian-Turkish Bilateral Relationship: Managing Differences in an Uneasy Partnership," in Stephen J. Flanagan, F. Stephen Larrabee, Anika Binnendijk, Katherine Costello, Shira Efron, James Hoobler, Magdalena Kirchner, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, and Peter A. Wilson, *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2589-A, 2020, pp. 119–121.

⁸⁵ Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, web tool, March 2020.

⁸⁶ Mustafa Aydın, Sinem Akgl Açıkmeç, Mitat elikpala, Soli Özel, Cihan Dizdarolu, and Mustafa Gokcan Kosen, "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy," Istanbul: Center for Turkish Studies, Kadir Has University, July 4, 2019.

⁸⁷ Boris Toucas, "NATO and Russia in Black Sea: A New Confrontation?", Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 6, 2017.

technology for its planned nuclear reactor. A Russian proposed TurkStream gas pipeline across Türkiye could cement Türkiye's strong energy ties to Russia. Specifically, Russian media has served to exacerbate views already held in Türkiye towards anti-American and anti-NATO attitudes that predate Russian media efforts at stroking these. Many of the above-described factors are able to harm Türk relations with the West and Moscow.⁸⁸

2.3.4 NATO's Relations with Ukraine and Georgia

The independent Reflection Group, which was formed by the NATO Secretary General published its report, NATO 2030: on November 25, 2020 under the title "United for a New Era". The Group was asked to review NATO's current and future roles and make recommendations addressing ways of making it stronger in terms of Alliance cohesion, Allied political consultation and NATO's political role. The Reflection Group emphasizes the resurgence of systemic rivalry and geopolitical conflict, with Russia and China occupying the large majority of its study. Russia is said to be probably going to remain the greatest military challenge to the Alliance and a threat to it in both kinetic and non-kinetic domains in the next 10 years.⁸⁹ The NATO 2030 Agenda is clearly an affirmation on the part of the organization's Open Door Policy. From the Alliance's political, practical and rhetorical backing, Georgia and Ukraine are currently acknowledged aspirant states. In a Brussels Summit 2021, 30 NATO Allies' heads of state and government reiterated that they back Georgia and Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within their internationally recognized borders. They urged Russia to remove the forces it has deployed in these countries without their consent in accordance with international obligations.⁹⁰ All of Ukraine's main strategic documents name NATO's membership and ramping up international support and sanctions against this Russian aggression as its top foreign policy and national security objectives. Three primary tenets of state national security policy are asserted in the study. First, developing security and defense capacities aimed at preventing military action against Ukraine. Second, the capacity to quickly respond to changed security environment and continued operations in the long term, minimizing internal and external vulnerabilities.

⁸⁸ Grigoriadis, Ioannis N., and Ümit Erol Aras. "Distrusted Partnership: Unpacking Anti-Americanism in Turkey." *Middle East Policy* 30, no. 1 (2023): 122-136.

⁸⁹ Thierry Tardy, "NATO 2030. United for a new era", NDC Policy Brief, No. 23 – December 2020.

⁹⁰ Brussels Summit Communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 14 June 2021.

Third, the creation of practical cooperation with other countries and international organizations on the basis of Ukraine's national interests, the emergence of a strategic partnership with key foreign partners.⁹¹ Georgia's major strategic papers already rank NATO membership as Georgia's top international and national security priority like Ukraine. Georgia's foreign policy since it regained independence in 1991 has been consistent concerning one thing. Regardless of whether they were affiliated with a pro-Western or pro-North foreign policy, every succeeding administration has chosen a pro-Western alternative. Forming such an alliance with the West and then integration into all Western institutions was the only way to reduce the threat of Russia and so preserve Georgia's sovereignty, they felt.⁹² The Russian Federation's military occupation of a part of Georgia's territory within the Georgian borders violates Georgia's sovereignty in accordance with the National Security Concept of Georgia as well as Georgia's statehood, as well as impedes the Georgians' development in the political, economic and social sense. The deployment of Russian ground, air, naval, and border forces, the heavy militarization of seized regions, all of which violate Georgia's sovereignty, put at risk regional security. In addition, Georgia's security is subjected also to an unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and North Caucasus instability.⁹³ In this case Georgia's security would be served by forming a cooperative, and peaceful atmosphere in the Caucasus. European integration procedures are necessary for Georgia's security. Georgia is part of European and Euro-Atlantic regions. NATO's eastward expansion is of interest to Georgia. During Georgia and Ukraine's time of dealing with both internal and external affairs, Georgia-Ukraine ties are currently based on Europe's steady political and diplomatic support of NATO. As NATO always keeps its promise, never been past that Bucharest Summit expressed there will never Georgia and Ukraine as a member, they make sure they keep that promise.⁹⁴ NATO's practical assistance to those countries consists in helping Georgia and Ukraine to implement the required reforms to generate interoperability with NATO and to develop autonomous self-defense capabilities. The Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine and Substantial NATO-Georgia Package are the main frameworks for useful assistance. On top of that,

⁹¹ Ihor Kabanenko, "Ukraine's New National Security Strategy: A Wide Scope with Foggy Implementation Mechanisms", Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 17 Issue: 133, September 24, 2020.

⁹² Natalie Sabanadze, "EU-Georgia Relations: A Local Show of the Global Theater", Carnegie Europe, November 16, 2023.

⁹³ National Security Concept, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia.

⁹⁴ Brussels Summit Communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 14 June 2021.

Georgia and Ukraine have also ratified the Charter on Strategic Partnership with the US, a document that gives them other means to bolster their security against the Alliance's unwillingness to enlarge.⁹⁵ Since Russia annexed Crimea, the BSR's security landscape has entirely changed, and NATO has had to increase its presence in the region following Russia's growth in capability. Intending to increase training and drills for coast guards and maritime forces and port visits, maritime cooperation was also extended to partner states Georgia and Ukraine.

Conclusion

The acquisition of Crimea by Russia has been crucial to the Alliance's conventional security issues, thereby NATO has enlarged its military presence in eastern and southeastern regions in order to create a balance of forces against Russia. The point where Georgia and Ukraine's accession trajectory is very noteworthy. While the Alliance has long been a strong advocate of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO through summit resolutions and reaffirmed rhetoric, Georgia and Ukraine's ability to move far forward in their longstanding aspirations to join the Alliance is severely constrained given Russia's imposition of NATO red line on joining for Georgia and Ukraine. RSCT teaches us to solve safety problems by looking at local political relationships. NATO's assistance to Georgia and Ukraine needs to expand beyond military accession because both countries require assistance with internal security frameworks as well as political stability and democratic reform development. All NATO members must understand that Alliance member states possess different strategic interests and threat assessment perspectives. Türkiye attempts to maintain equitable diplomacy between NATO and Russia creating strategic difficulties. External actors NATO and Russia impact both domestic politics and security of states Georgia and Ukraine through the complex regional security network that overlays the region. But they should also use NATO's current political and practical help to bring their democracies to a stronger footing, reform their security and defense, improve interoperability with NATO troops and build resilient societies. It's the case of three NATO members with Türkiye acting a balanced act between NATO and Russia, Romania pro NATO and Bulgaria not mentioning Russia in words. If one look at it from the NATO perspective, all the NATO members should be working together for that

⁹⁵ United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, Signed at Washington, DC on January 9, 2009.

matter but there should be a balance in the countries' interests and in the Alliance interests. The findings of this chapter based on the RSCT principle of regional polarity shift is that the elevated military presence of NATO in Romania and Bulgaria since 2014, has changed the strategic balance in the BSR along the lines of change in the previously multi-polar or neutral dynamic environment towards the NATO-dominated polarity. As RSCT puts it, these changes create an insecurity among competing states prompting a countermove. One example can be the implementation of Aegis Ashore in Romania that became a game changer in terms of strategy and triggered the occupational militarization of Crimea and the fortification of naval forces by Russia. It is in line with what Buzan and Wasefer argue and that is that external intrusion into the security complex of a region often distorts internal balances forcing hitherto lesser states such as Romania into the vortex of NATO-Russia conflict. The difference in Bulgarian response (less committed, more hesitant) indicates a difference in amity/enmity position (Bulgaria is not strongly in the alliance against Russia, but still, part of the NATO complex) thus producing a weaker response.

Chapter Three

Security Implications of NATO Expansion in the Black Sea Region and Russia's Response, 2014–2024

The understanding of NATO's activities in the BSR by Russia is preconditioned by historical and geopolitical factors alongside with the security concerns. The BSR as a nexus of Europe, Asia and the Caucasus is of particular crucial importance to Russia. For Russia the threat that NATO poses not merely military, but a natural right and interests in organizing regional security in this territory is seen as a threat to Russia's strategic interests as a regional and global actor.⁹⁶ The approach applied for analysis is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. For RSCT, security threats cannot be seen as an attribute of a single state, but rather a function of relations between neighboring states. Such areas like Black Sea have intricate web of security interdependence whereby security of Russia if not a NATO member country is the security of countries around Black Sea. Regional Security Complex Theory is helpful to explain why Russia sees NATO's enlargement as a threat in the BSR. The NATO's military and strategic activities are not perceived by Russia as separate actions but as discrete series aimed at destabilization of Russian perception of security in the post-soviet space.⁹⁷ This is the case because, in RSCT, the interests of security of each state in the region are perceived to be mutually dependent. Hence, at the slightest opportunity, any discernible, even a minor, change of power relations within the NATO camp forces Russia to re-strategize so as to protect its interests.

This chapter has been organized into following parts: i) Historical Context of NATO's Expansion in the BSR, ii) Historical and Political Importance of Black Sea, iii) NATO's Enlargement and the Changing Russian Perceptions of it and iv) Conclusion. NATO has been gradually enhancing its presence in the BSR which is viewed as a continuous encroachment on the Russian backyard, and this process is followed by Russian military, diplomatic, and, possibly, economic counteractions. The enlargement of the NATO and most of all military operation, and NATO bases and forces perceived as threat which would upset balance of security in the region in the eyes of Russia and

⁹⁶ Flanagan, Stephen J., Anika Binnendijk, Irina A. Chindea, Katherine Costello, Geoffrey Kirkwood, Dara Massicot, and Clint Reach. "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security". RAND Corporation, 2020.

⁹⁷ Wagner, Greta. "Black Swans in Black Sea: Scenarios for the Future of NATO-Russia Relations in Black Sea Region." Charles University Digital Repository, 2019.

challenge its dominance in its near abroad. In this chapter, a process tracing methodology is incorporated into a study design to examine how Russia utilized the military, diplomatic, and hybrid capacities in the face of NATO expansion towards the BSR between 2014-2024. Instead of describing the actions by Russia in chronological order, this chapter goes through certain NATO steps or projects one by one and suggests the critical points which triggered the particular Russian reaction. As an example, the establishment of a tailored Forward Presence in the BSR, by the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, has led to the increased anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in Crimea by Russia, and heightened Black Sea naval activity. Likewise, in 2020, when Ukraine was moving toward NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partnership, the attacks on it were increased in the cyber environment and disinformation campaigns as well as the military buildup near the border of Ukraine in 2021. Dwelling on cause-effect chains, the chapter mechanizes the sequence of a process tracing approach, which unveils the reason why the Russians perceived the threats and gradually expanded the NATO presence. Moreover, it also provides the analysis based on Romania (as a high NATO-aligned state) and Turkey (as an actor balancing) to show that the reactions of Russia are not universal and depend on the degree of NATO integration and former relations. This method is amenable to casual inference so that one gets to know not only the pattern of performances but strategic rationale in them.

3.1 Patterns of NATO's Expansion

The expansion of NATO after the Cold War era is a significant qualitative change in the European security systems. The collapse of the Cold War is said to have seen the western leaders and among them the Americans in a dialogue with the Soviets discussing the fate of NATO. According to Russian officials, at these meetings, especially when discussing German unification, the Western partners have given purported verbal guarantees that NATO would not move to the east.⁹⁸ Although, there were no bargains that could be sanctioned by law, Russian officials claim that by NATO enlargement to East European and former Soviet dominated countries they violated these agreements. The first Nassm expansion was in 1999 with the membership of three

⁹⁸ Åtland, Kristian, and Ihor Kabanenko. "Russia and its western neighbours: A comparative study of the security situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea regions." *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 2 (2020): 286-313.

Central and Eastern European countries, namely Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Russia regarded this as direct intervention into its sphere of interests which apply political, military and economic pressure traditionally. The expansion of NATO that began after the fall of the Soviet Union and continuing with the addition to NATO of the Baltic nations including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania or of Romania, Bulgaria and others, have been most worrisome to Russia.⁹⁹ Some of them were formerly in the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact, and joining NATO is regarded by Russia as the loss of ground. From a Russian point of view, NATO is encroaching towards the east, this is a crippling effect on Russia mainland as a Great Power in its zone of influence or sphere of interests. As had already been seen, this expansion not only places NATO military facilities near Russia's borders but also undermines Russia's capacity to protect its post-Soviet sphere of influence. This sentiment is especially translated when countries of the former Soviet republics like Ukraine and Georgia are involved, the latter of which has pursued NATO entry. As prominent within the RSCT, in such an intertwined Regional Security Complex Russia perceives NATO activity as a bid to weaken its presence and security in Europe and the BSR.

3.2 Historical and Political Importance of Black Sea

There is no doubt that Black Sea has important geopolitical factors that are of importance to Russia, whether as a military strategic base or as an economic hinge. As an important maritime interface connecting the East European, Caucasian and the Middle Eastern regions, Black Sea remains the primary point for Russia's access to the Mediterranean region. This region is not simply a relevant area of economic importance in terms of the export of goods by sea and ship building, it is also a defense outpost against possible enemies. To Russia thus free access to and within Black Sea is critical for its current military and future economic power projection in the larger generality of the Eurasian space.¹⁰⁰ In regard to the military, Black Sea hosts Russia's Black Sea Fleet and its base in Sebastopol, occupied Crimean territory. These are essential parts of the Russian naval plan and grant Russia a military base in the Mediterranean which is strategic to its navy. In the geopolitical context of use of Black Sea as a destination to

⁹⁹ Naumescu, Valentin. "Stability, ambiguity and change in the discourses of NATO allies in Black Sea region: The cases of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey." *Croatian International Relations Review* 23, no. 80 (2017): 187-209.

¹⁰⁰ Chiriac, Olga R. "Enemy at the Gates: NATO in Black Sea." In *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation: Implications for Black Sea Security*, pp. 75-100. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

enhance its presence as a dominant power, as a deterring factor against NATO forces and to keep a security zone from perceived aggression from the west, Russia has a lot to benefit. The control of Black Sea is another major strategic choke point for transferring fleet from Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and it also plays an important source for getting the naval power projection in the Mediterranean and North Africa, thus compromising its situation in this passage will severely diminish Russia's force worldwide. Its militarization and implication as an economic asset are obvious as well.¹⁰¹

The region is an important point of transit of oil and natural gas resources where the natural gas and oil is transported to Europe. Black Sea is crucial for Russia's energy export, and its main sources include TurkStream and Blue Stream. Its function as a transit point in international relations which is especially relevant today as a part of agricultural delivery chains of countries such as, Ukraine or Russia increases strategic value of Black Sea. Through the BSR Russia can safeguard such economic stakes as well as maintain its status of key energy supplier for the Europe.¹⁰² According to RSCT, the security actors within any specified geographical region are closely connected, for instance, the actions of one state in this region, for example NATO military deployment and cooperation with Black Sea nations, could have an overview impact on the security of proximate actors including Russia. These realities of NATO build up and deployments in Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye are seen by Russia as directly threatening its strategic interest and capability to manage the BSR hence the security dilemma that the West poses to Russia. With NATO forces situated in these states especially Romania and Bulgaria that are members of NATO and Türkiye, an important member of NATO that has enhanced its military capability in the BSR, increases Russia's worries of the shrinking security space between it and NATO. Furthermore, the expansion of NATO and the possible membership of Ukraine or Georgia deepens Russian concerns because those states are crucial for Russia's conception of a stable, pro-Russian zone in the BSR. The possibility of NATO enlargement to these countries is viewed in Russia as a threat with regards to its near abroad and the fact that any NATO military installations and command and control facilities would be right on the

¹⁰¹ Allison, Roy. "The Unresolved Conflicts in Black Sea Region: Threats, Impacts on Regionalism, and Regional Strategies for Conflict Resolution." In *Black Sea Region*, pp. 86-122. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁰² Hodges, Ben. "Black Sea... Or a Black Hole?" Center for European Policy Analysis, 2021.

Russian borders making it far less convenient for Russia to influence the countries of the former Soviet space.¹⁰³

Case	NATO Action Type	Year	Russia's Response Type	Intensity
Romania	Aegis Ashore deployment	2016	Iskander missile drills in Crimea	Escalatory
Ukraine	Sea Breeze joint naval exercises	2018	Increased Black Sea Fleet presence	High
Türkiye	NATO-Türkiye coordination, S-400 tensions	2019	Diplomatic engagement, no escalation	Low
Georgia	Joint NATO training program	2021	Cyber disruptions, border drills	Medium
Bulgaria	NATO infrastructure development	2020	Naval patrols, political rhetoric	Low

This table is made by the author where variables are coded manually and are measured by time, intensity and type.

3.3 NATO's Enlargement and the Changing Russian Perceptions of it

NATO's enlargement has compelled Russia to adapt its security approaches and programs including not only Black Sea area, but the wider post-Soviet area as well. The so-called Russian counteraction to NATO's enlargement has been the shifts in its strategic positioning, armed forces configuration, and foreign policy since NATO intensively bolstered its military presence in the Eastern Europe, particularly in Black Sea area.¹⁰⁴ Military modernization has also been a key component of the Russian response, spending much on Black Sea Fleet, air defense and the creation of novel missile systems and the S-400. These measures are intended to preserve Russia's capacity to threaten and coerce potential adversaries arising from NATO's expansion. These measures include, military modernization, proxy warfare, hybrid tactics and the use of softer power to checkmate NATO. Main instances of the non-direct military interference, which allows Russia to challenge NATO, are the conflict in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia's sponsoring the separatists in the Donbas, Ukraine or Abkhazia, Georgia. Thus, aggravating instabilities around it, Russia is interested in stopping the continued NATO membership of neighboring states and reducing their potential for

¹⁰³ Åtland, Kristian. "Redrawing borders, reshaping orders: Russia's quest for dominance in Black Sea region." *European Security* 30, no. 2 (2021): 305-324.

¹⁰⁴ Bekiarova, Natalia. "The changing strategic paradigm in Black Sea zone and the challenges to regional security." *IJASOS-International E-journal of Advances in Social Sciences* 5, no. 13 (2019): 168-174.

cooperation with the West. RSCT shows that the expansion of NATO also changes the security environment, making every state within it depend on one or many others in relation to their security, whether or not they are NATO members or Russia. Within such suppositions, actions of NATO are viewed as a destabilizing factor in the regional security that Russia aims to achieve in its vicinity. This interdependence pushes Russia to use policies, which go beyond traditional military power such as diplomacy and exerting economic pressure, as well as attempts to manipulate political situations within the neighboring countries.

The NATO expansion into Russia's near abroad region seems ludicrous because Moscow sees this area as its own territory and because Black Sea connects to important enduring sea communications routes leading to the Mediterranean Sea. The strategic locations around Russian territory has contracted while NATO and Romania and Bulgaria's recent NATO membership stall Western countries' direct access to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. NATO leadership along with Western nations refused to recognize Russia's legitimate land holdings acquired in March 2014 while introducing an increase in military operations around Crimean waters. According to Moscow's perspective all activities it views as attempts to weaken its regional power status create greater legal and political challenges in the region. Russia's A2AD system targets geographical zones to prevent entry by NATO forces who enjoy extended precision strike capabilities as Moscow maintains its accusations against the alliance. This configuration undermines Black Sea A2AD capabilities for Ukraine. As one of Russia's protective instruments Moscow relies on its A2AD to defend the southern Russian territories and prevent further western military advances.

3.3.1 The Augmentation of the Size of the Armed Forces and their Sustained Transformation

After NATO enlargement especially with Bulgaria and Romania joining NATO in 2004, NATO saw a downside of its expansion where Russia upped the stakes by increasing its defense budget in the BSR. The expansion of NATO forces in closest countries, related military drills, and upgrades to the alliance's facilities raised concerns to Russia regarding the balance of power which it used to dominate. In 2014 the Russian Federation extended its control over the Crimea which is important for Russia for its naval base in the city of Sevastopol which became a main base of Russia's Black Sea

fleet.¹⁰⁵ It also provided Russia a direct access to the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait which is so important for its military and economic consideration. The modernization of Russia's Black Sea Fleet incorporating modern systems such as the S-400 surface air defense system demonstrated the great amount of capital that Russia has invested to guarantee the area as a response for the emergence of NATO. S-400, one of the most cutting-edge missile systems in the world, lets Russia keep high defensive capability and prevent NATO's aircrafts or missiles to act without restrictions. This military buildup is not only caused by NATO's increasing presence but general approach to use military means to make a point and exert control over a region that Russia considers as its backyard.¹⁰⁶ From the viewpoint of RSCT these developments point to the fact that Russia's security is closely intertwined with those of neighboring states. The expansion of NATO troops is considered by the Russian Federation as intervention from the outside in its internal affairs, the need for which forces it to take definite military actions to stabilize its position, restore the imperial control over the ex-Soviet states, and to defend its crucial military interests in the BSR.

3.3.2 Conflict of Interest and Asymmetric War fighters

The involvement of Russia in proxy wars and the application of hybrid warfare strategies have comprised essential components of the counteractions performed by Moscow against NATO's eastern enlargement as well as attempts to preserve the Russian interest across Eurasia, Black Sea in particular. Since NATO enlargement in 2004, and especially after its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia increased its participation in hybrid warfare, openly as well as covertly arming, funding, and encouraging separatist groups and sowing instability in countries that were aspiring to join the alliance.¹⁰⁷ The above examples are inseparable from the annexation of Crimea, as is the conflict in Eastern Ukraine up to the present moment. In Ukraine, Moscow's supply of aid to the separatists in the Donbas has resulted in a frozen conflict that complicates Ukraine's efforts to join NATO and embrace a European Union-led West. With support of these secessionist movements Russia also violates Ukrainian territorial

¹⁰⁵ Alexandrova-Arbatova, Nadia. "Security relations in Black Sea Region: Russia and the West after the Ukrainian crisis." In *Aftermath of the Ukrainian Crisis*, pp. 21-32. Routledge, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Kormych, Borys, and Tetyana Malyarenko. "From gray zone to conventional warfare: the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Black Sea." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 7 (2023): 1235-1270.

¹⁰⁷ Chong, Byron. "The role of Black Sea in Russia's strategic calculus." Center for International Maritime Security. <http://cimsec.org>, 2018.

integrity and at the same time contributes to NATO enlargement cessation by provoking unrest in nations that can potentially join the alliance. Likewise, in Georgia Russia backs separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia which while practically acknowledged as independent states are pressured significantly by Russian forces.¹⁰⁸ These actions reflect Moscow's aspiration of keeping the NATO out of and maintaining Russia's reach within its presumed area of activity. Besides these military invasions Russia has come up with hybrid warfare strategy to further destabilize the country and to cause trouble for NATO's attempts to strengthen its voice in the region. These strategies include cyber war, propaganda and politics interferences, approaches with which Russia wields soft power without engaging in warfare. In this way, such methods are aimed at exposing the weaknesses in member countries and aspirants to NATO and thereby prevent a united front by the West. In line with the RSCT analysis, utilization of proxy wars and hybrid wars foster the creation of a security generation space around Russia. In this manner, Russia sustains uncertainty and shrinks NATO's influence enlarging neighboring states' zones of instability, hence securing its own regional security benefits. This strategy also seems to help NATO not to add Southern vector, in order that Russia can definitely control essential territories and approaches to and from Black Sea.

3.3.3 Pressure in the Diplomacy and Economic Aspect

Russia persisted with relying on economic pressures as a core tool of pressure, as part of its hybrid war in the BSR and beyond. One of the material interests of Russia is, especially in energy resources, mainly natural gas supplied to European countries. As one of the single largest supplier of energy to the continent, Russia has applied political pressure on both NATO Europe and countries in its zone of strategic influence.¹⁰⁹ For example, gas turn offs and change of prices has been applied as tools of political and economic pressures on some countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, which Russia uses these crises due to its leverage. In addition, Russia has applied sanctions and restricts trades with countries that considered establishing relationships with the West or NATO to force them to stop cooperating with NATO. All the economic actions

¹⁰⁸ Gerrits, Andre WM, and Max Bader. "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution." *East European Politics* 32, no. 3 (2016): 297-313.

¹⁰⁹ Blockmans, Steven. "Crimea and the quest for energy and military hegemony in Black Sea region: governance gap in a contested geostrategic zone." In *Aftermath of the Ukrainian Crisis*, pp. 71-82. Routledge, 2018.

carried by Russia prove that Russia uses sanctions as a tool of punishment for Ukraine's attempt to escape from its sphere of influence, with unlawful annexation of Ukrainian territory i.e. Crimea, and application of sanctions for its political orientation towards the West. Likewise, Russia serving its strategic energy interest in Europe through lobbying many projects like Nord Stream pipelines which focuses on weakening the EU countries' ability to unite with NATO through making them highly dependent on Russia.¹¹⁰ From the RSCT standpoint, these economic strategies are characteristic components of the so-called securitization of economic relations because economic and political interactions of states are closely intertwined in this area and depend on the relationships of the neighboring countries. Through the economic influence Russia can dictate the security policies of the neighboring countries and make sure that none of them are aligned with NATO, or are at least neutral towards Russia.

3.3.4 Russia's Reaction to NATO's Military Build-up in Black Sea

The enhancement of NATO member states' military forces in the BSR has changed the security more fundamentally which, in turn, has forced Russia to take several defensive and proactive initiatives to maintain the supremacy and strategic stakes in the region. This study finds that as NATO has sought to bolster its military presence in the especially in terms of the numbers and frequencies of troops and naval force in Romania and Bulgaria as well as in common NATO exercise, Russia responded through a series of corresponding measures with the intent of asserting military dominance in the BSR. These actions are, however, a reaction to a threat they perceive in NATO especially as far as their zone of influence is concerned.¹¹¹ One of the main responses which has been observed is an increase in military maneuvers and patrols in Black Sea. The Russian Federation continuously practices military maneuvers, focused on anti-air and anti-missile capabilities of forces, and the large-scale amphibious exercises in terms of defending against a potential NATO advance. The public drills are supposed to demonstrate Russia's preparedness to the military and act as a provocation against NATO's expansion in the area. Also, Russia has carried out the move to enhance its naval patrols and surveillance in order to empower it constantly observe NATO naval ships close by its borders and as a result exercise dominance over these sea corridors

¹¹⁰ de Jong, Moniek. "Tracing the downfall of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Energy and Environment* 13, no. 1, 2024.

¹¹¹ Putnam, Jamie M. "One Man's Reaction to NATO Expansion." Ursinus College, 2016.

which are rather sensitive to Russia's military and economic security. A recently made shift towards military development does not only concern conventional armed forces, but also outstanding pieces of military equipment, including the S-400 air defense system, modern submarines, hypersonic missile systems and so on. Over the course of the last few years, the shares of these systems have been intended to threaten NATO's high-tech achievements and upgrade Russia's protection if the confrontation in military terms occurs.

3.3.4.1 Military Maneuvers and Show of Force

Thus, with the NATO's presence in Black Sea intensifying Russia has stepped up the frequency, and the scale, and the complexity of the exercises. These, including large-scale ones i.e. Caucasus and Ocean Shield are the components of Russia's operational-top level response to the alleged military threat of NATO's actions. It is used for military purposes, building up force and deployment of troops with aggressive intensions revealing to NATO and its other allies that Russia will do everything possible to protect her interests in the region.¹¹² The Caucasus exercises which began in 2012 are some of Russia's largest military exercises to date. Many of these training drills involve various hypothesized conflicts, including traditional warfare and hybrid ones, land and sea. This exercise entailed a call for Russian troops to conduct combined exercises with the Armenian and Abkhazian forces while still putting Russia as the masters of the show. The exercise also provided realistic portrayal of military actions aimed at repelling NATO's intervention in the area and defense of Russian space and counter strike operations against potential aggressors including those from NATO's. The exercises are also a message that if NATO decides to use military force in Russia's periphery, it will get a response.

Likewise, Russia's Ocean Shield maneuvers are instead constant rehearsals, as showcased in Black Sea, that compound Russia's military profile. Chief among these exercises is anti-maritime, air defense and anti-submarine exercises, which are particularly relevant due to the increase in NATO's naval power in Black Sea.¹¹³ Such an event, for instance, the 2019 Ocean Shield, included not only Black Sea Fleet but

¹¹² Markedonov, Sergey. "Russia and the conflicts in the South Caucasus: main approaches, problems, and prospects." *Caucasus Edition* 3, no. 2 (2018): 24-47.

¹¹³ Bridger, James M. "Safe Seas at What Price? The Costs, Benefits and Future of NATO's Operation Ocean Shield". NATO Defense College., 2022.

also strategic bombers and naval aviation as it represented the coherent web of the Russo defend system land, air, sea forces. In these exercises Russia normally conducts dramatized attacks on NATO naval forces, and training methods that would be adopted in case of attacking or ejecting NATO forces and naval ships in Black Sea. By doing these riots, Russia underlines its presence in the region as its sphere of interest and emphasizes all naval power in Black Sea against NATO forces. However, RSCT analysis of these military maneuvers is that they are not about showcasing of force capabilities alone but about confirming a regional hegemon's supremacy and bid to balance rising NATO militaries. In the spirit of RSCT, security of states constituting a regional security complex is tied and hence, what happens to one state – such as the enlargement of NATO and its military deployment, affects the security practices of the other directly and more often than not, immediately. According to this, such a rousing of the activity and presence of NATO in the BSR is viewed by Moscow as a direct threat to security in the region. Such spectacles of the military might be aimed at preventing NATO from further persistence and intervention in the region. These actions communicate to NATO that Russia is serious and is ready to respond with force to protect its territorial integrity, and is cost imposing, and thereby conveys a message to any potential NATO forces that Russia can cause considerable costs to NATO. This way Russia demonstrates that it is prepared to provide massive military forces to sustain its unchallenged status as the regional hegemon that will prevent NATO from developing a secure anchor point in its neighborhood. However, it is imperative to look at the political implication of the exercise that are being conducted time and again. These drills are supposed to convey one simple message to NATO and its partners that Russia will not tolerate the expansion of NATO towards its zone of strategic interests.¹¹⁴ These exercises are usually well timed and located to achieve the optimum effect. For example, Russian warships and submarines often practice near vital NATO's naval facilities or areas that are of key essential importance for the alliance, including the Bosphorus Strait, the entrance to Black Sea. These exercises are carried out at the time when some significant diplomatic event occurs around the world, or important NATO military operation takes place in this region, which strengthens the signal that Russia is ready to defend its interests against the Western countries. All in all, Russia's military

¹¹⁴ Binnendijk, Anika. "Understanding Russian Black Sea power dynamics through national security gaming." RAND Corporation, 2020.

maneuvers and shows of strength are not unidimensional reactions to NATO escalation in the BSR. They are meant to signal possession, martial preparedness within Russian territories, and to curb further NATO endeavors within that particular region.¹¹⁵ From an RSCT point of view, the recovery represents direct responses to NATO's military build-up as Russia aims to strengthen a security architecture that preserves its regional hegemonic power and sphere of influence.

3.3.4.2 Battles and Skirmishes at Sea

Black Sea has emerged a theatre of mounting Russian-NATO naval rivalry over strategic supremacy based on perceived competition interest. The increased navy operations in the area have led to many altercations at sea, threatening postures, incursions, aggressive approach, encroachment and close calls raising the probability of escalation of possible clashes.¹¹⁶ Sorely one of the most remembered stand offs obtained when the British destroyer, the HMS Defender, had to cross near the Crimean coast. As a part of Ukrainian territory, NATO regarded it as an exercise of right of innocent passage through the waters. However, Russia on whose territory Crimea is now after it annexed the region in 2014 considered the move a violation of its territorial integrity. In the return, Russian forces used live fire measures and low flying to wanton the British ship to depart. This spelled out the larger divides on Black Sea issue map and brought out the vulnerability of NATO incursions in contested waters.

Kerch Strait crisis may not be recognized directly related to NATO but Russian forces captured the Ukrainian naval ships planning to enter the Sea of Azov. Even though it was proved that this action was not an aggressive one, was criticized heavily by NATO down and was a foretaste of future naval incidents. The actions of Russia serve as evidence of a desire for the presence of permanent control over the more important sea routes which led NATO to increase the level of protection for Black Sea states.¹¹⁷ Thus, the NATO member states have recently increased activities in Black Sea, for example, Operation Sea Breeze that many allied countries performing. Consequently, Russia has

¹¹⁵ Hippolyte, Jean-Claude, Anna Murovskaya, Yuri Volfman, Tamara Yegorova, Oleg Gintov, Nuretdin Kaymakci, and Ercan Sangu. "Age and geodynamic evolution of Black Sea Basin: Tectonic evidences of rifting in Crimea." *Marine and Petroleum Geology* 93: 298-314, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Kabanenko, Ihor. "Strategy in Black Sea and Mediterranean." *Russia's military strategy and doctrine*. Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation: 34-74, 2019.

¹¹⁷ Kirilova, Neli. "Control of Black Sea Straits: The Kerch Incident." *Pro Publico Bono: Magyar Közigazgatás; a Nemzeti Köszolgálati Egyetem Közigazgatás-Tudományi Szakmai Folyóirata* 11, no. 3: 137-160. 2023.

always conducted counter military maneuvers, practice confronting NATO through mimicked aggression including flying military planes over their vessels. Such conditions are still rather promising for some misunderstanding, as any incident here can lead to significant escalation or worsening of relations.

Russian naval presence in Black Sea stems from a desire to dominate sea domains to discourage rival nations while also willing to expose forces to risks for operational execution. Key strategies employed by the Russian navy include the following. i) The naval drills see NATO vessels followed by Russian aircraft and ships that approach dangerously close to one another. The Russian tactic is designed both to reduce NATO's Black Sea operational effectiveness while demonstrating Russian determination of territorial control. Russia has transferred key modern warfare capabilities consisting of Bastion coastal missile systems and Kalibr cruise missile-equipped submarines to Ukraine. They underpin its A2/AD capabilities, which keep NATO's ships out of the area and limit their freedom of maneuver.¹¹⁸ ii) Russia periodically shuts down key maritime travel areas through defensive military activities that have mimicked periodic Kerch Strait operational periods. These actions interfere with NATO's supply chains and make it adhere to Russia's requirements. Most naval confrontations are accompanied by air elements, adding to the security relations.¹¹⁹ iii) Russian fighter jets with bombing bombers perform regularly around NATO ships for evaluating the defense readiness and finding weaknesses in these ships' air defenses. When these encounters occur frequently the risk increases significantly that the conflict will take an unwanted path. Anti-missile operations require forces to move nearer toward Russian territory by NATO so operational dangers increase notably which leads to potential ambiguous maritime accidents. The increased deployment of abrupt behaviors through enemy radar-locking has elevated security tension in the area. These naval battles extend beyond inter-army contests because they fuse underwater operations into major global political competition at the extreme strategic level.¹²⁰ NATO strengthens its basic purpose of maritime activity freedom and conveys unambiguous international law requirements to its partnering nations including Ukraine and Georgia. Through these

¹¹⁸ Bailey, Riley, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan. "Russian offensive campaign assessment." Institute for the Study of War 15, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Fink, Martin. "Naval blockade and the Russia-Ukraine conflict." *Netherlands International Law Review* 69, no. 3: 411-43. 2022.

¹²⁰ Mazere, Andrei. "Anti-Access and Area Denial Military Structures, Destabilisation Factors in Black Sea Extended Region." *Valentin Naumescu Raluca Moldovan*, 515. 2022.

sea encounters Russia demonstrates dedication to enlarging its designated maritime space as it attempts to stir the Western world.

3.3.4.3 Political and Juridical Actions of Russia to Counteract NATO's Expansion in the BSR

The Russian government uses diplomatic channels and legal initiatives to answer NATO expansion along with activity within the BSR. The measures implement Russian politics targeting territorial defense and NATO military inhibition within this geographic area. i) Russia works to build diplomatic partnerships with its neighboring states primarily to prevent these countries from joining NATO's western influence area. The strategy depends on energy dependence as well as trade connections and defense collaboration. The strategic convergence between Russia and Türkiye using TurkStream energy infrastructure and S-400 defense systems develops for important Russian-Turkish bilateral relations despite Türkiye's NATO membership status. Through strategic partnerships Russia has targeted the creation of strife between Türkiye and NATO. Regional countries remain dependent on Russian exported natural gas which diminishes their capacity to establish anti-NATO and Russian counter policies.¹²¹

ii) Russia implements its strategy through the application of Montreux Convention as one legal instrument. This treaty regulates naval warship activity in the waterways between the sea and Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits enabling control of access to Black Sea. Under the terms of the Montreux Convention Russia controls the number and size of warships that can operate within Black Sea while limiting naval activity time for those countries that lack seafront. Russia maintains continuous emphasis on obeying the treaty provisions because this institution regularly challenges limitations established under this treaty. Russia energetically avoids any amendments or reinterpretations to the treaty that would provide easier access for NATO to Black Sea.¹²² iii) Russia seized control of stretches in Black Sea following its Crimea intrusion in 2014 while asserting dominion over regions near the Crimean Peninsula. Officials from Russia have consistently argued and used such arguments in their legal

¹²¹ Kuşku-Sönmez, Eda. "Regional cooperation in Black Sea basin: what role for city diplomacy?." Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 14, no. 4: 489-507. 2014.

¹²² Baldiran, Selen, Dinçer Bayer, and Hüseyin Gençer. "The Importance of the 1936 Montreux Convention for Black Sea Security: A Close Look into Russia-NATO Controversy on the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in 2022." Information & Security 51: 11-23. 2022.

interactions with NATO forces. Russian control of Crimea led to Russian ownership of greater EEZ and territorial sea expanse alongside activities that barred foreign naval vessels from moving through Crimean Peninsula water territory. Russia continuously charges NATO with violating its territorial limits whenever vessels from allied navies approach what Moscow considers Russian waters as seen during the HMS Defender ship event in 2021.¹²³ iv) International organization membership allows Russia to dispute NATO information about Black Sea situation. Russia achieves two vital roles as a World War II victor and Security Council member with veto abilities which consistently oppose decisions targeting its operations or supporting NATO's presence in the region. Through the Commonwealth of the Independent States along with the Eurasian Union and additional connected network structures Russia provides alternate security frameworks to its neighboring states which oppose NATO's influence.

v) Russia has established diplomatic channels to gain support of international public and undermine NATO's Black Sea military activities. Russian officials consistently hold NATO responsible for growing conflict provocations throughout Black Sea geographic area. According to Russian diplomats NATO operations violate regional standards while creating security instabilities throughout the area. Through state-controlled Russian media outlets the Soviet army presents NATO as an enemy force that emphasizes state sovereignty while advancing the Kremlin's claims about perceived Western political interference in the area.¹²⁴ vi) Russia supports regional economic integration because this move functions as soft power to reverse NATO's involvement in the region. Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) offers Russia an opportunity to build stronger trade transport and energy relationships with its neighboring Black Sea nations. This approach boosts regional connections thus maintaining these countries away from ultimate NATO membership. Through TurkStream and Blue Stream pipelines Russia connects regional economies to its exports which decreases NATO-supported energy dependencies. vii) Moscow has boosted its relations with NATO members through bilateral agreements to consistently press NATO's expansion efforts formally or indirectly. The provision of equipment that helps national forces bypass organized resistance coupled with training programs

¹²³ Turns, David. "The HMS Defender Incident: Innocent Passage versus Belligerent Rights in Black Sea." In *American Society of International Law*, vol. 25, no. 16. 2021.

¹²⁴ Galeotti, Mark, Alexander Lanoszka, and James Rogers. "Black Sea Region: Beyond NATO." Policy Paper, Geopolitics Programme, No. GPPP01: 26. 2021.

between Russia and states such as Serbia and Armenia generate military partnership outside of NATO's framework. Each year Russia participates in Black Sea exercises which display power through performances instead of genuine attacks against NATO.¹²⁵ viii) The BSR receives its primary security backing from Russia since nonparticipation from other states is not necessary. Russia fosters the idea of another security system different from NATO. Black Sea nations work toward separate security solutions with more needed political negotiations according to Russia's proposal. The Russian government demands that NATO members refrain from establishing military bases along Black Sea to preserve high troop density limits while regulating NATO interests through this restriction.¹²⁶

Analyzing Russian response over the past decade, two types of activities could be identified: coercive and strategic. The Russian defense has dramatically increased Black Sea fleet's capabilities by adding warships, submarines with Kalibr missiles launchers and improved shore missile systems: Bastion and Bali. Through its successful Crimean annexation Russia has built a powerful Crimean defensive infrastructure with significant ground bases as well as naval operations and air defenses that strengthen its Black Sea position. Montreux Convention serves as Russia's basis for restraining NATO forces while strengthening its case for maintaining maritime stability throughout the area. The Russian administration uses international bodies through the UN system together with regional platforms to spread alternative stories about NATO forces violating national self-determination standards enabling military occupation. During the time frame of 2014–2024 Russia demonstrated complex perspectives about NATO's Black Sea enlargement but its primary strategic focus revolved around protecting security and controlling Black Sea regional hegemony for dominance. Black Sea will continue to experience delays in security colonization and sovereignty disagreements primarily because of established political and geographical conditions which obscure the situation.

¹²⁵ Naumescu, Valentin. "NATO in Black Sea region: Unpredictability and different levels of commitment among the three coastal allies." *The Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues*, 2020.

¹²⁶ Åtland, Kristian. "Redrawing borders, reshaping orders: Russia's quest for dominance in Black Sea region." *European Security* 30, no. 2: 305-324. 2021.

Conclusion

This study explores NATO-Russian tensions through Black Sea regional activities throughout the period from 2014 to 2024. The ongoing sequence of events throughout this timeframe reveals key structural elements that encompass territorial power rivalries and local regional security arrangements as well as unique global system perspectives. The NATO Island-Advance in Black Sea space represents more than Russia's declining geographic authority because it means Russia's weakening defensive capacity at range. Russia has used multiple militaries alongside political and legal as well diplomatic tools to defend its hegemony against NATO expansion. The application of Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory allows us to develop a critical assessment of Russia's interactions with NATO throughout the BSR. According to this framework security works as a two-way operation within regional institutions because actions from individual actors lead to reactions from neighboring entities through close contact combined with interpersonal contacts. From Russia's perspective NATO's continued enlargement threatens to disrupt strategic stability throughout Black Sea because this area represents a vital strategic and military interest for Russia. NATO frames its operations as protective measures because it strives to defend both national independence and strengthen degenerating international legal frameworks which have emerged since Russia claimed the Crimea.

Chapter Four

Potential Consequences of NATO-Russian Confrontation in the Black Sea Region

Even enjoying its beaches with six countries Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Türkiye and Ukraine, Black Sea remains the chief link between Europe and Asia as well as the Middle East. But since recent years, Black Sea has grown even more important in regard to changes in global alliances, international security and territorial disputes while NATO's presence in the region has been increasing. The BSR has become a contested region in part as a result of NATO's post 2014 strategy to ensure Russia's pullback from its eastern flank and reduce Russian influence in this strategic space. After the annexation of Crimea, protracted conflict in eastern Ukraine and militarization of the Sea, tensions between NATO and Russia have increased. The actions that have followed have sharpened the rivalry between NATO members and Russia in a quest for strategic domination of this region.

This chapter has been organized into following parts: i) Potential Consequences of NATO-Russia Confrontation ii) Economic Consequences, iii) Humanitarian Consequences, iv) Military Consequences, v) Energy Consequences , vi) Regional and Global Political Repercussions and vii) Conclusion. Expanding upon a process tracing framework employed in the prior chapter, this section then uses a structured design to examine the differences in impacts of NATO Russia confrontation on BSR states of Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye, Ukraine and Georgia. The chapter examines the geopolitical orientation of every state, its relations to NATO, and its susceptibility to Russian pressures in relation to the degree and type of outcomes, including standard military provocations to economic instability, energy insufficiency, and forced migration. In the case of Romania, its good NATO positioning has turned it into a target of Russian forceful components, but Türkiye, due to its balancing role, has avoided the direct drift but is still in diplomatic confusion. In the meantime, the most noticeable direct costs have been incurred by non-member states such as Ukraine and Georgia: occupation or disintegration of territorial sovereignty and ongoing hybrid threats. The logic of comparison used in this case enables the study to decide whether or not the security risks of NATO enlargement depend on the local conditions of the

states involved or whether the patterns are typical of the region in general. By doing so, this chapter supplements the RSCT focus on the patterns of amity/enmity and regional polarity by providing empirically driven distinction between the threat landscapes of states of Black Sea.

4.1 Potential Consequences of NATO-Russia Confrontation

NATO's response took shape through a dual strategy. It is bolstering its existing defense mechanisms in member states bordering on Black Sea and that is also carrying out military exercises to prove its resolve. In addition, Romania and Bulgaria, both NATO members, have received an increased NATO presence in the form of rotational deployments of troops and the most advanced military systems, such as missile defense systems. NATO also boosted naval presence in Black Sea as it stepped up its freedom of movement and held a number of joint military exercises including Sea Breeze exercises, which brought NATO and partner nations together.¹²⁷ Moscow was worried that NATO's expansion eastwards put its strategic interests on the spot. Top of the list was the worry that NATO was expanding its partnerships with non-member states like Ukraine and Georgia, both on Black Sea with strategically located countries. In response to perceived Russian aggression, NATO offered enhanced cooperation, and military support to these countries, and Ukraine increasingly pushed ahead on the path to NATO membership. Russia, however, saw NATO's actions as growingly threatening and began to build up its own military and intervene politically on Russia's behalf in Ukraine and Georgia.¹²⁸ RSCT elaborates the weakness of Ukraine with its liminality - they do not belong to the NATO Alliance and are on a deeper level penetrated by Western institutions. That invented a structural paradox: intense animosity on the part of Russia, yet no complete protective alliance. The result is hybrid war, territorial annexation, and future invasion, which is expected according to RSCT since insecurity is greatest in a region of inappropriate alignment and penetration by outside actors.

For Russia, NATO's eastward expansion isn't just a threat to the region's security, but a challenge to the balance of power it has been trying to maintain. When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991 Russia was perceived to be surrounded by former Warsaw Pact

¹²⁷ Dimitrov, Vassil. "Black Sea Security: NATO and Russian Interests." *Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1, 83-105. 2021.

¹²⁸ Biscop, Sven. "The Geopolitics of Black Sea Region." *Security Policy Journal* 36, no. 4: 112-128. 2020.

countries and Soviet republics joining NATO. In effect, the Russian state, already preoccupied with military aspects of its BSR, had come to regard NATO's stepped-up involvement in that area as part of a larger, though by no means always explicit or openly acknowledged, campaign of holding Moscow permanently in check and to relegate Russian influence in its near abroad. With all the guns firing, the Russian response to this encirclement has been, among other things, military, diplomatic and informational.¹²⁹

Russia ramped up its Black Sea Fleet militarily, particularly after annexation of Crimea, putting a new foothold in the region, extending the reach of its domain over strategic waters and as a direct counterweight to NATO.¹³⁰ Russia has emphatically told NATO in diplomatic terms that it considers NATO's expansion to be a direct threat to its sovereignty and national security. Russia aims to weaken NATO's cohesion by stirring up media campaigns, division within the states of NATO members themselves, and to back pro-Russian governments in key areas such as Moldova and Armenia.¹³¹ Furthermore, Moscow's backing of separatist activity across the BSR to challenge NATO expansion, destabilize potential NATO aspirant, and reassert Soviet influence over former Soviet countries has carried on to this day through the continuing conflict in eastern Ukraine. Finally, the economic, geopolitical and strategic importance of the BSR makes of it a focal point for a complex geopolitical rivalry between NATO and Russia. The origins of tensions within NATO's expansion post 2014 and its Russian response invoke one of the deep security interdependences of security complexes in the region, as elaborated in the Regional Security Complex Theory. Black Sea is more central than ever before to the security of these countries and to the broader global order, even if these enduring geopolitical tensions continue.¹³²

4.2 Economic Consequences

NATO Russia confrontation in the BSR and its economic consequences for the parties involved and for the entire region are important. The consequence of these dynamics is

¹²⁹ Götz, Eberhard. "Black Sea, NATO, and Russia: Strategic Rivalries and Regional Instabilities." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 3: 347-365. 2020.

¹³⁰ Götz, Elias, ed. *Russia, the west, and the Ukraine crisis*. Routledge, 2018.

¹³¹ Cirimpei, Sergiu. "Moldova versus Russian hybrid threat: A question of national will." PhD diss., Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2016.

¹³² Azarieva, Janetta, Yitzhak M. Brudny, Eugene Finkel, and Evgeny Finkel. "Bread and autocracy: food, politics, and security in Putin's Russia". Oxford University Press, 2023.

also of a very strategic nature i.e. the imposition of sanctions, the disruption of trade, and the terms of financing heightened militarization. These economic shifts have notably impacted everything from national GDPs to individual livelihoods, as persistent geopolitical conflict cuts still at the heart of the world's most strategically important maritime region.

4.2.1 Sanctions and Counter Sanctions

Western powers from the US to the European Union have hit Russia hard with sanctions policies from 2014 after it annexed Crimea and subsequently joined Russia's war in eastern Ukraine. Among the measures applied were targeted at critical parts of the Russian economy i.e. finance, energy, defense and technology, as well as travel bans and asset freezes on prominent Russian individuals and institutions. The sanctions helped to shrink Russia's GDP, fuel the Russian currency and shut Russia out of global financial markets, all of which made Russia an economically isolated place.¹³³ It was hardest hit in Russia's energy sector, which supplies a sizeable chunk of its federal revenue. Energy technology export control and sanctions on key firms like Gazprom and Rosneft further limited Russia's ability to increase oil and gas production, or its ability to develop out Arctic resources. The economic strain intensified, however, as oil and gas export revenue were reduced by the falling sales and Europe's search for alternative suppliers. For example, between 2014 and 2016 Russian GDP declined by approximately 2.8% with energy revenues falling substantially and directly impacting state budgets and social economic programs.¹³⁴

In the face of Western sanctions, Russia hit back, one of which was to ban agricultural imports from the EU and the West. These counter sanctions tried to strike back economically but also interfered with the flow of goods across Black Sea and disrupted industries dependent on cross border trade.¹³⁵ In addition, smaller BSR states that joined NATO also felt pressure from the economy. Whilst NATO and EU states

¹³³ Christie, Edward Hunter. "The design and impact of Western economic sanctions against Russia." *The RUSI Journal* 161, no. 3: 52-64. 2016.

¹³⁴ Nitsevich, V. F., V. V. Moiseev, S. N. Glagole, and O. A. Sudorgin. "Western sanctions and their consequences for Russia." In *Smart Technologies and Innovations in Design for Control of Technological Processes and Objects: Economy and Production: Proceeding of the International Science and Technology Conference "FarEastCon-2018"* Volume 1, pp. 65-79. Springer International Publishing, 2020.

¹³⁵ Ashford, Emma. Not-so-smart sanctions: the failure of western restrictions against Russia." *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1: 114-123. 2016.

provided political and economic support, which Russia retaliated by imposing trade embargoes and curtailing market access for key exports such as wine, agricultural products and steel for countries like Georgia and Moldova. As an example, Russia's suspension of imports of Georgian wine (a major national product for Georgia) following Georgia's pro NATO stance resulted in substantial export losses within Georgia's agricultural sector. The economic vulnerability of countries that are dependent upon trade with Russia increased even more with this further alignment with NATO. While NATO related investment in security infrastructure benefited Bulgaria and Romania as NATO members, the increased military costs due to discontinued relations with Russia and trade imbalances also arose.

4.2.2 Disruption of Trade Routes

Black Sea is a central transit for regional and international trade and the key link between Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. Black Sea shipping lanes are important to the ports that serve as export centers for important commodities like grain, steel and energy products, and disturbances in these lanes could reverberate widely. Trade flows have been negatively impacted by the Ukraine crisis and naval confrontations between Russia and Nato aligned forces, with insurance premiums for shipping rising and freight costs going up, with shipments further slowed.¹³⁶ Black Sea ports are run by Ukraine and Russia, and they export a large share of the world's wheat as well as sunflower oil. For these exports, there have been disruptions to maritime routes critical to the trade because of the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia's control of Crimea. For example, in the leadup to Russia's annexation of Crimea, it's harassed commercial vessels heading towards Ukrainian ports, but especially in the Sea of Azov. The delays caused by this for Ukraine's maritime trade amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

But military exercises and salvos have also increased risks for commercial shipping in the region. The seizure of Ukrainian naval vessels by Russia in the Kerch Strait had become a precursor to military escalation and caused greater unease among insurers and shipping companies.¹³⁷ Commercial trade is indeed deterred by such incidents and

¹³⁶ Orhan, Ebru. "The effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on global trade." *Journal of International Trade, Logistics and Law* 8, no. 1: 141-146. 2022.

¹³⁷ Raina, Himanil. "Legal Aspects of the 25th November, 2018 Kerch Strait Incident." *National Maritime Foundation*, 161-169. 2018.

costs of goods transported through Black Sea are increased. The Kerch Strait Bridge, which also further exacerbated the problem by making it impossible for the size of ships to reach Ukraine's eastern ports, stopped ships from being able to export from what were previously Ukraine's eastern ports. The disruption of trade routes is not just an economic consequence restricted to Russia and Ukraine, but also from Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye. Stable maritime transport is essential for such countries' imports and exports, in particular energy supplies. They have also slowed down the pipeline networks operating under Black Sea, with construction across the TurkStream and South Stream projects respectively mired in delays and increased security costs.¹³⁸

4.2.3 Cost of Militarization

Black Sea littoral states have suffered severely from the need to meet high defense expenditures resulting from the sustained NATO-Russia confrontation. Increased regional insecurity is forcing NATO members such as Romania and Bulgaria to build more modern military capabilities that meet the NATO's 2% of GDP defense spending guideline.¹³⁹ To take another example, the Romanian military has already embarked on an ambitious program of military procurement (Patriot missile systems, F-16 fighter jets and other powerful hardware), raising defense spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2022.¹⁴⁰ Such investments obviously support the building of security infrastructure, but they also drain money from social and economic development leading to tradeoffs that limit economic growth. Likewise, Ukraine, steeped at war with Russia, has spent a growing proportion of its national budget on defense. Ukraine's defense spending has risen to more than 5 percent of GDP since 2014, a burden on an already struggling economy. Resources have been diverted from social programs and public services, and rebuilt military capabilities, and continued funding to operate in the Donbas region, and attempt to address infrastructure damage.

Of the two main strategies i.e. providing assurances to NATO members and deterring Russia, NATO, in general, has committed significant financial resources to

¹³⁸ Erdağ, Ramazan. "TurkStream as Russia's Last Step in Diversification." *Insight Turkey* 23, no. 1: 205-226. 2021.

¹³⁹ MacFarlane, S. Neil. "NATO and Black Sea Security." In *Security Dynamics in Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders*, pp. 41-54. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Daniela-Elena, H. R. A. B. "Procurement Programs Challenges for The Sustainability of The Romanian Military Logistics." In *Proceedings of the International Management Conference*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 439-449. Faculty of Management, Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, 2022.

strengthening NATO's eastern front.¹⁴¹ Recurring missions of naval forces, establishment of command centers in Romania and Bulgaria as well as air patrol operations in Black Sea has all enhanced the buildup of the alliance in the region. Supporting the endeavors of NATO's initiatives has been in the billions of dollars provided primarily by the US particularly the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI). However, these expenditures ensure collective security, but have also regressed the discourse within NATO as to how the costs are to be divided fairly and if sustaining the existence of a permanent militarization of a nation is feasible.¹⁴² Thus, the 137 military buildup in Black Sea has a high price for Russia. Missile systems in Crimea, preparing military exercise and modernizing Black Sea Fleet have put much pressure on another weak economy of Russia because of sanctions and low oil prices leaving limited space for the authorities to move around. Between the years 2014 and 2020, Russia has invested around 30 billion dollars for improving old warships and submarine facilities in Black Sea. The militarization thus siphons resources out of developing other areas of the economy i.e. a situation made worse by Western sanctions and absence of foreign investment. As militarization raises the price of defense, these costs are also absorbed indirectly by the people of the BSR. The social welfare and economic infrastructure are drained of more funding to provide more and more of desks. The leader's allocation of state resources to the military requirements widens socio economic disparities and limit future developmental prospects. For example, millions of persons have been displaced due to a long-standing war in eastern Ukraine, and localization of labor markets, investment in the necessary infrastructure have been affected, and added more to the economic issues.

4.3 Humanitarian

As a result of the ongoing geopolitical tensions between NATO and Russia in the BSR there has been a profound humanitarian and social consequence. In these spheres,

¹⁴¹ Fiott, Daniel. "The Fog of War: Russia's War on Ukraine, European Defense Spending and Military Capabilities." *Intereconomics* 57, no. 3: 152-156. 2022.

¹⁴² Becker, Jordan. "Defense spending, burden-sharing and strategy in NATO's Black Sea littoral states: domestic, regional, and international systemic factors." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21, no. 3: 393-413. 2021.

especially in those of forced displacement and the polarization of sentiments within affected states, these effects are particularly strong.¹⁴³

4.3.1 Refugee and Migration Issues

Internal displacement in Black Sea area has been increasing as a result of the escalation of the conflict. By December 2023, roughly 3.7 million people in Ukraine were internally displaced, 80% of whom were displaced for more than a year and some 39 per cent who had moved multiple times. An ongoing conflict forced more than 32 per cent of surveyed individuals to leave their homes, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. In addition, it has forced its surrounding countries, in particular NATO members, to host refugees in huge numbers.¹⁴⁴ A large portion of its border is with Ukraine and Romania — a country forced into crisis by years of protests and a subsequent government reshuffling — has had difficulty providing shelter or health care or opportunities for migrants to work in the region. The rapidly growing influx has heavily overburdened public services and resources and resulted in social tensions, and economic burden. Internal and external displacement involves complex changes at the level of individuals and societies, and therefore calls for comprehensive social policies aimed at addressing these challenges.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, the conflict has come at a sustained lag and this has created cycles of displacement and return. Since 2022, an estimated 4.45 million displaced persons, of whom about 1.3 million are refugees, have returned to Ukraine. Nevertheless, many have returned to lands that remain unquiet, poor in infrastructure and services, thus prolonging vulnerability and putting displacement back on the cards .

4.3.2 Polarization and Public Sentiment

That geopolitical strife has also deepened divisions among Black Sea's states along lines of whether they align with NATO or Russia.¹⁴⁶ As a security guarantee against

¹⁴³ Runarsson, Isak. "Can the West Afford to Let the World Go Hungry?: Overcoming Challenges to Establishing a Humanitarian Corridor in Black Sea". Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Voznyak, Halyna, Olha Mulska, Oleksiy Druhov, Khrystyna Patytska, and Iryna Tymechko. "Internal migration during the war in Ukraine: Recent challenges and problems." *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 21, no. 1: 312-325. 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Ukraine: IOM Response 2022-2024

¹⁴⁶ Khylyko, Maksym, Hanna Shelest, Armen Grigoryan, Anar Valiyev, Ahmad Alili, Fidan Namazova, Salome Kandelaki, and Bidzina Lebanidze. "Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Black Sea Geopolitics." *Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD)* 130 2022.

Russian aggression, public opinion in Ukraine has grown more and more in favor of NATO membership. Meanwhile, in the east, with historic and cultural links to Russia, some segments of the population are skeptical or even opposed to NATO because accepting into the alliance is perceived as jeopardizing already fraught relations. Internal debates and, more or less, civil unrest have been fueled by this dichotomy. The societal divide is shown through the growth of nationalist and pro-Russian political movements in Romania. A pro-Russian stance and opposing Romania's stance in support of Ukraine, the far-right presidential candidate Călin Georgescu is currently leading in polls ahead of the May 2025 elections. His popularity is a result of disillusioned factions of the Romanian populace looking to NATO and Western policies who are weary of thinking this threatens national sovereignty and economic interests.

Public perception has widely developed due to media portrayal and official propaganda. By effectively portraying NATO as a hostile actor threatening its own Russian spheres of influence, state-controlled media in Russia have given their country's government major domestic support for the foreign policy whose continuation depends on such government. Thus, this narrative has helped to grow nationalism and anti-NATO sentiments in the Russian people. The polarization is not just national, but regional as well. As a NATO member with interests in the BSR, Türkiye sees Russia's actions as regional, rather than direct threats, and consequently applies policies that sometimes diverge from those of other NATO allies. Such divergence signals the difficulty of formulating a single response to the crisis and how regions differ from one another.¹⁴⁷

In general, the impact of the confrontation between NATO and Russia in Black Sea zone is humanitarian and social, extensive and multi-faceted. The displacement crisis has overwhelmed neighboring states and imposed a heavy requirement for robust humanitarian response and long-term integration strategies. While it's true that the simultaneous polarization of public sentiment reminds us of the need to build on a more nuanced and nuanced policy approach to legacy issues in the context of the many histories, cultures, and politics of those affected societies, it is also true that many of the reformers challenged long entrenched power structures and facilitated breakaways from contending political blocs generally. To overcome these challenges, it will take an urgent effort from all of the major international institutions, all of the regional actors,

¹⁴⁷ Naumescu, Valentin. "The Consequences and Perspectives of the Russian War against the West in Black Sea Region." Valentin Naumescu Raluca Moldovan, 247. 2022.

all of the local communities, to work together to build a country that is stable, socially cohesive and that respects human rights.

4.4 Energy and Resource Dynamics

The NATO-Russia confrontation in the BSR has reshaped energy and resource dynamics, particularly through vulnerabilities in energy infrastructure and shifts in energy alliances. These changes have far-reaching implications, influencing regional stability, economic performance, and global energy markets.

4.4.1 Energy Infrastructure Vulnerabilities

The BSR's energy infrastructure has become a strategic target amid rising geopolitical tensions. The Nord Stream and TurkStream pipelines exemplify the fragility of critical energy assets in conflict-prone environments. The Nord Stream pipelines i.e. Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 have been at the center of geopolitical controversies for years. These pipelines, constructed to transport natural gas from Russia to Europe via the Baltic Sea, faced significant challenges even before the suspected sabotage incidents in 2022. The explosions that damaged the pipelines underscored the risks of undersea infrastructure being weaponized in political conflicts. Although neither pipeline was operational at the time of the explosions, the act disrupted energy markets and forced NATO to reassess the security of its energy networks. The economic impact was felt globally as natural gas prices surged; straining economies heavily dependent on energy imports.¹⁴⁸

Similarly, the TurkStream pipeline, delivering Russian gas to Türkiye and Eastern Europe via Black Sea, faces vulnerabilities. While operational and essential for regional energy supply, TurkStream's infrastructure remains a potential target for strategic sabotage. Unlike Nord Stream, TurkStream is closer to ongoing conflicts and military tensions in the BSR. Ensuring its security requires high levels of international cooperation, significant financial investment, and military safeguards. Energy facilities, including pipelines and terminals, are vulnerable not only to physical sabotage but also to cyber attacks. With advancements in technology, hostile actors can disrupt the functionality of energy networks remotely, further complicating security strategies. For

¹⁴⁸ Yin, Ruyu, and Kaiyan Zhong. "Nord Stream Explosions and the Geopolitical Game Behind it." Закон и власть 1: 3-7. 2023.

example, Ukraine's energy sector has faced numerous cyber attacks, attributed to Russian-backed hackers, aimed at destabilizing its economic infrastructure. These attacks disrupted power grids and demonstrated the utility of hybrid warfare in achieving geopolitical objectives without direct military engagement. The vulnerabilities of energy infrastructure extend beyond immediate disruptions to broader implications for regional economies. Countries like Ukraine, which depend on transit fees for pipelines running through their territories, face significant revenue losses if infrastructure is damaged or rendered inoperable. Additionally, disruptions threaten energy security for Europe, which has historically relied on Russian natural gas.¹⁴⁹

4.4.2 Shifting Energy Alliances

The geopolitical conflict in the BSR has also catalyzed changes in energy alliances, as nations adjust their trade and supply chains to mitigate risks associated with dependence on contentious regions.

4.4.2.1 EU's Diversification Strategy

The EU, traditionally reliant on Russian natural gas, does not support the concept of Russian dominance in the BSR. It has diversified its energy imports following Russia's actions in Ukraine. The EU's strategy includes increasing liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, developing renewable energy capacities, and expanding pipeline connections with non-Russian suppliers. For instance, the EU intensified its LNG imports from the US and Qatar, aiming to replace Russian gas with reliable alternatives. By 2023, Russian pipeline gas accounted for only 8% of EU gas imports, a sharp decline from the pre-2014 figure of 40%. Portugal exemplifies this diversification. In 2024, it sourced 91% of its LNG from the US and Nigeria, reducing Russia's share to a mere 4.4%. Similar transitions are seen in countries like Germany and Poland, where major investments in LNG terminals and renewable energy projects have aimed to minimize reliance on Russian energy sources. These efforts align with the EU's broader climate goals and desire to decouple from volatile regions.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Erdağ, Ramazan. "TurkStream as Russia's Last Step in Diversification." *Insight Turkey* 23, no. 1: 205-226. 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Wright, Steven. "Navigating the New Era: Energy and Environmental Considerations in EU-GCC Relations." *The European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council: Towards a New Path*, 105-123. 2021.

4.4.2.2 Russia's Pivot to Asia

Russia, in response to losing its traditional European market, has sought to redirect energy exports to Asia, particularly China and India. The development of new pipelines, such as the Power of Siberia 2 project, represents Moscow's efforts to increase energy cooperation with China. While this strategic pivot reduces reliance on the European market, it also faces challenges, including infrastructure gaps, pricing negotiations, and geopolitical competition within Asia. Unlike Europe, where Russia historically enjoyed long-term contracts, its dealings with Asian countries are shaped by volatile markets and fluctuating demand, leading to potential financial instability. Additionally, Russia's growing alignment with China on energy matters highlights a deeper geopolitical convergence. The two nations share concerns about Western dominance, making energy cooperation a natural extension of their bilateral relationship. However, this relationship is unequal: China's stronger economic position allows it to dictate terms, often putting Russia in a subordinate role.¹⁵¹

4.4.2.3 Impact on Global Energy Markets

The shift in energy alliances has broader implications for global energy markets. Increased demand for LNG, driven by Europe's pivot, has strained global supply chains, raising prices for smaller nations that previously benefited from low-cost energy imports. Simultaneously, the reconfiguration of trade routes and the increased focus on energy security has expedited investments in renewable energy and nuclear power. Countries are diversifying not only their suppliers but also their energy sources to mitigate risks stemming from geopolitics.

4.4.2.4 Regional Implications for Black Sea States

Black Sea nations such as Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania occupy critical positions in the evolving energy landscape. Türkiye, leveraging its location as a transit hub, plays a dual role. While it is a recipient of Russian gas via TurkStream, it is also facilitating Europe's energy diversification by hosting terminals for non-Russian LNG and advocating for new pipeline projects. However, Türkiye's balancing act between NATO

¹⁵¹ Torkunov, Anatoly, and Dmitry V. Streltsov. "Russian policy of turning to East: Problems and risks." *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia* 67, no. 4: 5-16. 2023.

and Russia places it in a precarious position, as aligning too closely with either bloc risks alienating the other.¹⁵²

Romania, another key player, has accelerated investments in offshore gas projects in Black Sea. These projects, spearheaded by companies like ExxonMobil and OMV Petrom, aim to increase domestic production and enhance energy independence. Bulgaria, while smaller in capacity, is focusing on improving connectivity with Greece and Türkiye to ensure access to alternative gas supplies.¹⁵³

In summary, the energy and resource dynamics of the NATO-Russia confrontation underscore the interconnectedness of geopolitics and economic security. The vulnerabilities of critical infrastructure highlight the importance of robust protection measures and international cooperation to prevent sabotage or disruption. Meanwhile, the evolving alliances and market shifts demonstrate the adaptive strategies of nations seeking to secure their energy needs in an unpredictable geopolitical environment. This transformation not only reshapes the BSR but also exerts influence on global energy trends, pushing the world toward diversification and resilience in the face of uncertainty.

4.5 Military and Security Implication

Several changes in the structure of military and security interactions of states in the area of Black Sea have been observed. The NATO-Russia relations have grown more acute, to which new a naval arms race has emerged and higher possibility of inadvertent escalation of conflict occurred.

4.5.1 Naval Arms Race in Black Sea

Black Sea is in the center of a military confrontation between NATO and Russia. This piece of water is an imperative considering military and naval operations, economic or commercial avenues as well as establishing a strategic domination of a particular geographic area. There is new arms race observed in the contemporary era as both

¹⁵² Maris, Georgios, Floros Flouros, and Ioannis Galariotis. "The Changing Security Landscape in South-Eastern Mediterranean: Assessing Turkey's Strategies as a Rising Power." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 5 (2022): 795-814.

¹⁵³ Bulearcă, Marius. "How Romania May Benefit from the Natural Gas Resources' Offshore Exploitation of Black Sea Romanian Continental Shelf?." In *International Conference on Economic Scientific Research-Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches*, pp. 329-341. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2022.

NATO and Russia have initiated a large number of steps to reform their naval forces in this region.¹⁵⁴

4.5.1.1 NATO's Enhanced Presence

Due to Russia aggression primarily after the Crimean crisis in 2014, NATO has stepped up its maritime operations in Black Sea. This covers increased navy drills, escort and maneuvers as well as the posting of more modern ships to be closer to, and protect eastern European members from further aggression. For instance, NATO has cooperated with member countries such as Romania and Bulgaria and has staged training with them. The above exercises act as a display of power and forwarded as mechanisms for boosting the defensive capacity of the allied unit.¹⁵⁵

4.5.1.2 On the Proposals for Russia Black Sea Fleet Modernization

Russia has started a large-scale modernization process of its Black Sea Fleet. This planning is aimed at strengthening its naval power and respond to NATO's expansion of its naval force. The modernization efforts involve i.e. acquisition of new submarines, frigates, and missile systems. Russia has been procuring new attack submarines for Black Sea Fleet since 2014, Sebastien Roblin emphasized.¹⁵⁶

4.5.1.3 Some of the Future Consequences of the Naval Buildup are Enumerated Below

The fact that NATO and Russia stepped up naval forces at the same time would tip the scale of power in the BSR. This buildup raises the likelihood of decisions and confrontations getting made, since both sides deploy in the proximity of one another with high-tech weaponry. Modern equipment, means, and the regular conduct of military actions positively influence the probability of developing events that will lead to large-scale conflict.

¹⁵⁴ Kayser, Sümer, and Navy Captain. "Geopolitics of Black Sea." Maritime security center of excellence (2021).

¹⁵⁵ Tulun, Teoman Ertuğrul. "Evolving Security Landscape In Black Sea: Strategic Shifts, Regional Dynamics, And European Implications." No. eb5rx. Center for Open Science, 2025.

¹⁵⁶ Petersen, Michael B. "Strategic Deterrence, Critical Infrastructure, and the Aspiration-Modernization Gap in the Russian Navy." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020.

4.5.1.3.1 Security Ambiguity under Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) asserts that regional security arrangements imply that the security of a state depends on its neighbors. Consequently, future security approaches to the BSR have been shaped in response by NATO and Russia's taken security policies interacting with each other's threat perceptions. Such as NATO has rather recently stepped up its presence and, thus, signals, while in fact they are a deterrent, may be seen by Russia as an aggression and lead to reinforcement of its Black Sea Fleet. Such a build-up of military possibilities is a clear picture of the security dilemma, where the defensive steps of one side present threats to the other side.¹⁵⁷

4.5.1.3.2 Potential of Accidental Encounters

The extensive connectivity of the military formations and a high frequency of practical operations in the BSR increases a probability of the occurrence of an unexpected meeting. It takes only a slight misinterpretation of a maneuver, a word, a signal, a glare or any other sign to escalate this sort of near accidents into major confrontations. To illustrate, the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 shows that the situation for air traffic personnel becomes especially dangerous during high-tension conflict.¹⁵⁸ In the maritime domain, the case of the seizure of three Ukrainian naval ships in Black Sea by Russia in November 2018 reveals the ability of specific events to trigger escalation and turn into a big international problem that entails the formation of rent-seeking coalitions and distorts diplomatic relations.¹⁵⁹

4.5.1.3.3 Mitigation Measures

In order to minimize these risks, communication lines between NATO and Russia are needed. Some frameworks concerning incident prevention could act as the precedent for similar approach in Black Sea; for example, the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement between the US and Soviet Union. That is, the need for guidelines regarding interactions in case of unlikely meetings at sea and constant communication between the military can prevent conflicts. Further, the transparency in military exercises,

¹⁵⁷ Maisaia, Vakhtang. "Black sea security and asymmetric military threats in the 21st century: New trends and new challenges." *Strategies XXI-National Defense College* 1, no. 72: 223-235. 2021.

¹⁵⁸ Mioduchowski, Andrzej, Antoni Olak, and Jerzy Michno. "Responsibility of the Russian Federation for Shooting Down a Malaysian Passenger Aircraft on 17th July 2014." *INCAS Bulletin* 11, no. 3: 199-208. 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Kormych, Borys, and Tetyana Malyarenko. "From gray zone to conventional warfare: the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Black Sea." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 7: 1235-1270. 2023.

identification of the exclusion zone at the times of rehearsals, can significantly decrease the probability of misinterpretation.

4.6 Regional and Global Political Repercussions

Regional alliances, global power dynamics, are however penetrating as they do with the military and security developments in the BSR. Actions of NATO and Russia — and with whom they deal bilaterally — also affect strategic calculations of other nations. The NATO-Russia crisis in the BSR is of profound consequence to regional alignments and the rules of world politics.¹⁶⁰ These outcomes are not military posturing but rather they have geopolitical consequences touching issues concerning political decision making, international cooperation and the strategic orientations of global powers.

4.6.1 Changes in the Regional Affiliates

Because the BSR has acquired a new geopolitical importance, the actors of the region have been compelled to reconsider their foreign and security policies. This has forced realignments of sorts especially so given NATO's growing interest and regional presence. This study looks at Türkiye's positioning in NATO and how it manages to balance its relationships as a member of this group. For this reason, Türkiye is in a strategic location since it is a member of NATO and has antecedents and business connections with Russia. The Montreux Convention of 1936 by which Türkiye is in the position to control the Bosphorus-Dardanelles straits puts Ankara in a very strong bargaining position with regards to naval access to Black Sea.

Thus, as stated above, the Türkiye's approach to the NATO-Russia confrontation was not limited to only the membership in NATO. On one side, Ankara still appreciates NATO and plays active role in regional security projects, contributing to the exercises prepare by the alliance. It has staged many naval exercises supported by NATO including Sea Breeze for boosting cooperation among member countries and to counter Russian aggression. These actions conform with defense of Türkiye as a part of collective defense enshrined in the 5th article of NATO Charter. In contrast, Türkiye has been traditionally building a practical relationship with Russia. Economic

¹⁶⁰ Ponomareva, Elena, and Dušan Proroković. "NATO vs. Russia: Impact on Balkan Regional Security." Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade; Faculty of Security Studies at the University of Belgrade, 2021.

interdependence plays a significant role here. A considerable amount of Türkiye's natural gas consumption is met through imports, and big bilateral energy projects have been conducted between Türkiye and Russia including the TurkStream pipeline. Besides, another case is Türkiye's acquisition of Russian S-400 missile system in 2017 angered NATO and became one of the manifestations of the difficult balancing of the Turkish foreign policy.¹⁶¹ Such a decision was perceived by NATO partners as an operational divergence and caused doubts about membership in the alliance.

Thus, over the recent years Türkiye has been aiming at profiting from its unexampled situation. For instance, Ankara has facilitated important bilateral talks between Moscow and Kyiv during the first months of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. They, plus its control of sea power in Black Sea as per Montreux Convention, reflect Türkiye's desire to become a mediator and security-provider in the region, all while catering to its own interests. Yet, this position may offend both NATO and Russia if it seems more partial to one party than the other.¹⁶²

4.6.1.1 Reflections on Romania and Bulgaria's Deepening NATO Connections

Two such countries are Romania and Bulgaria, both of which lie in southeastern part of the alliance, have become champions of the cause of enhancing the coherence of NATO's structure in the face of resurgent Russia. Both nations rely on NATO as security providers to protect sovereignty and territorial integrity after Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and military presence in Black Sea. As for Romania, it has defined itself as a linchpin of NATO's defense system in the eastern part of Europe. The country houses several of the military structures of NATO for example Aegis Ashore missile defense system in Deveselu that is very vital for the BMD strategy of the alliance. Romania has also improved on its defense spending, even going above the NATO recommended average of 2% of their GDP, and providing forces to multilateral naval exercise like Sea Shield. They indicate that Bucharest is keen on improving general security and covering Russian brinkmanship in the region. Likewise, Bulgaria has been welcoming economic integration with NATO but at a slightly slower rate because of internal politics. Sofia, as one of Black Sea states, has contributed to NATO maritime

¹⁶¹ Irkhin, Aleksandr A., Olga A. Moskalenko, and Natalia E. Demeshko. "Turkish Balance, or Türkiye's Foreign Policy Strategy in Black Sea Region Following the Special Military Operation." *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 24, no. 1: 7-22. 2024.

¹⁶² Goren, Nilsu. "The NATO/US-Turkey-Russia strategic triangle: challenges ahead." Center for International & Security Studies, U. Maryland., 2018.

operations and has been engaged in hosting NATO initiated infrastructure projects. However, due to historical relations between Bulgaria and Russia, as well as because the part of Bulgarian population supports Russia, there are issues related to Bulgarian consistent following of NATO policies. For instance, discussions of energy dependence on Russian gas both internally and externally represent the Realist dilemma between economics and security.¹⁶³

4.6.2 Global Power Dynamics

Black Sea confrontation will have far-reaching implications for many world actors as it influenced the US and the European Union (EU) and China's strategies and policies initiatives.

4.6.2.1 United States and NATO Unity

The US has been very involved in spearheading NATO's actions against Russia for its activities in the BSR. Washington considers the confrontation as the most severe challenge for NATO in the question of unity and credibility as for strengthening its eastern members' security.¹⁶⁴ The previous and current U.S. administrations have increased military assistance to Ukraine, growing deploying rotations in Eastern Europe and support financial and logistical for NATO operations in the BSR. For instance, during an ongoing war, the U.S. donated hazardous firepower to Ukraine in form of HIMARS rocketed systems and Patriot missiles. All these actions strengthened Ukraine's ability to defend itself at the same time as the US stood firmly for its NATO partners.¹⁶⁵ Further, regarding NATO, the Biden administration helped to improve unity in countering oppositions within the block of the NATO member states of its members' individual efforts to defend individually the block. Yet, doubts persist, at least within the NATO internal context. Cautious states such as Poland or Baltic implementing a strong military measure on the other side, there are countries of Western Europe like Germany or France, which support diplomatic relations with Russia. Black Sea confrontation has thus revealed division within NATO those on one side of the divide

¹⁶³ Naumescu, Valentin. "Stability, ambiguity and change in the discourses of NATO allies in Black Sea region: The cases of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey." *Croatian International Relations Review* 23, no. 80: 187-209. 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Flanagan, Stephen J., Anika Binnendijk, Irina A. Chindea, Katherine Costello, Geoffrey Kirkwood, Dara Massicot, and Clint Reach. "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security." RAND Corporation, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Murauskaite, Egle Elena, ed. "The War in Ukraine: Understanding Western Tools Short of War". Vol. 45. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2024.

argue that the organization is long past its best and so will not outlive this decade while the other side think that NATO will remain unified farther.

4.6.2.2 A Historical Chronology of the European Union's Energy Shift and Its Policies

In reaction to NATO-Russia standoff, the EU has adjusted its security and energy postures. Realizing the dependence that come with reliance on Russian natural gas the EU has stepped up its diversification process. Structures such as REPowerEU have been established with the goal of decreasing existing reliance on Russian energy by increasing relations with renewable energy. The EU signed deals in 2022 to buy more LNG from both the US and Qatar, an emerging focus on European-American energy relations.¹⁶⁶ In terms of the security the EU has become more entwined with NATO, adopting defense projects that coordinate with the alliance's actions. The European Defense Fund (EDF) established to strengthen the EU's collective defense has extended focus on Black Sea security projects in recent years.¹⁶⁷ In addition, the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia with regards to financial, technical and energy sectors show that the union is undivided against Russia's act of aggression. These measures not only effectively economically isolated Russia but also increase the cooperation between the two sides of the Atlantic concerning security threats posed from authoritarian states.

4.6.2.3 China's Calculated Engagement

As a rising global power China has reacted carefully to the NATO-Russia confrontation in the BSR. Currently, Beijing has a strategic cooperation with Moscow provided by mutual anti-Western solidarity. Nevertheless, China has shifted from actively engaging in the conflict as it actively pursues economy and geopolitical goals. The BRI infrastructure comprises port projects in Greece and rail connectivity through Türkiye in the BSR. These investments have the goals of improving access to the European markets and guaranteeing China's economic predilection in an unstable area.¹⁶⁸ However, growing NATO's hostility to Russia may have implications for China's strategic agenda in the region in case of a disruption of regional trade or infrastructure

¹⁶⁶ Dinu, Vasile. "Clean, Diversified, and Affordable Energy for the European Union in the Context of the REPowerEU Plan." *Amfiteatru Economic Journal* 25, no. 64: 654-658. 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Molnár, Anna. "The EU's Common Security and Defense Policy in the Context of European Strategic Autonomy." *Central European Academic Publishing*, Miskolc - Budapest, pp. 35-72, 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Bo, Wang, Pelagia Karpathiotaki, and Dai Changzheng. "The central role of the Mediterranean Sea in the BRI and the importance of Piraeus Port." *Journal of WTO & China* 8: 98. 2018.

ventures. Nonetheless, the conflict has seen China advance its energy relations with Moscow. In response to western cut on Russian energy exports Beijing boosted its Russian oil and gas imports at well below market price. This increasing economic integration affords insight into the risk analyses of their bilateral relations for both powers. However, China is cautious on praising Russian actions in Ukraine so as not to put off many European trade partners.

Conclusion

Black Sea confrontation underlines the weakness of the current models of international organizations as the means to regulate the regional conflicts. Even organizations such as the United Nations (UN) have failed to manage the crisis due to issues of veto powers with the security council, something that gives the Russians a lot of power. This has further cemented the idea of a broken international system where regional conflicts are gradually shaping this world more than any other factor. On the other hand, the effectiveness of NATO that equally coordinated itself in response to Russia display the importance of military alliances in delivering security. The confrontation has also led to criticism in how international organizations should or can be adapted to accommodate the challenges of precisely a multipolar competition and hybrid warfare. In a nutshell, the current conflict between NATO and Russia in the BSR has enshrined significant change in the regional relations as well as balance of power on the international plane. Some of the affected countries include Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria that has adjusted its plans and puts in place measures to counter the dynamics of the conflict while the super powers like the U.S, EU and China has put in place measures to embrace the consequences of the conflict. These developments highlighted the linkage between regional and global security as an example of how small conflicts can realign the strategic directions of states and organizations internationally. Such outcomes have a lot in common with what RSCT causes. The BSR has now become a highly integrated security network whereby any security threat in any state is speedily relayed to other states via interstate alliance, regional antagonism as well as geographic vulnerability. The repositioning of NATO into countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, the increased collaboration it has with Ukraine and Georgia, has changed the polarity of the region of the BSR, in the westward direction but with the west holding the power. Polarity has changed in terms of RSCT so that security dilemma interactions have increased thereby forcing Russia to pursue an aggressive

state in an effort to retain strategic parity and influence. Another important aspect noted by RSCT is that of amity/enmity patterns: Romania, Ukraine and Georgia are increasingly being integrated into a NATO-friendly network and Russia is becoming an outcast, which becomes the basis of its feelings of encirclement as well as its legitimization to take counter-measures. Thus, the proxy wars, economic fragmentation and long-term insecurity mentioned in this chapter are by no means isolated trends and it is only a structure that produces such tendencies.

Conclusion, Findings and Recommendations

Conclusion

NATO's expansion into the BSR since 2010 has completely transformed the political relationships which exist among Russia and NATO members together with other regional actors. The alliance stepped up its presence within the region starting from 2014 to improve security following Russia's annexation of Crimea. NATO's intensified military cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria plus Türkiye and increased joint exercises triggered Russian security perceptions of direct regional threats. Russia strengthened its military forces in Black Sea territory by deploying advanced weaponry and boosted sea force presence while deepening regional force integration. Since 2014, NATO military and partnership activities in the BSR have caused a Russian response that has worsened a security environment with increasing threats and open military conflicts between Russia and NATO which has resulted in an uncertain regional security arrangement in the BSR.

The military-strategic interaction between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea Region (BSR) in 2014-2024 was critically discussed in the research. Based on the process-tracing approach and with the help of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the hypothesis of the research was tested to state that enhanced NATO military presence and capacity-building in the BSR promoted similar Russian military escalation, which aggravated the situation in the region derailing its security. In order to examine this, the research examined major propositions under case studies of selected BSR cases of Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye, Ukraine, and Crimea. Since the year 2014, the enhancement of NATO military activity and capacity-building programs in the BSR have catalyzed a similar volume of corresponding and escalating Russian military efforts, thus laying the groundwork to worsen regional security conditions. Empirical evidence has played a big role in confirming this hypothesis. Russian military responses have been correlated with and in some cases caused by NATO buildup which takes the form of forward deployments, multinational exercises, and political associations. They are naval remobilization, militarization of Crimea, and hybrid warfare, which collectively strengthened instability in the region.

All the propositions that are contained in the hypothesis are now tested below. Research Question 1: Why has NATO been extending its troop presence eastward toward the Black Sea ever since 2014? The eastward enlargement of NATO was part of a strategic counter to Russia annexation and long-term potential of Crimea as a threat to the alliance in its eastern outskirts. Main reasons were: Realist logic of deterrence against the vulnerable southeastern flank of NATO. Capacity-building logic: the improvement of interoperability, readiness, and responsiveness in Romania and Bulgaria. Symbolic commitment: the exhibited interest in collective defense since the Wales and Warsaw summits. Such pushes did not simply represent a symbolic strategic power, and they included forward presence operations, Aegis Ashore sites, and multinational naval deployments.

Research Question 2 and 3: Why is NATO's enlargement along the BSR perceived as a threat by Russia, and how did this influence Russia's policies in the region? The collapse of buffer zones and enhanced power penetration by the Western countries through NATO actions made Russia presume their actions based on the threat. This viewpoint based on RSCT and the logic of Realist security dilemma gave rise to: The installation of A2AD systems in Crimea. A black sea fleet expansion. Hybrid-war strategic operations in Ukraine and Georgia. The policy of passive deterrence by Russia changed towards proactive and escalatory policy entrenching its regional dominance by military aggressiveness and geopolitical intimidation. The actions by NATO influenced directly the threat perception of Russia to policy planning to strategic response cycle.

This research reinforces the analytical capabilities of RSCT since it proves that: Swings in polarity (NATO hegemony) and power insertion (e.g., Ukraine) are accelerating Russian insecurity. The amity/enmity structures are used to foretell how the Russian state behavior differed among the states of the BSR. The regional approach proposed by RSCT can be further improved through its triangulation with Realism (which explains the responses of power) and Constructivism (which explains the narratives of threats created by Russia, e.g., on the existence of NATO). The thesis shows that the behavior of regions, even though not on the basis of empirical testing, can be coherently explained within the context of structured perception and interaction patterns based on the application of RSCT in an analytical context rather than in an illustrative one.

The presence of NATO has stabilized the members but destabilized the periphery in this region. In the case of non-member states (Ukraine, Georgia), an invitation to partnership and lack of protection stimulated coercion and lack of deterrence. In the case of balancing actors (Türkiye), ambiguity left space to move. This paper has established that the BSR has turned into a tactical security block characterized by asymmetry, the cycles of escalation, and identities-oriented affinity. That there is no simple east-west divide in conflict between the NATO and Russia, but instead a process with regional effects of shifting threat perceptions, alliances, and national identity politics. The embeddedness of the empirical findings in a well-defined hypothesis-testing and theory supported structure of knowledge takes the study beyond description and provides a causally informed comparative and policy-relevant insight on regional security in the post Crimea period.

Key Findings

- NATO's expansion in the BSR is linked with Russia's posturing in the region. The region sees an intensified NATO presence because military exercises and operational forward bases serve to strengthen Eastern Europe's military defense while securing borders against additional Russian push. In all instances, military and institutional interventions by NATO such as the deployment of missile defense in Romania, Sea Breeze exercises with Ukraine, and EOP status with partners were seen by Russia as buffering measures. This impression triggered a defensive-realism rationality: not direct confrontation, but escalation balancing emerged the Russian response, e.g. the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet, the deployment of missiles in Crimea, or hybrid warfare in Ukraine. It proves the point that more NATO presence is associated with more aggressive Russian action particularly on the territory of non-NATO countries (Ukraine, Georgia).□
- Based on results, the performance of Russia was not consistent but calculated according to the position of every term in RSCT amity/enmity scheme:
 1. Romania: Incredible hostility -> strong retaliation in arms.
 2. There is nothing really quiet like that in Türkiye: Unclear friend/foe/careful foreign policy.
 3. Georgia/Ukraine: Georgia/Ukraine are clearly pro-NATO but outside of NATO will offer hybrids and kinetics.

4. Bulgaria: Noncoherency and low profile → very little reaction.

- NATO has recorded an enhanced interest in the Black Sea region since 2014, which has resulted in the regional shift to a loosely balanced zone to a NATO-polarized region with a lesser strategic ambiguity. Russia views this as a failure of the post-soviet buffer zone. Led by this behavior (annexation of Crimea, attacks in Ukraine, military militarization of the sea), one can observe a typical RSCT spiral of security, which grounds the efforts of one party to strengthen its security with the weakening of the other security and, consequently, the reaction.
- The paper establishes that Russia does not just depend on the use of military strength when responding to NATO. Rather, it employs hybrid tools (cyberattacks, propaganda, energy interference) in particular against countries that are not under the NATO membership umbrella (Ukraine, Georgia). This validates the constructivist finding that strategic identity and symbolic communication (e.g., treating NATO as an aggressor) is important in Russian strategy.
- RSCT is effective in regional variation and response dynamic, particularly in those areas where there is amity/enmity alteration. Nonetheless, it becomes rich when it is delinked with realism (which theorizes threat-balancing rationales) and constructivism (which theorizes identity-related aggressions and verbiage). Such triangulation provides us with a richer explanatory reasoning on the question of why the same actions of NATO produce varied reactions of Russians in different states.

Recommendations

- Black Sea actors should enhance mutual communication among themselves to manage regional disputes. This includes regular diplomatic, military and security dialogues which help to solve fears, monitor crises, promote understanding and transparency, and decrease the risks of unintentional conflicts.
- The countries throughout the BSR should manage their military forces alongside diplomatic dialogue to protect their national security. Continuing refinement of military capabilities displays should avoid escalation of tensions and should be aimed at facilitating territorial and regional problems through diplomatic channels.
- Black Sea regional states should opt economic growth as a common interest. Cross border trade and energy cooperation in the BSR would increase interdependence, reduce conflicts and induce stability in the region by joint economic development.
- Military competition continues to be an important aspect of Russia's defense policy, however, an agenda of expanded cooperation with NATO and Black Sea states in areas including environmental protection, counterterrorism, trade and energy security should be enhanced to establish long term stability beyond military rivalry.
- To ensure peaceful dispute resolution and regional stability, borders must be upheld as well as United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) must be respected by Black Sea countries.

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