

NATO Summit 2021: Black Sea Strategy Needed

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Black Sea sits at an important geopolitical and economic crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow has tried to turn the Black Sea into a Russian lake, posing a direct threat to U.S. and NATO security interests.

During the 2021 NATO summit, the Alliance should develop a clear strategy for the Black Sea region that advances Alliance interests while pushing back on Russia.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, offers a chance for NATO and its allies to start developing a meaningful Black Sea strategy. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow has tried turning the Black Sea into 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 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.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6087>

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MAP 1

The Black Sea Region



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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An Important Crossroads

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

Three of six Black Sea countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) are in NATO. Another two countries (Georgia and Ukraine) work closely with NATO, have suffered the direct impact of Russian aggression, and aspire to join the Alliance.

It is also worth noting that Black Sea countries have demonstrated a greater political will to deploy troops in support of NATO operations than countries in other regions. Last year, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine collectively contributed one-third of all European forces serving in NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, for example.

Russia and the Black Sea

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 from the Black Sea. Today, an oil tanker passes through the Bosphorus leaving the Black Sea every 15 minutes carrying Russian oil or Kazakh oil (the latter, of course, passes through Russia so that Moscow can collect transit fees).

Russia's annexation of Crimea was an unprecedented act of foreign-state aggression in the 21st century. The annexation has de facto cut Ukraine's coastline in half, and Russia has since claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean peninsula that belong to Ukraine.

Russia has taken steps to strengthen its grip on Crimea through a major effort at increasing its anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Russia's A2/AD capability is not the only matter that makes operating in the Black Sea a challenge. Additional diplomatic and political factors further complicate the matter.

Challenges for NATO

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 weigh 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 tonnes, may pass at any one time, and they are permitted to stay in the Black Sea for no longer than 21 days.¹ This places limitations on non-Black Sea NATO member operations in the Black Sea region.

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

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 in NATO ships to the Black Sea in February 2017, progress has been slow.

At the July 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO also agreed to “develop [a] tailored forward presence in the southeast part of the Alliance territory. Appropriate measures, tailored to the Black Sea region.”² The land component of NATO's tailored forward presence is a multinational framework brigade based in Craiova, Romania, under the control of Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast (HQ MND–SE) in Bucharest.³ HQ MND–SE achieved final operational capability in March 2018.⁴ The 5,000-strong brigade “still consists mainly of Romanian troops, but they are supplemented by Bulgarian and Polish troops and headquarters staff from various other NATO states.”⁵

The U.S. and Romania jointly organize a biannual exercise called Saber Guardian, which is “designed to improve the integration of multinational combat forces.”⁶ The 2021 iteration is taking place in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, and will see “more than 13,000 service members from 19 countries conduct live fire and air and missile defense operations, plus a large-scale medical evacuation.”⁷

More NATO Presence Needed

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 during NATO's summit. To do so, 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. Russia's annexation of Crimea is a direct threat to U.S., NATO, Ukrainian, and Georgian security interests.
- **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.

- **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. A Center of Excellence would provide an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue and training on how to address the challenges associated with Black Sea security.
- **Think creatively about increasing presence in the Black Sea.** In addition to establishing a Black Sea Maritime Patrol, NATO needs to explore more unconventional proposals to increase the length of time for which non-Black Sea countries operate in the sea. This should include the possible use of the Danube River or the Danube-Black Sea Canal.⁸
- **Not neglect the land and air component of Black Sea security.** With much of the focus on the Black Sea region placed on the maritime realm, policymakers cannot ignore the important air and land component in the region. NATO should consider the feasibility of a Black Sea Air Policing Mission, for example.
- **Deepen relations with Georgia and Ukraine.** These are two Black Sea countries that know what it is like to suffer from Russian aggression. They also aspire to join the Alliance. Without close cooperation and relations with both, NATO cannot have an effective Black Sea strategy.

Conclusion

The economic, security, and political importance of the Black Sea and the broader region is becoming more important. The security of the Black Sea is important not only for NATO's southern flank, but also for keeping the door open for future NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. With

Russia using the Black Sea as a springboard for operations in Syria and Libya, and with continued Russian aggression against Ukraine and Georgia, the U.S. and the Alliance cannot ignore the region.

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Endnotes

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