

U.S.–Romanian Relations: A Pivotal Partnership in an Unstable Region

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Romania is a NATO anchor on the Black Sea—but military readiness cannot exist in an economic vacuum.

American greenfield investment has stalled due to Romanian regulatory churn, not a shortage of strategic opportunity.

Washington should back Romania's energy exports, Romania's NATO security-provider role, and deeper legal cooperation.

The United States confronts a critical inflection point on the eastern front of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Throughout the history of the region, the Black Sea has proven to be geopolitically and economically important. Washington has long prioritized military cooperation with Romania and increasingly recognizes the valuable growth opportunities in the economic dimension of the U.S.–Romanian strategic partnership. From this broader geostrategic perspective, continuing to enhance a pragmatic bilateral relationship with Romania on key economic, diplomatic, and security policy initiatives is clearly in America's national interest.

Economic Cooperation

To secure its geopolitical gains in the Black Sea region and beyond, Washington should encourage

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Romania's ongoing economic transition from a post-communist, capital-importing country into a high-value commercial partner and strategically channel private capital into the country's energy, defense, cybersecurity, and transportation infrastructure.

Romania: A Pro-American, Pro-Western Partner in a Volatile Region. As a strategic NATO ally on Europe's border with the Black Sea, Romania is a longtime friend of the United States that shares the values of market democracy. In December 2025, congratulating the people of Romania on their National Day, Secretary of State Marco Rubio pointed out that "the United States and Romania share a strong and growing partnership built on shared strategic interests in security, energy cooperation, and trade."¹ He further noted that "we [the United States] commend Romania's regional leadership and encourage your [Romania's] continued role in promoting stability across the Black Sea region."²

Indeed, the Black Sea is 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. For nearly three decades, Romania has served as one of America's most reliable and unyielding allies in the region. Unlike some of its neighbors that exhibit ambivalent foreign policy stances toward transatlantic unity, Bucharest has maintained a consistent pro-Western trajectory.

Among other factors, this alignment has been grounded in ongoing engagements with the United States, fortified by deep military integration. Bucharest has been moving away from energy and technology supply chains that depend on adversaries such as Russia and China by actively prioritizing American civil nuclear engineering and security-vetted communications frameworks. Bucharest was among the first European capitals to explicitly codify strict regulatory bans against untrusted, high-risk vendors participating in its 5G telecommunications infrastructure. By selecting secure American and allied hardware providers, Romania has aimed to protect its critical data infrastructure.³ In light of this track record, Washington should engage Bucharest in a dialogue about opportunities to expand that success through targeted economic incentives while encouraging Romania to push Brussels to fully activate the European Union's 5G Toolbox.

It is notable, as Secretary Rubio highlighted, that "Romania's pledge to commit 5 percent of its GDP [gross domestic product] to defense by 2035 will strengthen the NATO Alliance and establish a foundation for growing prosperity for years to come."⁴ Greater security and resilience cannot rely on a military footprint alone, however. It requires more robust economic foundations. Romania's long-term resilience, especially in the context of the

geopolitical stability of the Black Sea, is directly linked to the economic sovereignty and security reinforced by the institutional strength of the region's littoral states. Yet, without a concerted effort by both Washington and Bucharest to deep-freeze regulatory hurdles and accelerate capital deployment, the economic corridor risks falling short of its strategic potential.

The economic relationship between the United States and Romania has entered an elevated, albeit unbalanced, phase. Bilateral trade in goods and services is expanding at double-digit rates and has broken historic records, driven by Romania's gradual emergence as a technological and advanced manufacturing hub.

Total bilateral trade has scaled significantly. Romanian exports to the United States have reached \$6.4 billion, making the United States Romania's 15th-largest global export market and its largest customer outside the European Union.⁵ Conversely, U.S. exports to Romania stand at \$3 billion, composed heavily of advanced machinery, transportation hardware, and defense systems.⁶ This structural trade surplus in favor of Romania reflects its graduation into advanced industrial and digital supply chains.

The United States represents the largest non-EU investor footprint in Romania, maintaining an aggregate foreign direct investment stock exceeding \$9 billion. This capital presence carries profound socioeconomic weight, directly supporting more than 120,000 Romanian jobs—approximately 2 percent of the country's entire full-time labor force, concentrated heavily in high-wage tech sectors.⁷ Notably, the energy infrastructure and technology security sectors are at the center of the U.S.–Romanian economic relationship. Yet long-term U.S. greenfield investment has experienced a relative deceleration. To revitalize greenfield investment, Romania should increase the transparency of forthcoming critical minerals opportunities, in extraction and refining, where American companies can engage.

Romania is positioned to become a launchpad for American nuclear innovation. Through partnerships backed by the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation and the U.S. Export-Import Bank, Romania is leading the deployment of American small modular reactor (SMR) technology in Doicești.⁸ A renewed focus on nuclear energy cooperation with the United States is critical at this pivotal juncture. By revitalizing and advancing the energy partnership practically, Romania can secure long-term energy independence, fuel economic growth, and even become a regional energy leader. Simultaneously, U.S. capital is critical to the extraction of deepwater natural gas reserves within Romania's Neptun Deep perimeter in the Black Sea, solidifying Bucharest's status as a net energy exporter to its vulnerable

neighbors.⁹ As these reserves are tapped, the United States and Romania should redouble discussions about constructing interconnections with the strategic Vertical Corridor gas-pipeline network to enhance Balkan and Central European energy security.¹⁰

Romania's Lingering Domestic Impediments Threaten Dynamic Capital Flows. From a broader geostrategic perspective, continuing to enhance pragmatic bilateral relationships with Romania on key economic, energy, and security policy fronts is in America's foreign policy interest.

Despite favorable metrics and strategic contexts, significant structural hurdles within Romania threaten to choke off the next wave of American private capital. If Bucharest wishes to remain competitive relative to regional peers, it must urgently address lingering deficiencies in its economic governance and pursuit of greater reform.

The primary deterrent often cited by American enterprises is the lack of domestic institutional predictability. The Romanian legislative landscape is prone to frequent, unannounced emergency decrees that alter corporate tax structures, micro-enterprise thresholds, and social security mandates overnight. For American companies, this regulatory churn introduces a costly premium on operations.¹¹ These challenges have been compounded by coalition instability, governing uncertainty, and short-term regulatory measures. The central recent example of these trends is the ongoing political gridlock, in which two nominees for prime minister have failed to achieve parliamentary approval amid political fights stemming from the 2024 presidential election annulment.¹² Romania is strategically reliable toward the United States and NATO, but Washington should encourage Bucharest to pair that external reliability with greater domestic predictability.

According to The Heritage Foundation's latest annual *Index of Economic Freedom*, Romania's economy is considered "moderately free."¹³ The country's rise toward greater economic resilience and competitiveness has been held back by institutional shortcomings and weak spots that require further reform. To be a freer and more competitive economy, Romania will have to focus on improving the judicial system, strengthening anti-corruption efforts, removing rigidities in the labor market, and further modernizing the financial sector.

To that end, one of the practical engagements Washington can reinforce is to continue its interaction with Romania through the Three Seas Initiative. Officially launched in 2016, the initiative aims to strengthen infrastructure, energy, and digital interconnectivity projects among countries bordering the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas and to connect them for greater regional development.¹⁴

Time to Capitalize on Romania's Economic Pivot and Secure the Black Sea Front. To install a more pragmatic bilateral economic partnership across the Atlantic between the two willing allies and convert trade-driven momentum into resilient, long-term strategic capital, both Washington and Bucharest must take decisive action.

Washington cannot provide Bucharest with the political will that the country needs to transform its economy according to free-market principles. However, by more candid and direct involvements in critical policy dialogues, the United States can constructively engage to make its case, particularly given the fact that the strategic interplay among economic freedom, energy independence, and national security is more critical than ever. One major outstanding piece of this conversation is the completion of Lukoil's international asset sale to Carlyle Group, which includes the Petrotel refinery that is the foundational source for Romania's petrol market.¹⁵ Washington can also engage at the technical and practical level in a way that enables Romania to advance its economic development. Project possibilities with economic development potential abound, including, but not limited to, expanding cross-Danube connectivity¹⁶ and exploring longer-term possibilities, such as boosting Black Sea data connections.¹⁷ Fundamentally, America's economic relationship with the country will be exercised best through the private sector: the catalyst for real and meaningful economic transformation.

Romania has proven itself to be a dependable, pro-market ally on the front lines of transatlantic security. However, military readiness cannot exist in an economic vacuum. By enhancing its domestic regulatory environment, investing heavily in physical infrastructure, and further deepening its integration with American energy and technology markets, Romania can cement its status as an indispensable economic anchor for the United States in the critical frontline. A vibrant and resilient Romanian economy would serve as an effective deterrent against regional instability. Washington must work with Bucharest toward that strategic objective by channeling the power of their private sectors to fortify this vital alliance.

Diplomatic and Educational Cooperation

In addition to a vibrant economic relationship with prospects for growth, U.S. diplomatic and educational cooperation with Romania is a promising arena for strengthening bilateral relations. From joint legal enforcement groups for upholding the rule of law to increasing each society's familiarity with the other, several opportunities present themselves.

Bilateral Legal Cooperation. The rule of law is foundational for economic prosperity and the protection of human rights, so Washington has long engaged in legal cooperation abroad with like-minded allies and partners, such as Romania. Supporting Romania's efforts to meet American standards for the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and doubling down on bilateral programs to combat organized crime and human trafficking represent two avenues to continue strengthening the U.S.–Romanian partnership and the rule of law.

Visa Waiver Program Status and Next Steps. Then-U.S. President Joe Biden had designated Romania as a VWP country on January 9, 2025, just before leaving office, but the Trump Administration paused this designation in March 2025 and then rescinded it in May 2025 “to protect the integrity of the VWP and to ensure border and immigration security.”¹⁸ The VWP has numerous qualifying criteria for just these reasons, including a below 3 percent nonimmigrant visa refusal rate in the previous year and an assessment that admission to the program will not harm U.S. law enforcement interests, among others.¹⁹

Romania is actively seeking to re-enter the program through meeting the program standards and expanded cooperation with the U.S. as highlighted by the February 2026 meeting in Washington, DC, on homeland security cooperation between the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Romanian Ministry of the Interior leadership.²⁰ Bilateral cooperation on this issue rests on three pillars: an Enhanced Border Security Partnership (EBSP), participation in the Automated Targeting System-Global (ATS-G) program, and the ongoing work of the Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit in Bucharest. Laid out as a requirement for aspiring VWP nations in 2022, the EBSP focuses on giving the U.S. Department of Homeland Security increased data access to partner nations' biometric records to improve U.S. border security.²¹ Romania's decision to accede to the EBSP puts it ahead of the broader European Union, which remains in negotiations with the United States.²² Most of the European Union member nations are also VWP members, but the EU would prefer a bloc-based membership for all EU members automatically. The United States prefers to handle the VWP program bilaterally with each nation, as the economic, demographic, and security factors vary from country to country.

Romania's participation in the ATS-G likewise increases security, as the program helps U.S. authorities “to enhance the identification of possible threats and to assist in securing the border and transportation security” by comparing cross-border information against law enforcement and intelligence data.²³ Originating in a 2023 memorandum of understanding, the Transnational

Criminal Investigative Unit is a joint effort between the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs to fight criminal activity in the Black Sea region. This close cooperation is key to breaking regional and transnational organized crime and strengthening law enforcement ties.²⁴

The central stumbling block to Romanian readmission to the VWP remains, however, that Romania's nonimmigrant visa refusal rate stood at 8.41 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2025.²⁵ Romania's visa overstay rate, however, has shown improvement over the past few reporting cycles, going from 3.75 percent in FY 2022²⁶ to 1.01 percent in FY 2024.²⁷ Deep border security cooperation is no doubt helpful in reducing these trends, but to lower the nonimmigrant visa refusal rate to the desired maximum percentage, further work is needed. On the American side, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Embassy Romania could identify the leading reasons for refusal and construct a concerted public messaging campaign to inform Romanians about qualifying for a U.S. visa. However, the prospect of illegal work in the United States, and organized crime groups that exploit visa issuance to facilitate smuggling and other illegal operations, are motivating factors for fraud that remain under the control of individual Romanian visa applicants, not the government. As with Poland, economic prosperity and increased opportunities at home are the most likely contingencies to eventually lower Romania's visa refusal rate.

Cooperation to Fight Organized Crime and Human Trafficking. Beyond border security, Bucharest and Washington have fostered multifaceted cooperation to combat organized crime and human trafficking. This cooperation has emerged throughout 2026, with impetus provided by the *2025 Trafficking in Persons Report*, which acknowledged Romania's "significant efforts" to eliminate human trafficking and laid out areas for additional progress.²⁸ Part of this cooperation revolves around an Annual Dialogue on the U.S.–Romanian Child Protection Compact (CPC), which occurred this year in June.²⁹ Backed by \$12 million in U.S. government funding, the CPC works to combat the heinous crime of child trafficking in cooperation with Romanian authorities who have worked closely with their American partners to strengthen the legislative framework to fight this scourge.³⁰ Cooperation to reduce human trafficking extends into the broader workforce as highlighted by the April meeting between U.S. Ambassador to Romania Darryl Nirenberg and Romanian Minister of Labor Petre-Florin Manole who spoke about ways to extend cooperation between both nations on labor protection and supporting human trafficking victims through sharing best practices, among other measures.³¹

Another area of concrete legal cooperation was the June 2026 conference organized by the U.S. Department of Justice in Constanța with Romanian authorities. The conference focused on enhancing joint efforts to fight organized crime, as previously agreed during the February visit of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs Cătălin Predoiu to the United States.³² High-level exchanges in this manner and ongoing joint training programs are important to ensure clear lines of communication and prosecutorial readiness to combat transnational criminal syndicates.

Strong U.S.–Romanian legal cooperation should serve as a pathway to strengthen legal and judicial systems in the broader region to reduce human trafficking and prosecute organized crime. In particular, the Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit’s work should be examined for opportunities to link up with broader Black Sea and Balkan partner nations also interested in freer economies and societies.

Diplomatic Cooperation. As NATO allies with 145 years of joint diplomatic recognition, Romania and the United States have a deep relationship from diplomatic and military cooperation to advancing shared interests and values. U.S. engagement with Romanian leadership of the Bucharest Nine (B9) diplomatic and defense-coordination initiative, a cooperation among Eastern European NATO members, and Romania’s efforts to prepare a Regional Alliance for Ukraine Reconstruction represent two pertinent avenues to enhance this long-standing diplomatic cooperation.

Leadership of the B9 Initiative. Former Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and former Polish President Andrzej Duda launched the B9 initiative in 2015 as a security coordinating forum for nine NATO allies in Central and Eastern Europe in the face of increased Russian aggression. The nine founding members are Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.³³ Most recently, current Romanian President Nicușor Dan hosted a leaders summit in May 2026 with Nordic allies, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and U.S. Under Secretary of State Thomas Dinanno in attendance as special invitees.³⁴ Consonant with their view of the potential Russian threat, the 2026 B9 summit featured vigorous support for raising allied defense spending to 5 percent of GDP,³⁵ with targeted statements in the summit’s declaration surrounding the defense industrial base and resilience.³⁶ One area where B9 allies can play a key role with Romania as a leading player is in the critical-minerals space. With the European Union, NATO, and national capitals raising the alarm about dependencies in the critical-minerals space, B9 countries, which have deep mineral reserves and growing processing capacity, should expand those assets in a coordinated

manner.³⁷ As Washington thinks through the secondary opportunities and challenges on critical minerals relevant to the 2025 bilateral critical minerals deal with Ukraine,³⁸ a conversation with Romania and the B9 would be well timed.

The critical-minerals chokepoint is not the only weaponized pain point: NATO allies' resilience has been targeted by Russia and China in the fuel and information spaces as well. The B9 has long been interested in fuel resilience, particularly a potential expansion or replication of the Central Europe Pipeline System (CEPS) along NATO's eastern front to ensure fuel in the event of conflict.³⁹ These efforts deserve careful consideration by NATO leadership, including the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), when conflict planning within the NATO Defense Planning Process. Some experts have also raised concerns about threats to Romanian and B9 resilience via aggressive cyberattacks and disinformation networks.⁴⁰ Romania's engagement with B9 and Nordic partners can help to drive durable progress in this area by unifying key strands of hybrid awareness, deterrence, and response thanks to the NATO Centers of Excellence tasked with handling the various parts of this threat: the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Finland,⁴¹ NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Latvia,⁴² the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence in Estonia,⁴³ and the NATO Human Intelligence Center of Excellence in Romania.⁴⁴

Regional Alliance for the Reconstruction of Ukraine. Leaning into its Black Sea geography, Romanian authorities have begun work on a Regional Alliance for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, which they envision linking up with European partners following a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine to support reconstruction efforts.⁴⁵ American officials should engage with this line of effort to ensure that it serves as the civilian component of the Coalition of the Willing being organized by France, Britain, and Germany to provide military support after conflict termination in Ukraine.⁴⁶ Romania is well-positioned to serve as the lead organizer of civilian reconstruction flows to Ukraine thanks to the deep (and expanding) infrastructure links between the countries, such as maritime flows to and from the port of Constanta, and new bridge and road crossings under construction to link the western Ukrainian border village Bila Tserkva and the northern Romanian town of Sighetu Marmatiei.⁴⁷ Existing infrastructure links will be critical to help handle the flow of reconstruction supplies and personnel, now estimated at a total cost of roughly \$588 billion by the World Bank in cooperation with Ukraine, the European Commission, and the United Nations.⁴⁸

Educational and People-to-People Ties. Deep policy cooperation is central to advancing American interests with allied nations like Romania, but its longevity depends on the cultivation of societal ties between Americans and Romanians. Besides business and personal travel to each other's countries, academic and official exchanges provide the scaffolding for these societal ties through programs like Fulbright, Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX), and official visits based on the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act (MECEA) of 1961.

Fulbright Romania. America's world-leading universities have long attracted students from around the world as American students and researchers engage with foreign counterparts on research relevant to those jurisdictions. The Fulbright Program was established with these trends in mind "to increase mutual understanding between the United States and partner countries, forge lasting connections, and help individuals and nations work together toward shared goals."⁴⁹ This program is successful due to the extended engagement with another culture, in both directions, that contributes to the understanding of governmental decision-making and societal dynamics, as well as the pleasures of culture, food, music, and more. Having supported 3,798 grantees (2,412 Romanian, and 1,386 American) from 1960 to 2024,⁵⁰ Fulbright Romania remains a critical part of the people-to-people exchanges between the countries that support the broader relationship with financial support from both the U.S. and Romanian governments since 1993.⁵¹

Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program. The FLEX program provides an even earlier opportunity for cross-cultural connection by offering competitive, funded scholarships to Romanian students for a high school study-abroad year in the United States, co-funded by the two countries.⁵² Coming up on its 10th year of operation in Romania, this program provides excellent opportunities to understand the American way of life and for program participants to forge enduring bonds.⁵³ FLEX, and programs like it, strengthen the foundations of U.S.-Romanian cooperation and should be widely marketed as opportunities for the next generation of Romanian leaders.

Romania-United States Exchange Program (MECEA Program) Finalized. MECEA, specifically Section 108A, established a process for cultural exchange programs wherein a foreign government can fund official trips by U.S. federal employees, such as congressional delegations and staff delegations, on a case-by-case basis.⁵⁴ Romania recently received approval from the U.S. Department of State which lays the basis for planning these exchanges to enhance American officials' understanding of the cooperation between the United States and Romania through visits to Romania.⁵⁵ While

no visit has yet been announced, Romania should prepare such a visit this fall to highlight its positive engagement in support of Black Sea security and development, and to reach out to congressional personnel about participating to capitalize on this new opportunity.

Security Cooperation

Since joining NATO in 2004, Romania has become one of the Alliance's most consistent contributors and now anchors the NATO presence both on the southeastern front and on the Black Sea. Connected to this enterprise, Romania has increased its defense expenditure to 2.43 percent in 2026 and has made major investments in basing infrastructure in Romania to support expanded rotational presence by the U.S. and other NATO members.⁵⁶

Strategic Challenge. As a non-Black Sea nation, the United States is constrained in its ability to maintain a consistent maritime presence. The 1936 Montreux Convention ensures Ankara's control of the Bosphorus Straits and limits the number, transit time, and tonnage of naval ships from non-Black Sea countries that may use the straits and operate in the Black Sea.⁵⁷ For this reason, it is in the interest of the United States that America's Black Sea NATO allies—Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—have sufficient naval power to deter Russian aggression and prevent the Black Sea from being dominated by Russia.⁵⁸

From Romania's expanding military facilities, Romanian, U.S., and other NATO allied forces can deter Russian aggression against the Alliance. NATO forces can complicate Russian planners' calculations by enabling NATO attacks against Russian assets across NATO's southeastern front should Russia conduct a military attack anywhere along its borders with NATO countries. In addition, Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base and Deveselu Military Base allow the United States to project power across the Black Sea region and defend European skies from a ballistic missile attack emanating from the Middle East.

Romania's 2025–2030 National Defense Strategy identifies the U.S.–Romania Strategic Partnership as “an irreplaceable pillar” of security and prosperity as the two countries address “instability throughout the Black Sea region” instigated by Russia's war against Ukraine.⁵⁹

NATO Security Engagement and U.S.–Romanian Bilateral Security Cooperation. Romania has made substantial investments in improving and expanding basing infrastructure to make Romania a major logistics hub for the Alliance.

Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base. Frequently shortened to “MK” in American military circles, Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base is a Romanian military facility located around 100 kilometers from the Romanian–Ukrainian border which serves as a key node in NATO’s eastern front deterrence operations. MK hosts U.S. and other NATO troops and equipment which has entailed past U.S. investments to upgrade joint facilities at the base since 2009.⁶⁰ The United States routinely rotates combat units through the air base as a deterrent signal to Russia, though American forces have increasingly concentrated further north, closer to the most acute NATO vulnerabilities, such as the Suwalki Gap.⁶¹

In 2024, the Romanian Ministry of Defense announced a 2.5-billion-euro modernization initiative to upgrade the base, including housing facilities to host 20,000 troops and with expanded runways to accommodate a wider range of military aircraft, including the F-35s which Romania signed up to purchase from the United States in 2024. Once the improvements are complete, MK will be among the largest air bases in NATO territory, one of the Alliance’s most important logistics and operational hubs, and a major staging ground for power projection.⁶²

Deveselu Military Base. Romania’s other crucial military facility is Deveselu Military Base which, among other things, hosts the U.S. Navy’s Aegis Ashore Missile Defense System. According to U.S. Army Major General Charles Miller, former Director of Strategy, Plans, and Policy for the Army Staff, “Aegis Ashore Romania is designed to protect European NATO Allies and U.S. deployed forces in the region against the growing threat posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles outside the Euro-Atlantic area.... This site provides a defensive capability to deter future conflicts and to defend against aggression should deterrence fail.”⁶³ This capability is housed within NATO’s broader and expanding ballistic missile defense mission, which depends on intercept assets such as Aegis Ashore.⁶⁴

NATO Multinational Force Structures. Romania, alongside allies, has moved toward a security-provider role within NATO’s greater Black Sea deterrence and security architecture through multiple substantial engagements and initiatives, including the Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group, the Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup and Headquarters, and a series of NATO exercises and other coordination efforts.

Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Black Sea Task Group (TG). Inaugurated in January 2024, the MCM Black Sea TG works “to ensure freedom of navigation in Black Sea waters through surveillance missions, actions to neutralize potential threats to maritime traffic, and related search and rescue operations at sea.”⁶⁵ The MCM Black Sea TG, led by Turkey, has

neutralized upwards of 150 naval mines with the mission expanding to include critical infrastructure protection during NATO's 2026 Ankara Summit.⁶⁶ Romania's role has grown from co-hosting the annual mine countermeasures exercise Poseidon⁶⁷ to greater direct minesweeper activity following the acquisition and transfer of two former Royal Navy minesweepers.⁶⁸ This increased capability and responsibility demonstrates Romania's positive trajectory toward a Black Sea security provider role within NATO.

Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) Battlegroup and Headquarters. Romania's location along NATO's eastern edge bordering Ukraine led to the establishment of a Forward Land Forces (FLF) battlegroup in Romania within NATO's EFP mission. France is the framework nation for Romania's FLF battlegroup,⁶⁹ with a minimum of 1,500 forward positioned troops in Romania and the planned capability to deploy up to 5,000 troops for joint exercises or active operations.⁷⁰ Further, both Romania and Bulgaria's FLF battlegroups fall under the command of NATO's Multinational Division Southeast Headquarters in Bucharest, commanded by Romanian Major General Cornel Tonea-Bălan.⁷¹

NATO Training and Coordination. Romania supports multiple NATO training and coordination activities, including Ukrainian pilot training, the Eastern Phoenix 26 and Sea Breeze Exercises, and NATO initiatives such as the Ammunition Center of Excellence and the Annual Hybrid Symposium.

Beyond previously mentioned elements, Romania has supported Ukraine by hosting Ukrainian pilots for F-16 training during the conflict, even expanding its fleet to support the training.⁷² Not only will the training of Ukrainian pilots improve their ability to contest Russian air superiority and defend Ukrainian sovereignty, but it will also begin transitioning Ukraine's air force away from Soviet systems that enforce dependence on Russian supply chains over the long term. As a result, Ukraine's defense partnership with the United States and the West will likely solidify over the long term.

Romania has hosted and participated in several NATO exercises in line with its burgeoning Black Sea security role. Eastern Phoenix 26 enabled multiple NATO militaries to test the integration of air defense systems against drone threats replicated by battle-tested Ukrainian soldiers, validating interoperability, capabilities, and tactical approaches.⁷³ Exercise Sea Breeze has occurred annually since 1997 and focuses on maritime capabilities (such as mine countermeasures and amphibious landings) which are valuable in the Black Sea region. Romania hosted part of Exercise Sea Breeze 2026 with participating forces from 17 nations operating at the Babadag Training Area and in the Danube Delta region.⁷⁴ These and similar exercises promote interoperability and warfighting readiness to maintain

NATO's deterrent strength, and Romania should continue to actively engage as a security provider and coordinator for Black Sea deterrence.

Romania has also enlarged its leadership contributions to NATO coordination by working to launch the NATO Ammunition Centre of Excellence and hosting NATO's Annual Hybrid Symposium in fall 2026. The NATO Ammunition Centre of Excellence, sited for Dragomiresti and backed by a loan from U.S. funds, will produce both 122 millimeter (mm) and 155 mm ammunition in Romania for NATO partners across Europe, helping to ensure supply-chain resilience and protect NATO standards.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Romania stepped up to host NATO's Annual Hybrid Symposium in Bucharest on October 15 and 16, 2026. The gathering will bring NATO officials and experts together to coordinate hybrid threat response strategies as Russia relies heavily on activity below the threshold of open conflict to test NATO countries.⁷⁶

Increased Defense Spending and Military Modernization. As of 2025, Romanian defense spending levels stood at 2.19 percent of GDP on core defense spending.⁷⁷ Romania's support to Ukraine, from ammunition⁷⁸ to a Patriot air defense system,⁷⁹ has also played a part in raising their defense spending as they helped Europe to take the lead in supporting Ukraine. Romania has signaled its intention to continue significant defense spending increases in the coming years and pledged to reach 3.5 percent core defense spending by 2035.⁸⁰

Black Sea Naval Capabilities. Romania's naval capabilities have lagged its other military branches in the past, but Bucharest has rightly moved to remedy this deficiency through warship and maritime protection battery acquisitions to upgrade their Black Sea capabilities. The centerpiece of Romanian naval modernization was the 2025 purchase of a Turkish-built *Hisar*-class Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV).⁸¹ The OPV acquisition and fitting with a Naval Strike Missile system will provide a full-service multi-role platform for Black Sea operations with pre-existing interoperability with the Turkish fleet in joint operations. The other major naval acquisition, previously mentioned, was the acquisition of two modernized former Royal Navy minehunters, which help to expand Romania's ability to ensure safe sea lanes amidst floating Russian mines drifting out of the Ukraine conflict zone in the Black Sea.

Alongside these warship acquisitions, Romania is also in the process of fielding Naval Strike Missile (NSM) Coastal Batteries. These NSM batteries will provide a maritime strike option with a range of more than 100 nautical miles along Romania's Black Sea coastline to interdict hostile vessels across size thresholds to establish coastal control.⁸²

Upgrading Airspace Control and Air Defense Assets. Building on the Aegis Ashore system at Deveselu, Romanian defense modernization has included expanding Romania's F-16 fleet, contracting for F-35s, replacing a donated Patriot battery, and procuring multiple counter unmanned aerial systems (cUAS) solutions.

Moving fully away from post-Soviet airframes, Romania has expanded its F-16 fleet to 49 aircraft, with the potential for further expansion. These F-16s will serve a bridging air defense role underpinning three fighter squadrons until the introduction of F-35s.⁸³ Demonstrating their readiness, in the summer of 2026, Romanian F-16s had to scramble and shoot down Russian *Shahed*-type drones over the Black Sea that were flying in NATO airspace.⁸⁴ Romania became the 20th member of the F-35 program in 2024 by signing a letter of offer and acceptance to procure 32 aircraft.⁸⁵ Delivery is expected to begin in 2030 with initial funding and approval for two squadrons' worth of fighters to ward off Russian advances by maintaining a cutting-edge fighter inventory.⁸⁶

In 2025, Romania purchased a replacement Patriot air defense unit to backfill the system it provided to Ukraine. This purchase will strengthen the integrated air defense of Romania, particularly with respect to ballistic missiles.⁸⁷

Romanian territory has been hit several times by errant drones used to target Ukraine,⁸⁸ and Romania is therefore prioritizing the procurement of air and missile defense capabilities. These include the 2026 integration of the U.S.-designed Merops cUAS system⁸⁹ and separate purchase of Israeli defense company Rafael's Spyder air defense system for \$2.3 billion.⁹⁰ Beyond specific purchases, Romania became the second American ally to enter the U.S. counter-drone marketplace, thereby signaling its intention to acquire and maintain capabilities at the technological forefront.⁹¹

Growing Army Capabilities. Despite a well-founded concentration on Black Sea security and aerial defense, Romania is also modernizing its land-based capabilities from long-range fires and artillery to armored vehicles and drones.

Recognizing long-range fires' deterrent value stemming from their ability to disrupt supply lines and hit targets in the rear during ground operations, Romania has purchased three High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) from the United States and established the first European HIMARS maintenance center.⁹² This will have the dual effect of strengthening Romania's army while augmenting resilience for a key ground combat capability. Romania has paired this capability with a purchase of 54 K9 self-propelled howitzers to provide artillery support to Romanian ground units out to 40 kilometers.⁹³

Finally, Romanian land forces have fielded several Bayraktar TB2 drones to provide integrated surveillance and strike capabilities to augment ground operations with deliveries concluding in 2025.⁹⁴

On the heavy-armor front, Romania purchased a battalion's worth of M1A2 Abrams tanks from the United States in 2023, and a request to expand that program and purchase 216 additional Abrams tanks remains before the U.S. government for consideration.⁹⁵ Abrams tanks strengthen the Romanian military's ability to assault and fortify positions in the event of conflict thereby contributing to NATO deterrence. In 2026, Romania moved ahead with armored personnel carrier (APC) modernization with a purchase of 298 Lynx APCs from Germany's Rheinmetall with first deliveries arriving in 2028.⁹⁶ This followed on the heels of an expansion of Romania's Piranha 5 armored vehicle fleet in 2025 with the addition of 150 more vehicles.⁹⁷ Taken together, these armored vehicle procurements demonstrate Romania's seriousness both about modern ground combat and partnership with NATO allies.

Hardening Cyber Defenses. Romania has enhanced its cyber defenses in recent years to protect their networks, stitching together the combined combat power of its military assets across the land, air, and sea sectors. Primarily, this has meant training with American units to learn and incorporate best practices and then translating this experience into hosting NATO cyber defense exercises.

Bilateral cyber defense cooperation between the United States and Romania was advanced in 2025 through a joint cyber exercise followed by a bilateral engagement. During Saber Guardian 25, conducted in June 2025, Romanian Cyber Defense Command and the Maryland National Guard Cyber Forces worked together to protect a tactical operation by the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment practicing joint operations and preparing for operations within contested environments.⁹⁸ The relationship between U.S. and Romanian cyber forces was extended by a bilateral engagement consisting of a visit by the Romanian Cyber Command to U.S. Air Forces Cyber's headquarters for a joint strategy session to cement best practices from earlier collaboration and strengthen relationships between the forces to prevent and respond to adversary attacks.⁹⁹ Romanian forces then showcased their experience by hosting the Locked Shields 2026 exercise, which integrated multiple systems and participants from more than 40 countries in a simulated defense against large-scale cyber crises.¹⁰⁰ Romania's commitment to building and exercising cyber defense capabilities confirms the breadth of its military modernization, ensuring that joint operations will be enabled and safeguarded.

Policy Recommendations for Congress and the Trump Administration

To strengthen its bilateral relationship with Romania in pursuit of regional security and prosperity, Washington should:

Back Romania's Emergence as a Regional Energy Provider. The United States and Romania should continue to deepen their cooperation on energy issues. Practically, this includes exploring ways to integrate Romanian natural gas production into the United States's Vertical Corridor project to enhance European energy security and completing the approval process for the Carlyle Group's purchase of Lukoil's international energy assets to remove this lever for Russia.

Expand Romania's Regional Security Role. Romanian concentration on stepping up as a NATO security provider should be welcomed by Washington, which should encourage the Romanian Army to expand its EFP rotational forces in Poland to replace current British contributions, thereby freeing British troops for Baltic support. The United States can also provide continued exercise cooperation and support Romanian efforts to strengthen capabilities that have direct eastern front defense relevance and are in short supply.

Encourage Bucharest to Elevate Ongoing Pro-Market and Pro-Investment Reforms. Washington cannot supply the domestic political will required to transform the Romanian economy along greater free-market principles, but it can constructively shape the trajectory. Through direct, practical involvement in critical policy dialogues, Washington can forcefully articulate its case—especially now, as the strategic interplay among economic freedom, energy independence, and national security grows ever more critical. Furthermore, the United States should engage at the technical and operational levels to assist Romania in accelerating its economic development. Ultimately, America's economic relationship with Romania is most potent when driven by the private sector. Private enterprise remains the definitive catalyst for meaningful economic transformation, a reality well-documented by The Heritage Foundation's annual *Index of Economic Freedom*.

Strengthen Bilateral Legal and Diplomatic Cooperation. Romania has already shown exceptional willingness to cooperate across legal portfolios to combat crime, corruption, and illegal migration. Washington should continue engaging with these areas and explore broader cooperation with Romania on regional initiatives such as the Bucharest 9, the Three Seas Initiative, and preparation for an eventual Ukraine reconstruction effort.

The Way Forward

Romania is a serious American ally with strategic geography and a durable transatlantic orientation. While challenges exist on the level of governmental stability and security pressures, America's interests lie in supporting Romania's efforts to transform its existing advantages into durable hard power, energy resilience, and economic strength through redoubled cooperation.

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