

ISSUE BRIEF

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Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Renewed Focus on the Black Sea Needed

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on July 11 and 12 is an opportunity for the Alliance to focus on a region that has been increasing in geopolitical importance: the Black Sea. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Black Sea has essentially become a Russian lake. This is a direct threat to U.S. and NATO security interests. Many of the recent initiatives regarding the Black Sea at the NATO level have not met expectations. The U.S. should use the July summit to lead the Alliance in developing meaningful ways to work with the Black Sea littoral states to start the process of developing a strategy for regional security.

The Importance of the Black Sea

The Black Sea sits at an important crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus. Many important oil and gas pipelines, as well as fibrotic cables, crisscross the sea. Throughout the history of the region, the Black Sea has proven to be geopolitically and economically important.

For the U.S., the strategic importance of the Black Sea is primarily derived from its treaty obligations under NATO. Three of six Black Sea countries (Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania) are in NATO. Another two countries (Ukraine and Georgia) participate in

NATO's Partnership for Peace program (and Georgia is an official NATO candidate).

The U.S. needs to maintain good relations with partner Black Sea countries because they have demonstrated the political will to deploy troops in support of NATO operations. Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia collectively contribute one-third of all the European forces serving in NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, for example.

A Russian Lake

For Russia, domination of the Black Sea region has always been considered a matter of national survival. Russian Black Sea ports, being Russia's only warm water ports, have always served the economic interests of Russia. For example, on the eve of World War I, 50 percent of all Russian exports, and 90 percent of Russian agriculture exports, passed through the Bosphorus out of the Black Sea. Today, an oil tanker passes through the Bosphorus out of the Black Sea every 15 minutes carrying Russian oil or Kazakh oil (the latter, of course, transits Russia so that Moscow can collect transit fees).

Russia's annexation of Crimea is an unprecedented act of foreign-state aggression in the 21st century. The annexation has de facto cut Ukraine's coastline in half and has essentially turned the Black Sea into a Russian-controlled lake. Russia has since claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean peninsula previously belonging to Ukraine.

Russia has taken steps to strengthen its grip on Crimea and boost Moscow's military footprint in the Black Sea region. As described in The Heritage Foundation's *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength*:

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4872>

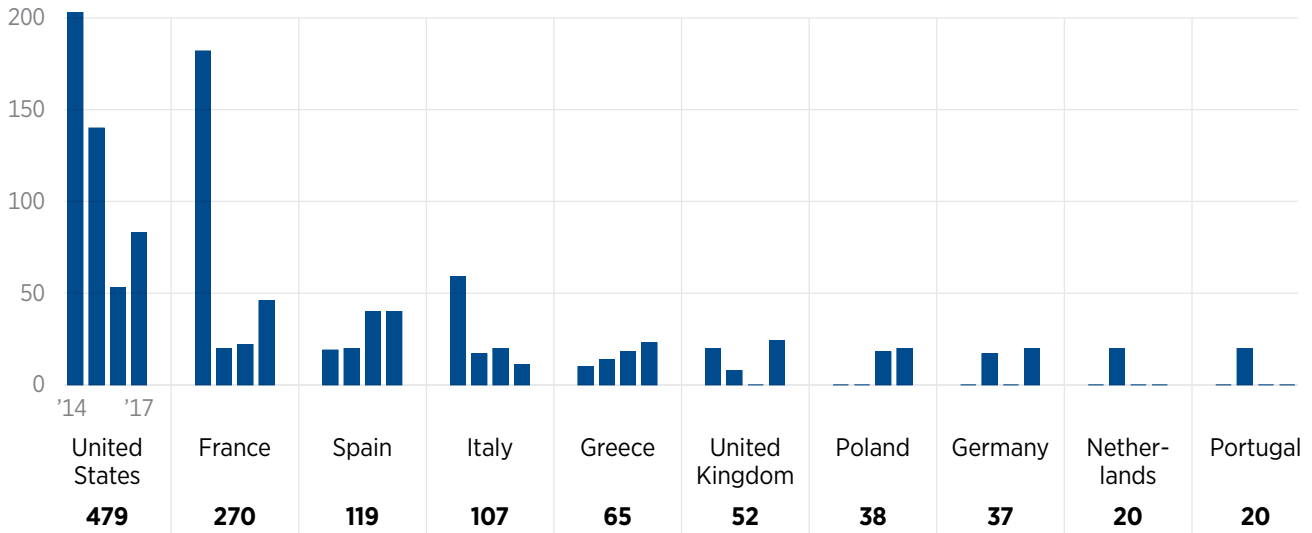
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CHART 1

U.S. Navy Maintains Large but Declining Presence in the Black Sea

NUMBER OF DAYS WITH WARSHIPS IN THE BLACK SEA, 2014–2017



SOURCE: Bosphorus Naval News, <https://turkishnavy.net/> (accessed January 2, 2018).

IB4872 heritage.org

Russia has deployed 28,000 troops to Crimea and has embarked on a major program to build housing, restore airfields, and install new radars there. In addition, control of Crimea has allowed Russia to use the Black Sea as a platform to launch and support naval operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia has allocated \$1 billion to modernize the Black Sea fleet by 2020 and has stationed additional warships there including two equipped with Caliber-NK long-range cruise missiles. Caliber cruise missiles have a range of at least 2,500 km, placing cities from Rome to Vilnius within range of Black Sea-based cruise missiles. In August 2016, Russia deployed S-400 air defense systems with a potential range of around 250 miles to Crimea.¹

Challenges Securing the Black Sea

Russia's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capability is not the only thing that makes operating in the Black Sea a challenge. Additional diplomatic and political factors further complicate the matter.

The 1936 Montreux Convention makes maintaining a robust NATO maritime presence difficult. The convention gave Turkey control over the Turkish Straits and placed limitations on the number, transit time, and tonnage of naval ships from non-Black Sea countries that may use the strait and operate in the Black Sea.

Non-Black Sea state warships in the Straits must be less than 15,000 tonnes. No more than nine non-Black Sea state warships, with a total aggregate tonnage of no more than 30,000 tons, may pass at any one time, and they are permitted to stay in the Black Sea for no longer than 21 days. This places limitations on both U.S. Navy and non-Black Sea NATO member operations in the Black Sea.

There are also challenges on the political front. Due to internal disagreements among NATO Black Sea members, NATO has been unable to meet its desired expectations in the region. For example, the creation of a permanent NATO maritime force in the Black Sea has been discussed since before the 2016 Warsaw Summit and still has not been realized.

1. Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2018), <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength>.

U.S. Presence in Black Sea

Soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.S., along with several other NATO members, stepped up its presence in the Black Sea. But since then, this presence has been drastically reduced. While NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg pledged an increase of NATO ships to the Black Sea in February 2017, this has yet to happen.

Time to Focus on the Black Sea

America can take a number of steps with NATO to safeguard its political, economic, and security interests in the region. The United States and NATO should:

- **Develop a strategy for the Black Sea region.** The U.S. should be a leader inside the Alliance to develop meaningful ways for working with the Black Sea littoral states to develop a strategy for regional security. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea has essentially become a Russian lake. This is a direct threat to U.S., NATO, and Georgian security interests. Many of the recent initiatives at the NATO level have not met expectations.
- **Work with NATO to establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the Baltic Air Policing mission.** NATO's interest in Black Sea security is increasing, but the overall presence of non-Black Sea NATO warships is decreasing. NATO should establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the successful Baltic Air Policing mission, in order to maintain a robust NATO presence in the Black Sea in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention. This would require non-Black Sea NATO countries to commit in advance to a regular and rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea.

- **Push the Alliance to publish a separate summit declaration on the Black Sea.** NATO leaders often agree on separate declarations, in addition to the main declaration, regarding specific issues of importance. The Black Sea is a very important region for NATO, and has not received the attention it deserves; a separate declaration on NATO's strategy and support for countries in the Black Sea would send a message that the Alliance takes the region seriously.

- **Work with NATO to open a NATO-certified Center of Excellence on Black Sea Security in Georgia.** There is no precedent for a NATO-certified Center of Excellence in a non-NATO country, but establishing one could improve NATO-Georgia relations and show how important the Black Sea region has become for Europe's overall security. The Center of Excellence would provide an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue and training in how to address the challenges associated with Black Sea security.

An Important Region

The economic, security, and political importance of the Black Sea and the broader region is only becoming more important. With Russia increasing its military capability in the region, now is not the time for NATO to grow complacent. With U.S. leadership, the Black Sea can receive the appropriate focus and attention at the upcoming NATO summit.

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