

# Time for Action: The U.S. and NATO Cannot Afford to Ignore the Black Sea Region

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will visit the Black Sea region, which is of growing geopolitical interest to the U.S. and NATO.

Austin will then attend the NATO ministerial meeting in Brussels, at a time when many in Europe are questing U.S. resolve after the Afghan withdrawal debacle.

On this trip, Austin should focus NATO on Black Sea security, boost U.S. military presence in the region, and support future NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine.

Next week, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will travel to Georgia, Ukraine, and Romania before attending a North American Treaty Organization (NATO) ministerial meeting in Brussels on October 21. This trip comes at a very important time. Many in Europe are questing U.S. resolve in the aftermath of the Afghan withdrawal debacle. The Black Sea continues to be a region of geopolitical interest to the U.S. NATO is in the process of drafting its next Strategic Concept, which will chart a path for the Alliance's future. Secretary Austin should use this trip as an opportunity to focus the Alliance on Black Sea security, boost America's military presence in the region, and support eventual NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5229>

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## The Black Sea

The Black Sea sits at an important crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus. For the U.S., the Black Sea's strategic importance is primarily derived from two issues. The first is America's treaty obligations under NATO. Three of six Black Sea countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) are in NATO and fall under the Alliance's security guarantee. Another two countries (Georgia and Ukraine) want to join NATO. Second, one of America's biggest geopolitical competitors and adversaries, Russia, is very active in the region, consistently undermining the interests of the U.S. and its allies.

**Georgia.** Georgia is a staunch partner of NATO. It is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for the Alliance. After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the subsequent occupation of 20 percent of its territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of NATO as well as non-NATO U.S.-led overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and Africa. Even with the Russian invasion and its aftermath, Georgia has not been deterred from getting closer to the West. This has made Georgia a net contributor to transatlantic security.

Two issues will likely dominate Secretary Austin's visit to Tbilisi. First is the tense political situation on the ground in Georgia after contentious local elections earlier this month. He would be wise to navigate Georgia's political landscape carefully and diligently. Not only should he meet with government officials, but also with members of Georgia's vibrant civil society and leaders of opposition parties.

Second, Georgians worry that their relationship with both NATO and the United States may stagnate in the aftermath of the Afghanistan withdrawal and the end of the Georgian Defense Readiness Program later this year. Tbilisi is therefore very much interested in understanding how it can contribute to NATO operations and maintain the strong bond that its military forces have developed with NATO militaries, especially the U.S.

**Ukraine.** Secretary Austin's visit comes on the heels of an uneventful meeting between President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in August, and the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in September. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine's landmass, and more than half of its coastline, have been under illegal occupation in Crimea. In eastern Ukraine today, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 14,000 lives lost<sup>1</sup> and 30,000 wounded.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of Russia's

aggressive actions in and surrounding Ukraine, it is important to remember the facts: Russia invaded Ukraine; Russia illegally occupies Crimea; Russia provoked and continues to support a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not exist before 2014; and Russia is the aggressor, while Ukraine is the victim.

Because the U.S. is only nine months into the Biden Administration, it remains to be seen how President Biden's policies toward Ukraine will materialize. When President Donald Trump was in office, his Administration oversaw sizeable weapons sales and aid-package grants to Ukraine. Between December 2017 and June 2020, the U.S. granted Ukraine more than \$687 million in aid and weaponry, including at least 360 Javelin anti-tank missiles, 47 Javelin launchers, and more than a dozen Mark VI patrol boats, plus snipers, ammunition, radar systems, and other gear.<sup>3</sup>

**Romania.** Over the past decade, Romania has become the U.S. keystone ally in the Black Sea region. The U.S. uses bases in the country, including Campia Turzii Air Base, from which it operates MQ-9 Reapers, and Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base, a major logistics and supply hub for U.S. equipment and personnel, as well as training grounds in multiple locations. Romania is currently investing \$2.96 billion in rebuilding Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base to NATO standards and increasing capacity.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Romania hosts an Aegis Ashore site in Deveselu, which became operational in May 2016, and is an important component of NATO's ballistic missile defense.

Romania has proven itself a willing ally, contributing to several NATO missions and making robust investment in defense capabilities a priority. Currently, 120 Romanian troops are taking part in the U.S.-led NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup in Poland.<sup>5</sup> Romania has attained both NATO spending benchmarks (2.02 percent of gross domestic product on defense, and 23.1 percent of defense spending on "major new capabilities") and is deepening defense cooperation with the U.S. through equipment purchases, bilateral security agreements, and joint exercises. On October 8, 2020, the U.S. and Romania signed a 10-year road map for defense cooperation. At the time, Romanian Minister of National Defense Nicolae Ciuca remarked, "The United States is our strongest ally. Romania's recent National Defense Strategy 2020–2024 highlights both the importance and the priority of working together in securing U.S. strategic flexibility in the Black Sea."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Romania's priority of purchasing U.S. equipment means that it not only receives battle-tested equipment, but also gains a deeper military relationship with the United States. Some of Romania's recent defense procurements include Patriot missile defense systems and F-16 fighters.

## NATO Meeting

The foundation of the transatlantic community is NATO, a multilateral organization that has done more to promote democracy, peace, and security in Europe than any other—including the European Union—since its inception in 1949. Far from being outmoded, NATO today is more relevant and crucial for maintaining transatlantic security than it has been since the end of the Cold War.

NATO is in the process of drafting its next Strategic Concept.<sup>7</sup> Now more than a decade old, NATO's most recent Strategic Concept is woefully outdated. Since its publication in 2010, the Alliance has had to deal with, either directly or indirectly, the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath, NATO's intervention in Libya, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the rise of the so-called Islamic State, the migrant crises in Europe, and Russia's intervention in Syria. In addition to these geopolitical challenges, advancements in hybrid warfare, especially in the cyber and disinformation realm, have posed new challenges for NATO. Even though the 2010 Strategic Concept is 40 pages long, it does not contain the words "pandemic," "Arctic," or "China."

## Time for Action, Not Words

Secretary Austin's trip to Europe is timely and important. To advance U.S. security interests in the Black Sea region, he should:

- **Invite Georgia to contribute troops to the U.S.-led multinational battalion in Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP).** Georgians are always looking for new ways to contribute to transatlantic security, and the U.S. and Georgia have a strong track record of serving alongside each other. As the Georgian presence in Afghanistan comes to an end, the U.S. should invite Georgia to contribute to its multinational battalion in Poland. To date, no non-NATO ally has contributed troops as part of the EFP battlegroups but if Georgian troops are able to serve in the NATO Response Force, they should also be able to serve as part of the EFP.
- **Reaffirm NATO's open-door policy for Ukraine and Georgia.** Both were promised eventual membership in 2008, and both are still waiting. Secretary Austin should reaffirm that U.S. support for NATO's open-door policy remains in place and that Russia does not have a veto right, including on potential future Ukrainian or Georgian membership.

- **Think creatively about routes to membership.** Georgia's NATO limbo has lasted too long, and the Alliance must develop a demonstrable way forward for Georgian membership. Due to Russia's partial occupation, most Europeans are lukewarm at best about Georgia joining NATO. At the October 21 meeting, NATO members should informally discuss the possibility of amending Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty to temporarily exclude the occupied regions as a viable option for addressing concerns about war with Russia if Georgia joins NATO.<sup>8</sup>
- **Supply more weapons to Ukraine with fewer restrictions.** When Ukraine received its first Javelin anti-tank missiles in 2018, part of the agreement with the Trump Administration was that the missiles would remain in storage far away from the front lines until they became necessary. Ukraine has the right to self-defense. As authorized by successive National Defense Authorization Acts, the U.S. should appropriate funds to increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military, including more anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and small arms with fewer, or more flexible, restrictions.
- **Encourage NATO to develop a strategy for the Black Sea region.** Russia's annexation of Crimea is a direct threat to U.S., NATO, Ukrainian, and Georgian security interests. Many of the recent initiatives at the NATO level have not met expectations. 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.
- **Push NATO to establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol 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.
- **Establish a permanent military presence in Eastern Europe.** U.S. basing structures in Europe harken back to a time when Denmark,

West Germany, and Greece represented the front lines of freedom. The security situation in Europe has changed, and the U.S. should account for this shift by establishing a permanent military presence in allied nations further east, potentially including Romania. A robust, permanent presence displays the U.S.'s long-term resolve to live up to its NATO treaty commitments.

## An Important Region

Secretary Austin's visit could not come at a better time. The economic, security, and political importance of the Black Sea and the broader region is becoming ever 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 Georgian and Ukrainian NATO membership. 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 afford to ignore the region.

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## Endnotes

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3. These numbers are based on several sources used in research conducted by Heritage Foundation analysts.
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6. David Vergun, "U.S., Romania Chart 10-Year Road Map for Military Cooperation," *DOD News*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2376797/us-romania-chart-10-year-road-map-for-military-cooperation/> (accessed October 13, 2021).
7. A NATO Strategic Concept is an official document that outlines the geopolitical and security challenges facing the Alliance, and the strategy that NATO should adapt to deal with these challenges.
8. For a detailed plan on how such an amendment could work, see Luke Coffey and James Carafano, "Time to End Russia's Veto on Georgia's NATO Membership," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3627, June 9, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/BG3627.pdf>.