

RUSSIAN MILITARY RESET IN THE HIGH NORTH AND THE BLACK SEA REGION: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

FLANKS FINAL REPORT

**Jakub M. GODZIMIRSKI
Ina HOLST PEDERSEN KVAM
Leonardo DINU
George SCUTARU**

The research is a result of the implementation of the bilateral initiative "Enhance knowledge of Russia's behaviour in the Kola Peninsula and the Arctic region, as well as the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea region – and to compare in terms of similarities and differences", financed under the Fund for bilateral relations 2014-2021.



Project implemented by



Authors:

Jakub M. GODZIMIRSKI

Ina HOLST PEDERSEN KVAM

Leonardo DINU

George SCUTARU

Research support:

Maria ION

Izel SELIM

Graphics coordinator:

Izel SELIM

© New Strategy Center, 2022

© Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2022

www.nupi.no

www.newstrategycenter.ro

Russian Military Reset in the High North and the Black Sea Region: Similarities and Differences

Introduction

The main aim of this report is to examine and compare the process of Russian militarization/military modernization taking place in two regions where Russia meets the institutionalised West – NATO and the EU. The first of these regions is the High North here defined as an area including the Barents Sea, the part of the Norwegian and White Seas bordering on the Barents Sea above the Arctic circle as well as land areas and islands stretching from Greenland and Iceland in the west to Novaya Zemlya in the east. Further South is the Black Sea region, including all countries bordering directly and indirectly (like Moldova) on this sea as well as adjacent areas and seas (the Azov Sea and Sea of Marmara with Bosphorus and Dardanelle) that have received more attention in the wake of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹

These two regions represent the two geographical extremities along the NATO Eastern flank where tensions between Russia and NATO have become more palpable after Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 and even more so after 2014 conflict in Ukraine in a situation when Russia is no longer defined by the Western security community as a potential strategic partner but rather as a source of strategic concern or even threat. Similar development has taken place in Russia that views increased NATO presence in its strategic neighborhood as a strategic challenge and potential source of 'threat' or 'danger' to the strategic interests of the country as defined by its current ruling elite.²

Both Russia and NATO have responded to this new situation by increasing their military attention to and presence in these two regions. This report will present the main developments in the two regions paying special attention to Russian approaches and to NATO's responses to Russian actions.

However, to address the problem of the increased Russian military presence and activity in these two regions in question and Western responses to these moves a broader background picture needs to be painted. This report is therefore divided into several sections. The first section presents shortly our understanding of Russia's strategic objectives in general as well as the instruments of national power Russia has at its

¹ For an interesting recent study on the security situation in these two regions see 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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1690634>.

² This perception was clearly demonstrated on 17 December 2021 when Russia published texts of agreements with the USA and NATO in which it demanded the alliance not only to stop its enlargement to the east, but also to return to the situation from 1997, the year when Russia-NATO Founding Act was signed.

disposal to pursue its strategic goals. In addition, we also shortly discuss how Russia tries to achieve these objectives by employing various means and instruments of power. The approach focusing on ends, means and ways is inspired by studies of national grand strategies examining how various states use various instruments of national power to achieve their objectives.³ In the second section this report narrows the analysis to an examination of what makes the two regions important from a Russian historical strategic perspective. In the third section this report narrows the scope of the examination event further and focuses on the military aspects of Russia's engagement in the two regions in question. The fourth section examines the Western responses to increased levels of Russian military presence and activity in the High North and the Black Sea. Finally, in the concluding section this report proposes some policy relevant measures to be implemented to improve the security situation in the regions and lower the risk of unintended conflict.

1. Russia's ends, means and ways

When examining Russia's deployment and application of military instruments in these two regions a comprehensive approach must be adopted. The issue of militarization at the regional level must be discussed in the broader context of the debate on the use by Russia of various instruments of power in its pursuit of strategic objectives. How Russia bundles various instruments of power today and what is the role assigned to military instruments in these two specific regional contexts depends on how the current regime defines the country's strategic objectives at the current stage of development of Russia's relations with the West and its institutions, including NATO that is in Russian official statements on security described as the main challenger and source of strategic threat. This report will therefore start with a brief mapping of Russian strategic objectives, followed by an examination of the role of various instruments of power in the pursuit of these objectives.

Russian strategic objectives

What are the objectives that Russian ruling elite seek to achieve in the current international situation and in the longer historical perspective? There is a whole body of literature examining the persistence of Russian objectives and how they are translated into mid-, short and long-term goals to be achieved by Russia at various stages of the country's development.⁴

³ For more on that see for instance Biddle, T. D. *Strategy and Grand Strategy: What Students and Practitioners Need to Know*. Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, The Strategic Studies Institute, 2015, Balzacq, T., Dombrowski, P., & Reich, S. (Eds.). *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, Balzacq, T., & Krebs, R. R. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

⁴ Black, C. C. "The Pattern of Russian Objectives." In *Russian Foreign Policy. Essays in Historical Perspective*, edited by I. Lederer, 3–38. London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962, Luttwak, E. N. *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983, Rieber, A. J. "Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy." In *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, edited by H. Ragsdale, 315–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Rieber, A. J. "How Persistent Are Persistent Factors?". In *Russian Foreign Policy in 21st*

For instance, in his examination of the pattern of Russian long-term objectives Cyril Black⁵ listed stabilization of frontiers, assurance of favorable conditions for economic growth, unification of Russian territories and participation in alliance systems and international institutions as the main leitmotifs in Russian foreign and security policy. At least some of these motives are still very much discernible in the actions of the current Russian regime, with annexation of Crimea as the best recent example of the policy of unification of Russian territories and militarization of strategically important regions as a measure serving the purpose of stabilization of borders. Also other recent Russian actions can be easily read within this historical framework.

Other recurring motivations were identified by Margot Light⁶ in her study on Russian foreign and security policy in the post-Soviet period. She argued that at that stage of development Russian official policy was driven by the interest in establishing the CIS as a buffer zone as a way of countering the negative effects of NATO's eastward expansion that Russia strongly opposed. Russian decisionmakers were also interested in defense of Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, in countering Western plans to deploy a ballistic missile defense system as well as in creation of a multipolar international system and in recognition of Russia as a great power.

A RAND study published in 2017⁷ examined how the situation changed after the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and concluded that Putin's regime was at that moment most interested in defense of the nation and the regime, in increasing the level of influence in the near abroad, in creating conditions that would limit the other states' ability to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs, in strengthening the perception of Russia as a great power and finally in political and economic cooperation as a partner equal to other great powers.

The US recent reading of Russian strategic intentions based on an in-depth examination of Russian policy provided by a group of leading experts on various aspects and directions of Russian policy⁸ concluded in turn that Russia's core objectives are to reclaim and secure Russia's influence over former Soviet nations, to regain worldwide recognition as a "great power" and to portray Russia as a reliable actor, a key regional powerbroker, and a successful mediator in order to gain economic, military, and political influence over nations worldwide and to refine the liberalist rules and norms that currently govern the world order.

Century. The Shadow of the Past, edited by R. Legvold, 205–71. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, Light, M. "Russian Foreign Policy Themes in Official Documents and Speeches: Tracing Continuity and Change." In *Russia's Foreign Policy Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, edited by D. Cadier and M. Light, 13–29. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, Radin, A. & Reach, C.B., Russian Views of the International Order Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017.

⁵ Black 1962.

⁶ Light 2015.

⁷ Radin and Reach 2017

⁸ NSI, Arquilla, J., A. Borshchevskaya, B. Bragg, P. Devyatkin, A. Dyet, R.E. Ellis, *et al.* "Russian Strategic Intentions." In *Strategic multilayer assessment (SMA) white paper*. Boston: NSI, 2019.

In a recent paper, Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky highlight the importance of understanding Russian thinking and strategy, and also underline the challenges and limitations that Russia faces. As the paper states, by misrepresenting its intentions and inflating Russia's military capabilities, we run into the risk "of dangerous escalation and wasted resources". But as Russia's actions over the past few years suggest, Russia's power is limited, as its global ambitions have benefited from multiple opportunities, and not so much from a well-resourced strategy. Furthermore, Russia lacks real allies, and only benefits from weak "client states", with little power and influence. Even Russia's attempts to expand its influence and its geopolitical ambitions can be limiting, as it lacks many of the tools that could sway others to cooperate. Its often-transactional international cooperation is also not regarded well globally.⁹

The RAND study on Russian Grand Strategy of 2021 highlights some important aspects and challenges faced by Russia. More importantly, based on the findings, several considerations need to be taken into account. Russia will continue to use coercion in the region in order to prevent neighboring states from integrating into Western economic and security bloc. Furthermore, Kremlin will continue to shift away from the West and continue its political economic and military cooperation with countries it considers to be rising powers (China, India and other regional leaders in the Middle East, South America, Africa, and Asia-Pacific). Given possible defense spending stagnation, it is unlikely that Russia will manage to excel at all the priorities it pursues simultaneously, in different points on the map.¹⁰

Naturally enough, also leading Russian experts have presented their opinions on what drives Russian foreign and security policy. For instance, Alexander Gabuev in his recent interview with Sergei Guriev¹¹ argued that current Russian foreign and security policy is shaped by people from intelligence and counter-intelligence services and driven therefore by search for broadly understood but unachievable absolute security, with focus on military security and by search for being recognized as a great power. The search for great power status is in his opinion explained by trauma caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union that was the most painful experience shared by current policymakers and society in general. In another interview conducted by Guriev he asked another of his guests – the leading Russian expert in the field of international relations, Fyodor Lukyanov – about his opinion on what drives Russian foreign and security policy. Like Gabuev, Lukyanov argued that search for security, especially traditional military security

⁹ Rumer, E. and Sokolsky, R. "Grand Illusions: The Impact of Misperceptions About Russia on U.S. Policy", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 30, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/30/grand-illusions-impact-of-misperceptions-about-russia-on-u.s.-policy-pub-84845>

¹⁰ Charap, S., D. Massicot, M. Priebe, A. Demus, C. Reach, M. Stalczyński, E. Han, L. E. Davis, "Russian Grand Strategy. Rhetoric and Reality.", Santa Monica, RAND, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4238.html

¹¹ Guriev, S. Chto (zhe) delat' s vneshney politikoy? Aleksander Gabuev at <https://www.vtimes.io/2020/11/11/aleksandr-gabuev-vse-pomenyalos-bi-esli-bi-bili-lyudi-mislyaschie-ne-kak-kontrazvedchiki-a1389>

is the main driver of Russian policy. He also shared to a certain extent Gabuev's opinion that the current elite pays too much attention – using even term 'paranoiac' – to recent historical traumas instead of looking for new emerging opportunities and blamed Russian political culture shaped by history for this negative development.¹²

Strategic toolbox and full-spectrum approach to conflict

What does Russia do to achieve these strategic objectives? Russia, like other countries, has at its disposal a whole range of instruments of power which can be deployed in the country's pursuit of its strategic objectives. In the ongoing international debate on what instruments of power various states have at their disposal the focus has recently shifted from DIME to MIDFIELD and MIDLIFE. The first acronym is used to describe Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic instruments of power (hence DIME) that states can use to promote, protect or defend their interests. In the second acronym M refers to military, I to informational, D to diplomatic, F to financial, I to intelligence E to economic L to law/legal and D to development related instruments of power. MIDLIFE lists military, informational diplomatic, legal, financial and economic instruments of power, omitting those concerning development.¹³

Diplomatic instruments are used when the state engages and interacts with other states and non-state actors to secure agreements that allow the conflicting parties to coexist peacefully and address issues that negotiating parties perceive as shared concerns.

Informational/communicative instruments are about creating, exploiting, and disrupting knowledge, but they are also employed to shape and influence public opinion and policy actions of other actors.

Intelligence instruments can serve similar purpose of information gathering and processing, but they can also be employed in a more active manner through various covert intelligence operations that aim to influence opinion through various agents of influence or behaviour of other actors by employing elements of available policy repertoire.

Economic instruments are deployed to influence positively or negatively other actors' prosperity and economy, and indirectly the economic situation of their societies, but also to provide some economic incentives for other actors to adopt a course of action that will be perceived as serving the interest of these actors who employ these economic instruments. The same effects can be achieved by employing financial instruments that are often viewed as one of the weapons from the economic arsenal.

¹² Guriev, S. Chto (zhe) delat' s vneshney politikoy? Fedor Luk'yanov videa available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4rftRrAZHc>

¹³ For an interesting operational definition of key instruments of national power see Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Doctrine Note 1-18. Strategy," 2018 available at https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jdn1_18.pdf.

Finally, military instruments can be used by states to impose their will on other actors when other instruments do not bring the wished results. This can entail applying force, threatening the application of force, or enabling other parties to apply force in pursuit of strategic objectives. Military build-up and modernization that have taken place in Russia after the war in Georgia in 2008 when Serdyukov reforms supported by Putin were introduced and facilitated by huge revenues generated by massive sale of oil and gas at high market prices have made the Russian military instrument more versatile and have provided Russian policymakers with more options. Although Russia is sometimes portrayed as a one-dimensional military power, this military dimension needs to be taken into strategic accounts of other actors operating in the international arena as Russia's military might and possession of a highly destructive nuclear potential provides Russia with important strategic leverages.

Having such a variety of instruments of power at its disposal Russia – and other actors – may use each of them in a flexible manner or combine several of them to achieve even greater impacts. Because this strategic toolbox includes not only military instruments and the challenges to be dealt with are not only of purely military character actors can pursue their strategic objectives by deploying various types of instruments depending on what goals are sought to be achieved.

Also Russia faces various types of security challenges in its relations with other countries and this broad approach to security should be taken into consideration when examining Russian policies in the two respective regions. This broad Russian approach to security is clearly visible at the website of the country's main body dealing with security – the Security Council of the Russian Federation where key Russian security documents are listed.¹⁴ The SCRF website presents key texts on national security and strategy divided into seven categories: 1) founding documents, 2) international security, 3) military and military defense-industry security, 4) economic security, 5) state and public security, 6) anti-terrorism activities and 7) information security.

The last addition to this collection is the country's National Security Strategy¹⁵ published in July 2021 that lists also the main security challenges Russia must deal with. As one of the leading Western observers of Russia put in his immediate comments to the document 'What is striking is that the new Strategy paints a more alarming picture about the threats Russia faces from the West and also conceptualizes those threats in wider terms.'¹⁶ According to the document the main threats are 'the desire of Western countries to preserve their hegemony' and the use by those countries of various non-

¹⁴ <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/>

¹⁵ President of the Russian Federation. *Strategiya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation) Moscow: President of the Russian Federation, 2021.

¹⁶ Galeotti, M. New National Security Strategy Is a Paranoid's Charter. Russia's new National Strategy regards not just foreign countries as a threat, but the very processes reshaping the modern world, *The Moscow Times* 2021 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/05/new-national-security-strategy-is-a-paranoids-charter-a74424>.

military instruments, such as a ‘desire to isolate the Russian Federation and the use of double standards in international politics’ or attempts at using socio-economic problems in Russia to undermine its internal unity, instigate and radicalize a protest movement, support marginal groups and divide Russian society.

By making references not only to traditional military threats the document adopts a broad approach to security identifying not only cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns as posing a threat to Russia but also actions aimed at traditional values, distortion of global history, revisionist interpretations of Russia’s global role as well as rehabilitation of fascism and incitement of interethnic and inter-confessional conflicts. The document mentions also that even the position of the Russian language can be threatened by these actions.

The West in general and NATO and the USA more specifically are identified as the main source of military threat to Russia not only in the last security doctrine but also in other documents of doctrinal character.¹⁷ It should therefore be expected that when dealing with this security challenge Russia would adopt a full-spectrum approach to conflict where non-violent and non-kinetic instruments can be used in the pre-conflict phase and can be supplemented by the use of more violent and kinetic instruments when needed.¹⁸ Having in mind that Russia views the military might represented by NATO and the USA as the main challenge to its security interests and the relative economic weakness of Russia vis a vis the West it is understandable that Russia pays special attention to development and modernization of its military instruments of power as the best way of deterring its potential enemies from taking any malign actions against it. This could be the case especially in the areas where Russia meets its possible Western adversaries, like in the High North or in the Black Sea region.

In the post-Soviet period Russia has employed military instruments more or less effectively on several occasions, both within its borders – like in the case of the two Chechen wars fought in the North Caucasus; and beyond its borders, when military instruments were used directly and indirectly in conflicts in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. Russian military instruments are used not only for purely military purposes, but also to signal Russia’s symbolic return as a great power and raise Russia’s international status in global hierarchy of powers by demonstrating Russian improved military capabilities.

In this study we narrow the geographical scope of examination to Russian power practices in the High North and in the Black Sea Region in the period after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine that has had huge consequences for Russia’s relations with the West and has

¹⁷ For more on that see Godzimirski J.M. Explaining Russian reactions to increased NATO military presence, *NUPI Policy Brief* 16, 2019 at https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25738?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹⁸ For more see Jonsson, O., & Seely, R. “Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine”. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 28(1), 1–22, 2015 doi:10.1080/13518046.2015.998118 and Jonsson, O. *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019.

therefore influenced Russia's strategic posture in the two regions where Russia and the West must interact for purely geographical but also for important strategic reasons.

2. Why to focus on the High North and the Black Sea?

Although this report focuses on the recent post-2014 developments it is also important to understand the broader strategic historical context. In this part we will therefore present briefly historical factors that have made Russia express strategic interest in these two regions that are currently, albeit for various reasons, relatively high on the Russian strategic agenda.

Russia's strategic drive towards and interests in the High North/the Arctic

Russia's interest in what is today referred to as the High North has deep historical roots. Russia has since its very beginning had strong connection to its northern neighborhood. The Russian state in its modern form was established by the legendary Varangian/Viking chieftain Rurik and was ruled by the Rurik dynasty until 1610 when the last tsar from this dynasty Vasili IV was forced to leave the throne. The territorial expansion has given Russia a complete control over its northern coastline turning it into the most important Arctic power.

Russia's status as a great European power was forged through a series of conflicts with its main northern regional rival Sweden that was defeated in the Great Northern War in 1721.¹⁹ The decision to move the capital of the new Russian empire further north to Sankt Petersburg and the transfer of Finland from Sweden to Russia in 1809 after Sweden's another defeat in the Finnish war made the northern dimension even more prominent in Russian strategic designs.

Over the past 300 years Russia's North has played an important part in Russia's relations with the outside world. It was an area where Russia embarked on mutually beneficial cooperation with other powers both economically and militarily, like during the WWII when Western convoys with military supplies reached Russia through Murmansk. But there were also instances, like during the Western intervention against the Bolshevik regime in the aftermath of the WWI²⁰, or during the WWII, when Russia had to confront other powers in the North.

The confrontation with the West during the Cold War, combined with some structural geographical factors and technological developments, have turned Russia's part of the High North into an important strategic asset.²¹ At the height of the Cold War nearly 60 percent of Russia's second retaliatory nuclear strike capability was for strategic and geographical reasons located in the area known in the strategic parlance as the Northern

¹⁹ LeDonne, J. P. *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003..

²⁰ Long, J. W. "American Intervention in Russia: The North Russian Expedition, 1918-19." *Diplomatic History*, 6(4), 45-86, 1982..

²¹ Archer, C. (ed.) *The Soviet Union and northern waters*. London: Routledge, 1988. See also

Bastion.²² This area had to be defended to protect the strategic assets located there but was also treated as a launching pad for Soviet offensive naval operations in the Northern Atlantic where the main confrontation with the West was to take place with the Soviet forces trying to cut communication lines between the USA and its European allies.²³

The end of the Cold war and the collapse of the Soviet state project seemed to have opened a new chapter in Russia's relations with the West, including with its northern neighbors in the High North where Russia bordered on a founding NATO member Norway and on Sweden and Finland that joined the EU in 1995. The deep economic, political and social crisis forced the Russian political class to focus on domestic challenges.²⁴ There was also an expressed hope that the new Russia would rebuild its economy and embark on deep democratic and market reforms turning Russia into a full-fledged member of the democratic community. To facilitate this deep transition a number of regional initiatives were taken, including the creation in 1993 of a regional platform for cooperation on regional questions, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) followed by creation of the Arctic Council in 1996 where 8 countries with direct interests in the Arctic were expected to work together on addressing common Arctic challenges.²⁵

However, 1996 signalled also an important shift in Russian policy – the period of what was labelled later as romantic Atlanticism came to an end and was replaced with the period of Russia's hectic search for multipolarity.²⁶ The main purpose of this policy shift towards multipolarity was to build a new international power constellation to contain the Western influence and restrain what was presented in the Russian official debate as the US hegemony. Although the West was still defined as an important partner, its influence had to be contained and Russia was to focus on its own narrowly defined interests that were to be pursued through cooperation with other non-Western powers, first and foremost China and India. The cooperation with the West was no longer viewed as the best way of dealing with Russia's grave problems and addressing common transnational challenges, but rather as an instrument in rebuilding Russia's status as a great power and important element of the multipolar world system. Especially Russia's trade in energy resources with the West was to play an important part in these strategic designs as it turned Russia into an indispensable energy power and at the same time generated huge state revenues that helped modernise Russian armed forces and secure

²² Atland, K. "The Introduction, Adoption and Implementation of Russia's "Northern Strategic Bastion" Concept, 1992–1999". *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 20(4), 499–528, 2007.

²³ McGwire, M. (1988). Naval Power and Soviet Global Strategy. In S. E. Miller, & S. Van Evera (Eds.), *Naval Strategy and National Security* pp. 115-170, An "International Security" Reader: Princeton University Press, 1988. and Ranft, B., & Till, G. *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1983.

²⁴ Putin, V. *Rossiia na rubezhe tysachletiya* (Russia at the turn of the millennium). Moscow: *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 1999.

²⁵ Cottey, A., & EastWest, I. *Subregional cooperation in the new Europe : building security, prosperity, and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

²⁶ Rahr, A., & Krause, J. Russia's New Foreign Policy. *Arbeitspapiere zur Internationale Politik*(91), 1995, Pushkov, A. The Primakov Doctrine" and a New European Order. *International Affairs*, 44(2), 1–13, 1998. Chebankova, E. Russia's idea of the multipolar world order: origins and main dimensions. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33(3), 217–234, 2017.

survival of the regime and a relative stability in the country. These three strategic objectives were achieved, helped by high oil prices, during the first two periods of Vladimir Putin's presidency. Putin was therefore able to signal opening of a new more confrontational era in Russia's relations with the West in his famous February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference where he warned the West that Russia had returned as a great power to be reckoned with.

In a situation when the West was again defined as a strategic rival and potential source of strategic threat to Russia, the need to secure the country's strategic assets in the High North built during the previous period of strategic confrontation with the West became even more obvious. Also the fact that Putin was confronted with problems related to the situation in the Northern Fleet early in his presidency when he had to deal with the *Kursk* accident in August 2000 could have played a role in him paying a special attention to development of these strategic assets in the High North. This may also explain why many of the superweapons announced in his March 2018 speech are developed, deployed in and are to be launched from the Russian part of the High North.

The historical pattern of cooperation and confrontation in the High North seems to have shaped Russian official thinking about the High North. The area is viewed as an area where Russia on the one hand wants to continue mutually beneficial cooperation with other actors, for instance by opening access to the Northern Sea Route. At the same time Russia signals strong interest in retaining sovereign control in the area and tries to hedge against harmful Western influence in the region and in more general terms by introducing measures to limit cooperation between Russia and the West.²⁷

Russia's main strategic assets that can, according to the official Russian stance, play a crucial part in a possible confrontation with the West are still located in the area of responsibility of the Northern Fleet that was recently turned into the fifth Russian military district. One could therefore expect that hard security concerns will in the coming years prevail in Russian thinking about the future of the High North. What makes the Russian part of the High North even more important in this period of conformation with the West in the aftermath of the 2014 crisis is the fact that the region is one of the three geographical regions in Europe where Russia meets NATO, the other ones being the Baltic Sea Region that is not discussed in detail in this report, and the Black Sea Region that is one of the two regions this report pays special attention to. By the end of 2020 the situation in the High North can be therefore summed up as a return to a sort of Cold war-like square one – Russia again views the West as a source of strategic threat and takes measures in the region that make the West worry about Russia's strategic intentions. A spiral of distrust in Russia's relations with the West is therefore

²⁷ On this duality in Russian approach to the Arctic/High North see Godzimirski, J.M and A. Sergunin, "Russian Formal and Practical Geopolitics in the Arctic: Change and Continuity." *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 11, no. 0 2020 at <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/1350>.

released and Russia's strategic assets in the High North are again viewed as an important strategic 'life insurance'.²⁸

The 197 km long border between Russia and Norway located only 100 km from the main Russian strategic naval base in the region has therefore again turned into a possible frontline in a potential conflict between Russia and NATO. In addition, in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine other Russia's neighbors in the High North have sought closer cooperation with NATO and even the question of their membership in the alliance was put on the national agenda. The change in the strategic orientation was most visible in the case of Finland with which Russia has a 1300 km long land border and a long history of relations based on the idea of Finland accommodating interests of its great power neighbor. But also Sweden, the historical rival with which Russia fought several wars that ended with Russia establishing itself as an important power in Northern Europe, has changed its strategic direction – from one of the champions of armed neutrality during the Cold war, Sweden has turned into one of the closest strategic partners of NATO.

Russia's strategic drive towards and interests in the Black Sea Region

While the current strategic situation in the High North reminds to a certain extent situation from the last days of the Cold war, the setting in the Black Sea Region has changed almost completely. In the last days of the Cold war most of the coastline in the region (73 percent) was controlled by the Soviet Union (310 km – Georgian SSR, 2782 km – Ukrainian SSR, 800 km – Russian FSR) and the Warsaw Pact allies Romania (225 km) and Bulgaria (354 km) and only the southern perimeter of the Black Sea was controlled by NATO member Turkey (1329 km). By 2020 NATO has expanded in the region when Bulgaria and Romania joined the alliance in 2004. In addition, two of the former Soviet republics – Georgia and Ukraine – have expressed interest in joining NATO and have established a close strategic cooperation with the alliance. Russia's actions in the region – the 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 intervention in Ukraine and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula – have turned the whole region into a hot spot and have damaged not only Russia's relations with Georgia and Ukraine but also raised tensions in relations between Russia and the West.

The recent developments in the region are but a new chapter in the long history of Russian presence in the Black Sea region. While in the North Russia's main historical competitors were Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – both defeated by Russia in 18th century – in the Black Sea region Russia had to confront the Turkish empire to get access to the shores of the Black Sea. The Russian drive towards the Black Sea was an important element in the process of building of the Russian empire and had also an ideological motivation. From the early years of the 16th century the idea of Russia as the

²⁸ Wilhelmsen, J., & Godzimirski, J.M. NATO and Russia : spiral of distrust. In K. Friis (Ed.), *NATO and collective defence in the 21st century : an assessment of the Warsaw Summit* (pp. 63–76). London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Third Rome gained ground in the Russian policymaking circles and was used to justify Russia's policies in the region, including towards the Black Sea region where Russia competed with Turkey. Russia defined itself as an orthodox power and protection of orthodox communities in the region, also those living under the Turkish 'yoke' was part of the official Russian policy. Also various strands of Slavophile and Pan-Slavic ideology²⁹ giving Russia the role of 'liberator' of the oppressed Slavic communities and presenting it as a leader of the Slavic world were an important ideological driver in Russian policy towards the Black Sea region. The situation of the Orthodox/Slavic communities in the Ottoman Empire provided Russia with a convenient excuse to launch various anti-Ottoman projects. One of these projects was the Greek Project – "a plot to extend Russian control around the Black Sea by dismantling the Ottoman Empire and supplanting it by restoring what was once known as Byzantium in its place as a Russian puppet state"³⁰. The project was launched by Catherine the Great in the early 1780s and its aim was the partition of the Turkish empire and reestablishment of the Eastern Roman Empire with capital in Constantinople.³¹

To achieve these ambitious objectives Russia had to steer a course for a strategic confrontation with Turkey that had established itself as an important actor in the region controlling most of the coastline of the Black Sea. Russia managed to get control over a small part of the Azov Sea shore in 1696 when after several campaigns against the Crimean Tatars the country got control over the Azov fortress. An agreement with Turkey in 1700 confirmed those gains allowing establishment of the Russian fortress in the area. However, already in 1711 Russia had to give up its Azov possessions to prevent a complete defeat of the Russian army during the Prut River campaign. It was first when the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji that ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–74 and gave Russia permanent control over parts of the Black Sea shore that Azov and other important areas in the region, including the Crimean Khanate, came under Russian control. These Ottoman concessions and acceptance of the right for Russian-flagged merchant ships to sail without impediment in the Black Sea³² „marked the beginning of Russia's maritime presence in the sea for the next century, with limitations in some places, or with almost complete domination of the Black Sea's maritime waters, in others"³³.

When the empress Catherine the Great decided to incorporate the Crimean Khanate into Russia in 1783 the country got a strong foothold in the region and became an

²⁹ Walicki, A. *The Slavophile controversy : a history of conservative utopia in nineteenth-century Russian thought*. Notre Dame, Ind.; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989 and Tuminez, A. S. *Russian nationalism since 1856 : ideology and the making of foreign policy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

³⁰ Gvosdev, N. "Russia's strategy in the Black Sea Basin", *War on the Rocks*, 2018 at <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/russias-strategy-in-the-black-sea-basin/>, accessed at 1.06.2020.

³¹ For more on that see Ragsdale, H. "Evaluating the Traditions of Russian Aggression: Catherine II and the Greek Project", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 91-117, 1988.

³² King, C. *The Black Sea: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.2005, here 140-141.

³³ Cojocari, T. "Russian Federation", in Dungaciu, D. *The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing,. pp. 228-233, 2020.

important regional power factor and actor. Russia's gains in the region were consolidated through various treaties – the Treaty of Jassy (1791) pushed Russia's borders in the region further to the West, to Dniestr river, and further to the South in the Kuban region; the Treaty of Bucharest 1812 gave Russia control over Bessarabia, while Treaty of Adrianopol (1829) moved Russia's border further South, giving Russia control over the huge portion of Black Sea coastline from Anapa to Poti in today's Georgia. In 1711 Russia was forced to leave Azov, the only place where it bordered on the Azov Sea; by 1829 the Russian empire controlled huge portion of the coastline in the region, stretching from the delta of Danube to Poti in today's Georgia. In addition, Russia obtained the right of unhindered passage of the unarmed ships through Dardanelles and Bosphorus.

Taking advantage of the weakening Turkish Empire, during the reigns of Peter I and then Catherine the Great, Tsarist Russia transformed its foreign policy in the region from a defensive one, starting from the need to secure its borders against possible Turkish or foreign attacks by controlling the maritime domain of the Black Sea, into an ideology of expansion. As C. King observed³⁴, Russian action was driven by the idea that only those who controlled the sea could be perceived as powerful states.

The acquisition of Crimea and "New Russia" (*Novorossia*) was followed by strenuous efforts to develop Russia's Black Sea seaports and naval forces according to the best standards of the time. The gains achieved in the 17th and 18th centuries solidified Russia's thirst for conquest with an aim to take control of the Black Sea Straits and to establish its rule over the former possessions of Byzantium as the champion of Eastern Christianity in the shape of a "Third Rome". This obsessive grand design would dominate Russia's strategy in the region for the next two centuries.³⁵ However, by mid-19th century, Russia's expansion and strengthened military presence in the Black Sea basin became a matter of serious concern for the leading naval powers of that time that sometimes joined forces to contain Russia.³⁶

In the following decades Russia experienced therefore both ups and downs in the region. First, the Russian forces led by the young Tsar Alexander II suffered a crushing defeat and had to accept the humiliating conditions of the 1856 Treaty of Paris. Russia had to dismantle some of its military installations and was prohibited to have a naval force in the Black Sea. It also had to abandon the recently acquired province of Southern Bessarabia, which had briefly ensured Russian access to the mouth of the Danube, until then under the formal control of the Ottoman Empire. For a short period of time the Black Sea was demilitarized and an International Commission ensured freedom of navigation for all international shipping. The results of the Crimean War also deepened the decline of the Ottoman Empire and weakened its grip on the western littoral of the

³⁴ King 2005

³⁵ Cojocari 2020

³⁶ Mungo, M. "Revolution on the Black Sea". In *History Today*, 11 May 2017 online edition, <http://www.historytoday.com/mungo-melvin/revolution-black-sea>, accessed 09.11.2017.

Black Sea, opening the way to the national awakening of the peoples in that area and their aspirations for independent statehood.

During the following decades Tsarist Russia, thanks mainly to the diplomatic skills of its foreign minister A. Gorchakov³⁷, repeatedly attempted to repudiate the restrictive provisions of the Treaty of Paris. It was only in 1871, taking advantage of a more favorable international context, that it managed to obtain, under the London Convention, the right to have its own Black Sea fleet and to build naval bases. The success of Russian diplomacy was due in large measure to the support of France, which enabled Gorchakov to issue a note specifying Russia's decision to withdraw unilaterally from observing military neutrality in the Black Sea by invoking the rights and security interests of the Russian Empire.³⁸ The international status of the Black Sea remained basically unchanged for the next few decades, even after the victorious Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 when Russia secured some gains in the Treaty of San Stefano (1878) but was also forced to accept partly humiliating decisions of the Congress of Berlin (1878) and give up some of its recent territorial acquisitions.³⁹ The tsarist policy on the Black Sea remained the same until the First World War.

The Black Sea space was also one of the important theatres of World War I. The agreement concluded in March 1915 between Great Britain, France and Russia recognised Russia's right to occupy, at the end of the war, the Straits, Constantinople and Tenedos and Imbros Islands. However, the evolution of the conflict and the events in Russia made the agreement impossible to implement.⁴⁰

One of the results of World War I was the dissolution of the Russian and Ottoman empires that, brought about the emergence of a number of independent state-actors and once again re-arranged the disposition of regional forces as enshrined in the post-war Peace Treaties. For several decades thereafter, regional political developments were shaped by the diverging interests of the supporters and opponents of the newly established territorial *status quo*.⁴¹

In the interwar period, two conventions were signed attempting to regulate international relations in the Black Sea basin and the Straits. The Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923, seeking to reflect the real balance of forces in light of the conclusions of World War I, considering also the fact that, by that time, a large part of the Turkish coast was under the control of the Allied powers and Turkey was deprived of the right

³⁷ For more on Gorchakov's role and achievements see Splidsboel Hansen, F.. Past and Future Meet: Aleksandr Gorchakov and Russian Foreign Policy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54(3), 377–396, 2002.

³⁸ Cojocari 2020; Dungaciu, D. *The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

³⁹ Flanagan, J. S. & Chindea, A. I. *Russia, NATO and Black Sea Security Strategy. Regional perspectives from 2019 Workshop*, The RAND Corporation, 2019 at www.rand.org/t/CF405.

⁴⁰ Celac, S., A. Giada Dibenedetto, A. Purcăruș. *Militarization of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres. A new challenge to NATO*, New Strategy Center & Centro Studi Internazionali, 2019 p.7.

⁴¹ Celac, S., Dibenedetto, A. G. & Purcăruș, A. *Militarization of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres: A new challenge to NATO*

to govern the Straits. According to the 1923 Treaty, the Black Sea continued to be open to the world, with full freedom of navigation through the Straits for merchant and military ships, but their presence in the sea could not exceed the maximum naval capacity of any one of the riparian states (Bulgaria, Romania, Soviet Union, and Turkey). The Treaty also provided for the demilitarization of the Straits, while Turkey lost its right to station troops within a 15-kilometer radius from the maritime coast.⁴² The Soviet delegation had requested that military vessels should not be allowed to cross the Straits, but eventually it had to sign the text as agreed by the parties. However, it did not ratify the Treaty, stating that some provisions threatened the security and vital interests of the Soviet Russia in the Black Sea and forced it to supplement its naval armament.⁴³ A decade later, when Turkey called for a revision of the Convention Soviet Russia offered its support and insisted that the Straits had to be fully under the control of Turkey and the riparian states, while the Black Sea itself must be controlled by the littoral states.

Following strenuous negotiations, the Montreaux Convention of 1936 on the status of the Straits restored Turkey's control over Bosphorus and Dardanelles. The Montreaux Convention gave Turkey the right to militarize the area of the Straits in the event of an armed conflict, "virtually controlling access to the Black Sea and gaining at the same time control over the International Commission of the Straits"⁴⁴. The Convention was signed by Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, the USSR, France, Great Britain, Greece, Japan, Yugoslavia, Japan and Italy (in 1938). The text of the Montreaux Convention is structured in two main dimensions, establishing a regime of strictly determined liberties depending on the types of ships and specific situations to which reference is made. Thus, it regulates two categories of ships – warships and merchant ships – and four types of situations: periods of peace, periods of war in which Turkey is not a belligerent state, periods of war with Turkey as a belligerent state, periods in which Turkey considers that it is threatened by imminent war.⁴⁵

The Convention was seen at the time as a diplomatic victory for Turkey, which thus re-established its strategically important position as guardian of the Straits, and partially also for Soviet Russia, which obtained only limited access of non-riparian warships to the Black Sea even though it had been long seeking to deny it altogether. In the course of time, there have been several, mostly half-hearted, attempts to initiate a revision or at least an updating of the Montreaux Convention to bring it in line with geopolitical realities and new technological developments, but any suggestion to that effect encountered fierce opposition from Turkey with support from the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation. Consequently, the Convention remains in force to this day as the only valid international legal instrument regulating the status and operational

⁴² King 2005, p.216.

⁴³ Cojocari 2020.

⁴⁴ Dungaciu, D., „The Montreaux Convention”, in Dungaciu 2020, pp. 279-281.

⁴⁵ Convention regarding the Régime of Straits, full text available at <https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280166981>. See also Dungaciu 2020.

requirements of the Black Sea Straits. By and large, its technical provisions have been formally respected ever since by all participants in the maritime traffic, both civilian and military.

By the late 1930s, just prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Soviet Union sought to gain strategic depth by expanding its domination westward. The notorious secret Protocol to the Non-Aggression Treaty with Nazi Germany signed on 23 August 1939 established the respective spheres of influence and led in the following months to the partition of Poland, Soviet occupation of the Baltic states and Finland, and acquisition of Romanian provinces of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, including a portion of the Black Sea coast and control over lower Danube. The Soviet rationale for expanding its sphere of control in the Black Sea region was explained in detail in Stalin's telegram sent during Molotov's visit to Berlin (12-13 November 1940) stating: "As for the Black Sea, Hitler may be told that the issue is not only the exit from the Black Sea, but especially the access to the Black Sea, which has always been used by England and by other states to attack the USSR shores. All the events, from the Crimean War last century to the landing of foreign troops in Crimea and Odessa, in 1918 and 1919, show that the security of USSR regions at the Black Sea may not be considered without regulating the Straits issue. Therefore, the USSR interest for the Black Sea is a matter of protecting the USSR shores and security". Despite the Soviet insistence, Germany deferred or was evasive and, in fact, rejected the Soviet claims.⁴⁶

The German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 pushed the USSR away from the Black Sea coast and when German troops launched their offensive towards the Caucasus in 1942 the USSR risked losing control over almost whole of its Black Sea coastline. However, after initial German success, the Soviet troop regained control and by April 1944 the USSR regained control of its whole pre-war Black Sea coastline from Batumi in the East to Dniester in the West. By the end of 1944 Soviet troops gained control over Romania and Bulgaria, that in the post-war settlement became the USSR vassal states in the region.

With these developments, the geopolitical picture of the Black Sea region changed once again. The Soviet Union managed to re-impose itself on the Black Sea, developing and strengthening its maritime bases, controlling, directly and indirectly a considerable part of the Black Sea coast. It was during this period that the Black Sea emerged as a space of strategic confrontation between the two military-political blocs – NATO with Turkey joining in 1952 and the other riparian states, that were members of the Warsaw Pact. The first signs of great power rivalry were emerging with the establishment of the NATO military base in Turkey. Broadly speaking, „the policy and strategy of Soviet Russia in the Black Sea remained almost identical to that of Tsarist Russia, until the fall of the Iron Curtain and the loss of the strategic port of Sevastopol in Crimea with the proclamation

⁴⁶ Celac, S., A.Giada Dibenedetto, A.Purcăruș *Militarization of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres. A new challenge to NATO*, 2019, p.7-8

of independence of former Soviet Republics”.⁴⁷ The Soviet Black Sea Fleet⁴⁸ was the main military asset in the region and its Fifth Squadron consisting of four surface warships and an equal number of diesel submarines was since 1964 patrolling the Mediterranean as an instrument of power projection to the Middle East and North Africa when it confronted NATO.⁴⁹

The momentous political changes of 1989-1991 leading to collapse of the Communist ideology and the Soviet Union produced an entirely new geopolitical situation in the region with reverberations of historical significance throughout the world. In 2004 Bulgaria and Romania became members of NATO and of the European Union. The newly independent nations of Ukraine and Georgia, which clearly stated their European and Atlantic vocation, were added to the list of Black Sea littoral states. For about a decade, the Russian Federation was in political turmoil and economic decline, which also affected its military capabilities in general and in the region.

However, the ascent to power of President Vladimir Putin combined with positive terms of trade helped Russia to regain its strategic clout. In his famous Munich speech in February 2007 Vladimir Putin signaled Russia's return as a more assertive actor and this adversarial rhetoric subsequently translated into deeds unmistakably indicating neo-imperial ambitions of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of Russia's neighbors. The Black Sea once again became the theatre of such policies, posing a serious threat to European security and a renewed challenge to NATO and the Western world. In 2008 Russia used military power against Georgia to strengthen its position in the region but the real watershed event came in 2014 when Russia launched military operations against Ukraine, annexed the Crimean Peninsula, and supported separatist forces in Donetsk and Lugansk. Although these two conflicts did not escalate into a full-fledged military conformation with the West, they both changed the mutual perceptions and thus pattern of interaction in the region. Russia is no longer viewed as a possible strategic partner by the rest of the Black Sea states, but rather as a source of strategic challenge to regional and continental security. At the same time Russia accuses the West of serious infringement of Moscow's strategic interests in the region.

During the Cold War Russia/USSR controlled directly or indirectly most of the Black Sea coastline and this control stretched effectively from Rezovo in Bulgaria to Batumi in Georgia. In 2021 Russia still controls a large part of the coastline stretching from Pichori in Abkhazia to the outskirts of Mariupol in Southern Ukraine. However, this control is challenged by the international community that did not recognize Russia's de facto incorporation of Abkhazia, Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and views the country's support to irredentist movements in Ukraine as a serious challenge. At the

⁴⁷ Cojocari 2020.

⁴⁸ For more on the Black Sea Fleet see Jora, L. “The Black Sea Fleet”, in Dungaciu pp. 259-260, 2020.

⁴⁹ McCormick, G.H. *The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean*, Rand Corporation, 1987 available at <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P7388.pdf>.

same time, however, Russia has managed to strengthen its military instruments and has re-established itself as the most important power in the region.

Russia's actions – that official Russia often presents as reactions to the Western infringements – have resulted in reshaping amity-enmity patterns in the region. Ukraine has become the most vocal critic of Russia and has shown determination to resist Russia's military pressure. Moldova has after many ups and downs embarked on a pro-Western course. Romania and Bulgaria joined both NATO and the EU and are by many in Russia treated as traitors of the Slavic/Orthodox cause. Turkey has embarked on policy of seeking a balance between its regional engagement in which it sometimes finds it necessary and useful to cooperate with Russia, but on other occasions chooses to confront Russia. Finally, Georgia has not recognized Russia's de facto occupation of its territories and hopes to one day become a NATO outpost in the Caucasus.

3. What makes the High North and BSR strategically important in 2021?

In Russian strategic perspectives, Moscow's contemporary evaluations of the relevance of the High North demonstrate significant continuity and remain strongly influenced by history and lessons learned. During the Cold War, the Russian Arctic as such became a primary frontier in Russia's pursuit of maintaining strategic stability. The development of sea-based strategic nuclear capability and the ever-greater ranges of Russian sea-based ballistic missiles made the Barents Sea the primary basing and patrol area for Soviet strategic submarines with ballistic missiles (SSBN). Their primary mission has since been to deter primarily nuclear aggression, with the threat of nuclear retaliation inflicting unacceptable damage from massive employment of strategic nuclear weapons against its potential enemies.⁵⁰ In a potential great power conflict between the Soviet Union and NATO, launching a devastating nuclear attack on North America across the North Pole was thus considered a necessity in order to secure the Soviet Union's survival. The credibility of Russian deterrence strategy thus rested primarily on the Strategic Nuclear Forces' ability for nuclear retaliation and, in some cases, first-strike.

Yet, viewed from Moscow, an unfortunate geography positions Russia, a vast land-based state, at a defensive disadvantage. Along its Northwestern border to the West, the Scandinavian territories function as a barrier fragmenting Russia's maritime potential all the while exposing its inferior military, traditionally outmatched and overstretched, to a plethora of threats in immediate vicinity. While the region's non-freezing harbours provide the Northern Fleet with permanent access to the high seas, Russian forces in theatre are thus nevertheless considered largely confined and their room of manoeuvre considerably constrained. Throughout history, these factors have engraved in Russian military planners a historic sensitivity for encirclement and the need to maintain

⁵⁰ Adamsky, D. "Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy", *Proliferation papers* 54 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, 2015, 13.

strategic depth in Russia's periphery along its vulnerable borders to the West.⁵¹ The heavy concentration of the Northern Fleet's SSBNs, and their critical role in securing the survival of the Russian regime, has increased the importance and necessity of such a bulwark also in the North.

To protect Russia's abilities for a retaliatory nuclear strike, the Bastion Defense concept, an echeloned defense scheme establishing forward perimeters for engaging hostile forces well beyond their bounds, subsequently became the Northern Fleet's *raison d'être*.⁵² Denial ambitions in the Norwegian Sea towards the GIUK gap would complement simultaneous control ambitions in the Barents Sea and a land occupation of Norwegian territory, possibly extending South to Trondheim.⁵³ In this regard, the concept was defensively oriented, yet based on fundamentally offensive operational approaches encroaching on NATO member states' territories, air space and ocean areas for securing the strategic submarines' operational freedom. US and NATO Maritime Strategy consequently dovetailed in their objectives of protecting North Atlantic Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) and projecting power deep into protracted Soviet inner waters towards the "Bastions" in which they operated in the rear, aiming to force a decisive engagement ending the war.⁵⁴ The High North thus took centre-stage in the Cold War's strategic dynamics, where competing superpowers vied for regional as well as global supremacy.

When the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the underlying dynamics in the region significantly transformed. Drastic upheavals in Russia revealed the poor state of the Northern Fleet, left "demoralized and confused" with pitiable military performance starving for proper funding. The once mighty Red Navy became renowned for its inability to put to sea, with its once mighty warships rusting in port.

Above the waves, however, the North's security environment was largely characterized as stable, predictable and benign. The West was no longer viewed as a threat but became an important political and economic partner. Russia went even through a period of romantic Atlanticism under Andrei Kozyrev as the country foreign minister and many expected Russian strategic plans to be redrawn. However, already in September 1993, in his letter to NATO partners warning them against any enlargement plans, Yeltsin signalled that Russia was not willing to accept any Western encroachments on its strategic interests. Although the Russian armed forces, including its naval assets in the Arctic faced hard times in the 1990 and Russia's ability to project military power was

⁵¹ Tsygankov, A.P., "The heartland no more: Russia's weakness and Eurasia's meltdown", *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 3:1 2012, pp. 499-428.

⁵² Atland, K. "The Introduction, Adoption and Implementation of Russia's "Northern Strategic Bastion" Concept, 1992-1999." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 4 (2007): 499-528; Tamnes, R. "The Significance of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Contribution", *Whitehall Papers* 87:1, 8-31, 2016.

⁵³ Ries, T., "Soviet Military Strategy and Northern Waters", pp. 90-133, in *The Soviet Union and Northern Waters*, by Clive Archer London: Routledge, 1988.

⁵⁴ Lehman, J. *Oceans Ventured. Winning the Cold War at Sea* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

substantially crippled because of the economic collapse and lack of funding, the Northern Fleet managed to survive and Russia's second strike capability was preserved during this dramatic period.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, the tragic and humiliating *Kursk* accident in August 2000 proved a grim wakeup call which epitomized the problems faced by the Russian military in this time of state turmoil. The newly elected president Vladimir Putin embarked on a policy of rebuilding Russia's military potential as well as its regional and global influence. In this regard, strengthening and modernizing the Strategic Nuclear Forces (SNF), of which the Northern Fleet's SSBNs are part, became top priority.⁵⁶ From ensuing reform processes and state armaments programmes, seeking to transform the Russian military from a Soviet style war machine based on mass mobilisation to a professional expeditionary force with fewer, lighter and more capable and mobile units, the Northern Fleet has gradually re-emerged from its post-Cold War malaise—assuming an increasingly important role in Russian strategic planning.

Figure 1. The Northern Fleet area of responsibility



In turn, the High North has once again emerged as an area of potential strategic confrontation with NATO that is defined in the current set of Russian strategic documents as a US instrument and one of the main sources of strategic threat to Russia.⁵⁷ In the Russian view, the Russian Arctic as such remains therefore a primary frontline towards the West, further fuelling Moscow's pursuit of establishing protective barriers ensuring its survival as a great power. By virtue of the nuclear triad's continued critical role in Russian deterrence strategy, securing the SSBNs' freedom of manoeuvre

⁵⁵ For more on this see Baev, P. *The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles*. London: Sage, 1996 and Odom, W. E. *The collapse of the Soviet military*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998.

⁵⁶ For more on the process of modernization of Russian armed forces see Renz, B.. *Russia's Military Revival*. Cambridge: Polity, 2018.

⁵⁷ President of the Russian Federation. *Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation), Moscow: President of the Russian Federation, 2014 and President of the Russian Federation, *Strategiya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation) Moscow: President of the Russian Federation, 2021.

in a potential conflict has similarly persisted as the paramount objective of Russian military strategy in the region. By maintaining its ability for nuclear retaliatory strike, the submarines as such secure the Kremlin a say in global matters in peacetime and guarantee a seat at the negotiation table in conflict. Their destruction would equally strip Russia of its great power status, and with it the legitimisation of its geopolitical ambitions of establishing a regional buffer zone safeguarding against potential threats. The Northern Fleet's importance in Russian strategic designs was thus underscored on 1 January 2021 when its status was upgraded to the level of military district, OSK North, on par with other military districts in Russia.⁵⁸

However, climate changes and the receding sea ice, historically protecting the Russian "Heartland" from a Northern invasion, will permanently expose an elongated and vulnerable flank towards its most likely opponent in war.⁵⁹ The SSBNs' prospects of hiding underneath the Arctic ice caps, as have hitherto been their modus operandi, are eradicated in the process. The threat of a US attack with enemy aircraft and ballistic missiles across the North Pole thus no longer remains the greatest single dimensioning influence in Russian military planning. NATO's naval might and its potential to master the approaches to Russia's largest seaward frontier, as such establishing itself in its "strategic underbelly" and further augmenting the potential of launching a potentially devastating air campaign, is adding to the Kremlin's woes.⁶⁰ The Northern Fleet's increased access to the sea beyond the summer months' ice-free ports provides as such only minimal comfort.

On the other hand, melting ice allows for increased exploration and exploitation of the lucrative economic opportunities. Russia's approach to the Arctic is therefore a mixture of realist fears that others may challenge Russia's position in the region and that Russia needs to re-build and strengthen its military presence to signal its resolve and a more liberal-institutional approach in which the Arctic can be viewed as an area of mutually beneficial economic cooperation.⁶¹ This region may therefore become even more important in economic terms if the development of the Northern Sea Route – the major Russian and international transport route linking Asia with Europe along the Russian Arctic coast – gains momentum and becomes a viable connection the Asian and European markets in the future.⁶²

⁵⁸ Tass. Severnyy Flot stanet otdelnoy voyenno-administrativnoy yedinitsey v 2021 godu, 2020 at <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/8663847>

⁵⁹ The «Heartland» denotes a geographical pivot area with strategic importance, as articulated by Mackinder in 1904, cf. Sloan, G. "Sir Halford Mackinder: The Heartland theory then and now", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22:2-3, 15-38, 1999..

⁶⁰ On the strategic underbelly see Zysk, K. Russia's strategic underbelly: military strategy, capabilities, and operations in the Arctic. In S. Blank (Ed.), *The Russian military in contemporary perspective* 687–724. Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019.

⁶¹ For more on this see Godzimirski, J. M., & Sergunin, A. Russian Formal and Practical Geopolitics in the Arctic: Change and Continuity. *Arctic Review*, 11(0), 2020. doi:10.23865/arctic.v11.1350

⁶² Gunnarsson, B., & Moe, A. Ten Years of International Shipping on the Northern Sea Route: Trends and Challenges. *Arctic Review*, 12(0), 2021. doi:10.23865/arctic.v12.2614.

The renewed Russian and international interest in the Arctic as an area of new economic opportunities has been driven by four factors:⁶³

1. given the increasing role played by natural resources in Moscow's designs, the Arctic has become pivotal to Russian strategic security and economic interests;
2. Russia has strengthened its capabilities and embarked on a bolder approach in its security and foreign policy, also in the Arctic, by sending a strong symbolic signal when by the 2007 Russian flag was planted on the seabed near the North Pole by the polar and by resuming its air and sea patrolling of the Arctic and North Atlantic that same year;
3. the Arctic is increasingly seen as a "retrieved" territory now that climate change has made visible impacts on geographical features of the region, and the shrinking ice cap may be creating new opportunities for development, transportation, and resource extraction.,
4. The "re-opening" of the Arctic caused by climate change is paralleled by another structural change—the relative decline of the West and the rise of the rest of the world, with China in particular showing greater interest in the Arctic, including closer economic and security cooperation with Russia

Russian military strategy in the High North

As the High North remains a primary frontier in Russia's pursuit of maintaining strategic stability and establishing protective barriers ensuring its survival as a great power, Russian contemporary military strategy in the High North similarly displays high level of continuity, first and foremost given the prolongation of many of its Soviet predecessor's various tasks in the region. The consideration of allied power projection towards them has similarly endured as the greatest threat.

The traditional tasks assigned to this force are to very large extent reflected in its structure. According to IISS,⁶⁴ by the end of 2020 the Northern Fleet had the following assets, cf. Table 1. These assets included the only Russian aircraft carrier, 7 of Russia's 11 strategic submarines as well as 18 of 38 Russia's tactical submarines and 10 of 31 principal surface ships.

Table 1. Composition of the Northern Fleet 2021

Submarines, total	26 (13)
Strategic Submarines SSBN	8 (3)
Submarines tactical total	18 (5)

⁶³ Godzimirski, Sergunin 2020.

⁶⁴ International Institute of Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2021* London: Routledge, 2021.

Submarines tactical SSGN	4
Submarines tactical SSN	9 (3)
Submarines tactical SSK	5 (2)
Principal surface combatants total	8 (4)
Battlecruisers and cruisers	2 (1)
Aircraft carriers	(1)
Destroyers	1
Frigates	5 (2)
Patrol and coastal comb	16
Corvettes	10
Mine Countermeasure	9 (1)
Amphibious landing ships and craft	7
Air defense	Long range: 6 SAM regt with S-300PS (SA-10B Grumble); S-300PM1 (SA-20 Gargoyle); S-400 (SA-21 Growler); Short range: 96K6 Pantsir-S1 (SA-22 Greyhound)
Naval aviation	38 fighters: 20 MiG-31BM Foxhound C; 18 Su-33 Flanker D 25 fighters/ground attack: 19 MiG-29KR Fulcrum; 4 MiG-29KUBR Fulcrum; 2 Su-30SM Flanker H 18 attack: 13 Su-24M Fencer; 5 Su-25UTG Frogfoot (training role) Anti-submarine warfare: 21: 10 Il-38 May; 11 Tu-142MK/MZ/MR Bear F/J ISR 4 Su-24MR Fencer Electronic intelligence: 3: 2 Il-20RT Coot A; 1 Il-22 Coot B Transport: 9: 8 An-26 Curl; 1 Tu-134 Helicopters: Anti-submarine warfare Ka-27 Helix A Transport helicopters• Medium Ka-29 Helix B; Mi-8 HipLong range
Naval Infantry	2 Motorized rifle brigades 1 naval infantry brigade
Coastal defense	1 Anti-ship missiles brigade

*Numbers in parentheses denote additional hulls under maintenance or modernization or otherwise inoperable.

The Northern Fleet's objectives

In the High North, Russia's next-generation weapons technology and platforms, streamlined in an innovative operational art exploiting their defensive and offensive effects, provide new means and methods of defending a vulnerable maritime flank. In Western defense circles, these developments are habitually analysed under the customary rubric of Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD), describing a joint denial regime with the aim of denying NATO access to several Area of Operations (AO) should conflict erupt. The advent of so-called A2/AD capabilities and their various deployments in OSK North's area of responsibility are frequently interpreted as confirmations of the Bastion Defense concept's continued existence.⁶⁵ Both concepts frame the renewed discussion of NATO's Northern flank and the potential challenges defending it in a potential Article V situation.

The result is arguably a general misinterpretation of Russian operational art and strategy, in particular in a larger conflict involving the Alliance. Analysing OSK North's operational approaches in isolation, such as the infamous Bastion and alleged A2/AD scheme in combination establishing sanctuaries holding NATO combat power at bay, risks de facto overlooking the full breadth of Russian military strategy in the region. First, such perspectives fail to sufficiently acknowledge the drastic upheavals in OSK North's forces since the Cold War's end, resulting in a lacking ability to implement and maintain the Bastion Defense's denial and control zones.⁶⁶ Second, they disregard the distinctly Russian study and practice of conflict as, perhaps not unique, but significantly different from Western methods.⁶⁷ Both ignore substantial developments in weapons technology and ensuing innovations in Russian strategic thinking exploiting them for establishing new dimensions of depth.

In reality, the Kremlin's contemporary objectives in the High North and the military approaches for obtaining them are inherently more complex than contemporary studies of them suggest. In the Russian military tradition, defeat of an opponent at both the operational and strategic level of war is achieved through a defensive-offensive strategy with a balanced combination of defense, counter-offense and offense. Often-times referred to as Russia's "active defense" strategy, it is based on pre-emption with preventive power use aimed at the rival's vulnerabilities in order to capture and maintain the strategic initiative.⁶⁸ To that end, an Initial Period of War (IPW) carries the greatest

⁶⁵ The Norwegian Intelligence Service, "*Fokus 2019. Etterretningstjenestens vurdering av aktuelle sikkerhetsutfordringer* [Focus 2019. The Norwegian Intelligence Service's assessment of current security challenges]" Oslo: Norwegian Armed Forces, 2019, 25.

⁶⁶ Kvam, I.H.P. «*Nordflåtens evne til kystnær maktprojeksjon. Implikasjoner for Bastionforsvaret* (The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection. Implications for the Bastion Defence)», *Necesse* 5:1, 22-58, 2020.

⁶⁷ Rather than describing actual Russian intent and operations, the A2/AD term is considered by Russian military theory as a Western concept where its Russian translation is instead used to describe a set of capabilities that may prove challenging to the US or to NATO in kinetic events on Russia's periphery.

⁶⁸ Bredesen, M-G. and Friis, K. "Strike First and Strike Hard? Russian military modernization and strategy of active defence", *Frivärld Briefing Nr. 10* (Stockholm: Stockholm Free World Forum, 2020 and . Bredesen, M.

potential to affect the course and outcome of conflict in Russia's favour, primarily given the possibility of decisive victories before the opponent is fully mobilized. A protracted, total war in the High North against NATO may thus be avoided if OSK North's limited forces instead obtains their objectives through limited, concentrated and decisive use of force at the very onset of conflict. Russian military strategy in the High North is consequently based on the determination that "the activities of the armed forces should be maximally active and decisive, aimed at the complete defeat of the aggressor" by targeting military, supporting and decision-making functions as a whole.⁶⁹

In the Russian Arctic, such war plans appear primarily concerned with mitigating the potential decisive effects of US and NATO power projection capabilities, capable of launching a massive aerospace attack from both US mainland across the Arctic as well as aircraft and forward-deployed warships in the Barents and Norwegian Sea. OSK North's joint operational concepts thus primarily concern "battle for air and sea dominance [and include] powerful rocket-fire strikes and decisive offensives of mobile forces with follow-on introduction of the main forces".⁷⁰ OSK North's forces are to that end integrated in a complimentary system of operations, tailored to the AO, geography, conflict type and the scope and degrees of force necessary to obtain objectives. These joint manoeuvres encompass the full spectrum of available means and weapons to inflict varying damage levels on opposing forces operating in theatre.⁷¹ Yet, common to all is their goal of attaining strategic effects in potential combat by decreasing the Northern Fleet's vulnerability and increasing its options and opportunities at the expense of NATO forces, attempting as such to level the playing field and the Alliance's conventional superiority and high-technological advantages.⁷²

Such a framework combines OSK North's means into a joint operational art with structured, synchronised and organised measures for weakening not only opposing forces' ability to sustain combat actions in the region, but also the West's will to continue hostilities altogether by striking deep across hostile contingencies well beyond the High North theatre.⁷³ In practice, the Northern Fleet's manoeuvres at the tactical-operational level are therefore distinguishable from equally offensive campaigns at the strategic level.

G., & Friis, K. Missiles, Vessels and Active Defence. *The RUSI Journal*, 165(5-6), 68-78, 2020.
doi:10.1080/03071847.2020.1829991.

⁶⁹ Zolotarev quoted in D. Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds", *Livermore Papers on Global Security* No. 3 (California: Center for Global Security Research, 2018, 29.

⁷⁰ Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities", 30-31. The current system of strategic operations comprises "Strategic Operation for the Deflection of Aerospace Attack", "Strategic Aerospace Operation", "Strategic Operation for the Destruction of Critically Important Targets", "Strategic Nuclear Forces Operation", "Strategic Operation in a Continental Theater of Military Operations" and "Strategic Operation in an Oceanic Theater of Military Operation".

⁷¹ Gerasimov, V. "Po opytu Sirii [From the experience in Syria]", *Voenna-Promyshlennyy Kur'er* [Military-Industrial Courier], March 7, 2016.

⁷² Covington, S.R., "The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare", *Paper* Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2016, 29.

⁷³ Kofman, M. A. Fink and J. Edmonds, «Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts», DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev Virginia: Center for Naval Analyses, 2020.

The former primarily involves a comprehensive approach for projecting power regionally in and from Northern coastal zones and the littorals with OSK North's tactical forces in order to establish a favourable room of manoeuvre vis-à-vis NATO forces. Meanwhile, the Northern Fleet's strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces' strategic offensives targeting the West's "military-economic potential" seek to manage the course of conflict and attempt to keep it short. As per the Russian perspective, only through such a holistic strategy may an opponent be successfully deterred or, if such efforts fail, sufficiently coerced or compelled into ending the conflict on terms favourable or acceptable to the Kremlin. Development of prudent countermeasures to Russian militarisation in the High North thus depends on a proper understanding this inherent duality.

An emerging coastal power

At the tactical-operational level, one of the most protruding characteristics of the Northern Fleet's modernization processes is the emergence of a 21st century coastal power with substantial firepower.⁷⁴ A doctrinal shift to coastal power projection, i.e. the ability to project military force in and from all domains pertaining to the coastal zone, is increasingly observable in the High North through armament programmes emphasising construction of weapon systems and platforms capable of coastal combat. Their offensive and defensive effects are attempted increased through fundamentally asymmetric, opportunistic and dynamic approaches to littoral warfare, based on making the most of joint action. The result is a modern and layered "coastal fortification" in the Eastern parts of the Barents Sea and surrounding territories, employing the shore to level the playing field in battle and avoid, deflect and absorb a decisive confrontation with NATO's superior military power until Russian forces may assume the strategic offensive ending the war.⁷⁵

This coastal power's foremost characteristic is the presence of land-based weapon systems against targets in the air, at sea and on land, deployed across OSK North's bases. A central priority has been to replace their ageing Soviet-era systems with new weapons-technology, particularly at Kola, Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land.⁷⁶ Given the predominant focus in Russian military planning on NATO's perceived superior missile arsenal, these aim first and foremost to shield critical infrastructure and forces in the area against aerospace attack. Notable capabilities thus first and foremost include the Air Defense Divisions' S-300 family and S-400 Triumf strategic air defense systems, in the future augmented with S-350 Vityaz and S-500 Prometey.⁷⁷ These are in turn

⁷⁴ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection".

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ These bases include primarily Murmansk and Severodvinsk hosting the Northern Fleet and OSK North headquarters, Rogachevo at Novaya Zemlya and Nagurskoye at Franz Josef Land. Recently re-established base infrastructure and their weapon systems further East in the Arctic is for the purpose of this analysis with a focus on the High North not included.

⁷⁷ S-300, S-350 Vityaz and S-400 Triumf have a nominal engagement range of 200, 120 and 380 kilometres, the latter once its long-range SAM becomes operational. These ranges will increase to 600 kilometres when S-500 Prometey enters service.

protected by point defense complexes, primarily the Pantsir-S1 and its Arctic equivalent, Pantsir-SA, along with Tor-M2DT.⁷⁸ Together, these form in total six air defense regiments across the Russian Arctic, arrayed to engage the West's stealth fighter jets, bomber planes, incoming missiles and low-orbit satellites. To that end, an extensive network of spy satellites, aerial sensors and radar stations, amongst others the fifth generation Voronezh-M and Resonance-N over-the-horizon radars, for early warning are organised to facilitate swift destruction of incoming missiles.

This Integrated Air Defense System (IADS) simultaneously serves the anti-ship missile (ASM) systems. Tasked with striking the Alliance's missile-capable and Aegis warships within range, these are similarly complemented by extensive minefields protecting against those units potentially evading them. A central priority has been to replace the Coastal Defense and Artillery Brigades' Soviet-era coastal defense complexes with next-generation Bal and Bastion-P systems equipped with Uran and Oniks missiles, respectively.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Electronic Warfare (EW) assets deployed across the services aim to deny such power projection capabilities the necessary Situational Awareness (SA) and information dominance necessary to efficiently conduct a synchronised air campaign. Cyber and EW, together with a host of deception measures, are thus considered essential force multipliers in OSK North's layered and multi-dimensional defensive scheme—which in combination makes Russian forces operating within their range inherently difficult to track, target and destroy.⁸⁰

In the future, OSK North's coastal fortifications will permanently include some more offensive systems, such as mobile land-attack missile launchers, first and foremost Iskandr-M, a ballistic missile, and the Iskandr-K, its cruise missile variant temporarily deployed to Pechenga during Zapad 2017.⁸¹ More controversial capabilities are also expected to be deployed to the region in the coming years, most notably the subsonic Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile and Avangard hypersonic boost-glide vehicle, both seemingly with nearly unlimited range. Plans furthermore include increasing its coastal defenses with land-based mobile versions of the hypersonic Tsirkon ASM. These missiles were in a 2018 speech infamously designated by Putin as unstoppable "super weapons" based on "new physical principles".⁸² However, in the High North, test firings of particularly the Burevestnik have been plagued by several accidents, supposedly crashing in the Barents Sea in 2017 and killing five Rosatom scientists in 2019, spreading a radioactive cloud near Severodvinsk after a blast while

⁷⁸ Pantsir-S1/SA and Tor-M2DT have a nominal engagement range of 20 and 70 kilometres.

⁷⁹ The Uran and Oniks ASMs equipping the Bal and Bastion-P coastal defence systems possess a nominal range of 260 and 400 kilometres.

⁸⁰ Bronk, J. «Modern Russian and Chinese Integrated Air Defence Systems. The Nature of the Threat, Growth Trajectory and Western Options», *Occasional Paper* London: Royal United Services Institute, 2020.

⁸¹ Iskander-M and Iskander-K have a nominal range of 500 and 1,800 kilometres.

⁸² Neil MacFarquhar and David E. Sanger, «Putin's 'Invincible' Missile Is Aimed at US Vulnerabilities», *The New York Times*, March 1, 2018.

testing the nuclear engine.⁸³ The original launch site has since been re-established at Novaya Zemlya, indicating a continued commitment to its development and of other offensive systems.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, trials of the Tsirkon ASM are in contrast making significant progress, successfully demonstrating its 1000-kilometre range in November 2020.⁸⁵

Denial or Distraction?

Although there are still some shortcomings and gaps in the systems, an already significant “coastal bastion” with substantial firepower consequently bolsters a protective shield over the Kola Peninsula and surrounding territories, air space and ocean areas. This fortification presumably attempts to establish de facto control of its seaward periphery all the while increasing the survivability and endurance of OSK North’s inferior forces.⁸⁶ In a predominantly maritime theatre such as the High North, the A2/AD label is thus not necessarily incorrect as Russian weapon systems deployed along Northern shorelines indeed by default amount to a significant denial capability.⁸⁷ At face value, the Northern Fleet’s joint coastal fortifications will therefore indeed complicate the Alliance’s ability to operate its forces near or into an AO and constrain their room of manoeuvre within one. In these areas, only highly specialised forces with the endurance for coastal attrition warfare will possess the ability to operate in a continuous battle for situational awareness and target acquisition, all the while with significant risk for surprise and destruction.⁸⁸ The deciding factor in such engagements will likely be sensor performance and the durability of kill-chains rather than the systems’ effective ranges, as well as the respective forces’ ability to inflict damage at closer ranges after long-range missiles have been depleted.⁸⁹

Yet, the presence of specific missile systems with certain technical specifications seemingly arrayed for standoff engagements does not automatically translate into an ambition of denial within an AO or anti-access beyond it. In reality, there appears to be no Russian assumption that the US’ superior military power may sufficiently be barred from deploying to the region nor denied freedom of manoeuvre within it to the degree the A2/AD debate frequently suggests.⁹⁰ Moscow does not perceive its Northern “denial zones” as operational safe-havens relatively indestructible to American power projection

⁸³ Thomas Nilsen, «Rosatom says five employees killed in blast while testing isotope and liquid propellant engine», *The Barents Observer*, August 10, 2019.

⁸⁴ Thomas Nilsen, «Launch site for Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile re-established at Novaya Zemlya», *The Barents Observer*, October 21, 2020.

⁸⁵ Russian MoD web reference when the current exercise is concluded.

⁸⁶ Kvam, “The Northern Fleet’s Abilities for Coastal Power Projection”.

⁸⁷ In an A2/AD operational approach, “the general predominance of the maritime domain as conflict space” is one of its key defining and determining factors, cf. Sam Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013, 13.

⁸⁸ For discussion of littoral warfare and its operational and tactical demands, cf. Milan Vego, «On Littoral Warfare», *Naval War College Review* 68:2 2015 and Robert C. Rubel, «Connecting the Dots: Capital Ships, the Littoral, Command of the Sea, and the World Order», *Naval War College Review* 68:4 2015.

⁸⁹ Kofman, “It’s Time to Talk About A2/AD”.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

capabilities, but, on the contrary, rather expects their penetration in a potential conflict.⁹¹

To this end, the Northern Fleet's tactical-operational approaches to avoiding a decisive engagement in theatre, from which it will likely lose, thus seeks to manufacture a favourable room of manoeuvre in other ways. By employing the coastal zone as a force multiplier to degrade NATO forces' defensive and offensive abilities as well as operational efficacy, the OSK North Commander attempts instead to destroy the Alliance's ability to potentially launch a disarming air campaign by deflecting damage away from critical strategic forces and infrastructure while imposing significant losses to NATO power projection capabilities and their critical subsystems in the process, enabling their attrition.⁹² A central aspect of OSK North's approaches to coastal combat is therefore not only to defend critical installations on land and at sea as well as projecting power towards opposing forces within range in and from littoral waters, but also to target ISR assets and battle space management systems, Command and Control (C2) nodes, logistical and transportation hubs and other critical infrastructure upon which an effective NATO campaign in the High North depends.

OSK North's joint operational concepts as such assume that all available forces and capabilities, including A2/AD capabilities typically categorized as "defensive", shall contribute to tactical offensives against primarily HVUs, both in the AO and in the enemy contingencies' rear. To this end, rather than conducting an "A2/AD operation", one or several simultaneous strategic operations would include typical A2/AD actions.⁹³ The emerging coastal power's foremost aim thus appears not to primarily deny allied forces access or restrain their manoeuvre to the Barents or Norwegian Sea, but to deny them and their technological superiority the quick and easy victory upon which the Alliance's concepts are based. The resulting operational problem for allied forces is thus rather the defensive-offensive combination of the Northern Fleet's operations launched in and from such littoral waters. In the potential outset of hostilities, the General Staff will thus likely conclude that protection of strategic facilities and forces at Kola is best served by destroying or disabling NATO's power projection capabilities on the ground or in port before they manifest as a threat in theatre at all.⁹⁴

To this end, the introduction of mid- and long-range land-attack and anti-ship capability across the OSK North has arguably reduced its need to deploy its inferior and drastically reduced forces in forward-positions in the North and Norwegian Sea, well beyond the safety of Russian territory and relatively safe home waters.⁹⁵ From the Kola Peninsula and adjacent seas, the Northern Fleet may neutralize NATO forces in their home port and bases in Northern Europe before they deploy. If key infrastructural nodes and

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kofman, "It's Time to Talk About A2/AD".

⁹³ Covington, «The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare», 29.

⁹⁴ Bredesen and Friis, «Strike First and Strike Hard?».

⁹⁵ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection".

support systems across allied territory in the High North, necessary for advancing and supporting allied forces and material, are similarly destroyed or otherwise inoperable, the Northern Fleet's coastal power may significantly damage the Alliance's ability to enforce its Northern flank.⁹⁶ In such a course of action, OSK North may obtain necessary and sufficient depth without risking heavy losses of minimal forces. The assumed Cold War rationale behind the Bastion Defense concept in particular thus arguably appears rather invalid, and unnecessary, in contemporary conditions.⁹⁷ Russian forces may instead attempt to destroy the territory's military utility, and thus the Alliance's possibilities of operating from it.⁹⁸

Bringing the war to the enemy territory?

In worst case scenarios, a central ambition appears to offensively expand the Northern Fleet's coastal power's reach in order to establish further depth.⁹⁹ An essential component of Northern exercises is indeed their conclusion typically after such land-based weapon systems have been forward-deployed along the Arctic coast. These amphibious operations are usually spearheaded by mobile forces, mainly the Coastal Troops' Naval Infantry brigades, various Spetsnaz and the Western Military District's Airborne Divisions. A second wave of heavier, mechanised formations then normally follow to safeguard their outposts.¹⁰⁰ A central feature of Russia's Northern exercises is its longstanding focus on amphibious operations, landing forces and equipment on typically "unprepared coastlines" or through forced entry. Today however, such operations are of significantly smaller scale and appear primarily of a tactical or operational nature, rather than with a strategic ambition of opening a second front.

Such adjusted and recalibrated objectives harmonise with a drastic reduction in Russian land power, no longer dimensioned for obtaining a *fait accompli* through substantial land grabs and prolonged sieges, as was the *modus operandi* of the Soviet Red Army in the region. Today, OSK North's 14th Army Corps comprise only the 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade at Pechenga and the 80th Motorized Rifle Brigade at Alakurtti. Both are equipped with self-propelled howitzers, multiple rocket launchers, anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles and numerous reconnaissance, engineer, sniper and support formations. In 2019, they were fully modernised with the T-80BVM main battle tank particularly suited for Arctic operations, also equipping the Naval Infantry. For higher-intensity scenarios, the Army Corps is organised with the Coastal Troops in Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG), improved provisional battalions consisting of artillery batteries and 700-900 contract soldiers from various tank and motorised rifle companies for rapid deployment.¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁶ Andrew Metrick, «(Un)Mind the Gap», *Proceedings*, October 2019.

⁹⁷ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection"; Ries, "Soviet Military Strategy and Northern Waters", 120.

⁹⁸ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection".

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kjellén, J. and N. Dahlqvist, "Russia's Armed Forces in 2019", pp. 23-58, in *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective*, by Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna Stockholm: FOI, 2019, 28-29.

BTGs are designed to swiftly obtain control of seized terrain, and to that end is tailored by the battalion commander for each combat mission.¹⁰² Yet, compared to the Western Military District's 54 BTGs, OSK North has only six—four in the Army and two in the Naval Infantry.¹⁰³

Given the Northern Fleet's limited land power capabilities, ambitions of considerable ground offensives in the High North, including the suggested occupation of Northern part of Norway more often than not accompanying the Bastion Defense debate, would arguably spread this minimal force across a territory too vast to seize and defend.¹⁰⁴ OSK North's approaches to combined arms ground combat, based on manoeuvre as well as direct and indirect fires, appears instead revamped for 21st Century combat through its primary focus on rapidly deployable forces with high readiness. Rather than conducting large-scale army operations, risking as such significant losses with minimal military gain, the Army and Coastal Troops appear instead dimensioned to increase Russian room of manoeuvre and establish depth in the High North other ways. By expanding the "coastal bastion" through seizing one or two specific coastal areas restricted in size, these drastically reduced forces may still obtain favourable geographical positions if successful in an early phase of conflict. As the total resource needs such operations demand have not decreased correspondingly, such locations must necessarily possess a high enough strategic value corresponding to the necessarily substantial use of force with critical resources and material.¹⁰⁵

NATO member Norway, with its unique coastline's defensive advantages in striking harmony with Russia's focus on coastal power, a critical need to increase its endurance and survivability as well as innovations in Russian strategic thinking for obtaining so, appears particularly exposed.¹⁰⁶ In worst case scenarios, OSK North's need to establish depth may thus result in measures offensively establishing coastal fortifications on a restricted area of the Norwegian littorals.¹⁰⁷ The combination of unique Norwegian coastal geography and Russian weapon systems would manufacture a substantially more effective bastion, where radar cover from the former's fjords and surrounding mountains further increase the latter's defensive and offensive effects. Meanwhile, the Norwegian coast's inner SLOCs, necessary for advancing, supplying and reinforcing any force operating in the High North, carry great strategic value to both Russia and NATO in a potential conflict. An opponent capable of employing this complex geography, exploiting its defensive characteristics for offensive purposes whilst controlling the

¹⁰² Grau L.W. and C. K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War. Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, 36.

¹⁰³ Kjellén and Dahlqvist, "Russia's Armed Forces in 2019", 28-29.

¹⁰⁴ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection".

¹⁰⁵ Kvam.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

theatre's most important means of communication, may thus turn the strategic situation in its favour.¹⁰⁸

Russian interest in the Norwegian littoral is to that end well-established. In particular the Soviet naval debate post-World War II on the cost-benefit of a coastal power was characterized by simultaneous discussion on the strategic relevance of Norwegian geography.¹⁰⁹ According to Soviet naval theorists, German control of the Norwegian coastline secured safe passage for the Kriegsmarine whilst securing Germany's flanks and functioning as a springboard for offensive operations into adjacent seas.¹¹⁰ Russian submarine activity in Norwegian fjords, gathering oceanographic and hydrographic data, was therefore a well-known practice during the Cold War.¹¹¹ Today, the Kremlin is urging Russian sailors to qualify for Pilot Exemption Certificates (PEC) in Norway and seek employment within its merchant industry.¹¹² Both demonstrate a perhaps undisputable need to increase Russian ability to operate in a complex geography in crisis and war.¹¹³

Instead of achieving a *fait accompli* mainly through offensive use of its Army, the Navy appears in this regard as the tip of the spear for establishing such forward fortifications and advance OSK North's mobile forces to secure the weapon systems' locations. A central feature of Russia's Northern exercises is its longstanding focus on amphibious operations, landing forces and equipment on typically "unprepared coastlines" or through forced entry. By virtue of Russia's armament programmes prioritising serial production of coastal combatants in specific, the Northern Fleet's ability for projecting power in this manner in the High North will be at its greatest since the Cold War already by 2025. As opposed to larger ocean-going warships capable of encompassing and enduring operations at sea, these warships have smaller dimensions and thus lesser seafaring ability—yet possess significant stealth, speed and combat capability. Their firepower equals that of larger platforms with greater tonnage, and may, as opposed to cruisers and destroyers, wreak particular havoc by employing inner SLOC.¹¹⁴ While the Baltic and Black Sea Fleet have received the majority of such new assets, the Northern Fleet is scheduled to revamp its coastal profile with several new additions in the next decade.

¹⁰⁸ Pugh, D.C. Guns in the Cupboard: The Home Guard, Milorg, and the Politics of Reconstruction, 1945-46, pp. 132-140, in *Forsvarsstudier III: Årbok for Forsvarshistorisk forskningssenter, 1983-1984*, by R. Tamnes Oslo: Tanum, 1984, 99-100.

¹⁰⁹ Herrick, R.W. *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy: Gorshkov's Inheritance* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988, 122-221.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Gjølsten, R. «Fremmede ubåter i norske fjorder. Realitet eller myte? [Foreign submarines in Norwegian fjords. Reality or myth?], *Oslo Files on Defence and Security I* Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2013.

¹¹² Ulriksen, S. and Å. Østensen, «Building on Strength. Proposals for US-Norwegian Cooperation on the Operational and Tactical Level», *Concept Paper 2/2019* Bergen: Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, 2019.

¹¹³ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection", 46.

¹¹⁴ Mosgovoy, A. "Nesterpimyy zhar 'Kalibra': My yavlyayemsa svidetelyami massovoy 'kalibrizatsii' rossiyskogo VMF [Unbearable 'Kalibr': We are witnessing a 'mass-kalibration' of the Russian navy]", *Natsionalnaya Oborona* [National defence]; Martyanov, A. "Russian Navy, Mission Found?", *US Naval Institute*, June 1, 2017.

Plans to that end include deliveries of up to 12 hulls of the Varshavyanka and Lada class conventional submarines (SSK) as well as two corvette squadrons, likely of the modernised variant of Steregushchiy class corvettes, or its modernized Gremyaschiy variant, and Karakurt class “small missile ships”.¹¹⁵ In line with Russian military planning’s focus on long-range firepower, all are equipped with Russia’s next-generation PGM systems, mainly the Kalibr and Oniks anti-ship and land attack cruise missiles and Paket-NK/-PL anti-submarine and anti-torpedo torpedo.¹¹⁶ In the coming years, these will likely be universally equipped with the Tsirkon ASM. While the surface ships possess area defense capability through the Poliment Redut air defense system and may scout for rivalling forces beyond the horizon with their on-board helicopters, man-portable air defense (MANPAD) systems aboard the submarines protects against air threats while snorkelling. In combination, these coastal combatants appear as the primary theatre strike capabilities in OSK North’s naval tactics. Together with new minesweepers and another Ivan Gren landing ship, this 21st Century coastal navy will spearhead future coastal operations in Northern coastal zones. When the Priboy class helicopter carrying landing ship currently under construction enters service, such campaigns will pack a considerable punch.

Given a drastic reduction in tonnage and available hulls, this coastal fleet appears insufficient and ill-equipped to establish the denial and control zones which the Bastion Defense concept prescribes. These ambitions depend first and foremost on enduring maritime operations at the open sea, requiring more capital ships with sufficient seaworthiness. By 2030 when its Soviet-era workhorses are retired, the Northern Fleet’s ocean-going platforms will in all likelihood consist of only four Gorshkov class frigates, two Kirov class battlecruisers modernised with next-generation weapon systems and five Severodvinsk class nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSGN). In contrast to the Bastion scheme, necessitating their force distribution across vast ocean areas, such a minimal surface action group’s survival in a potential conflict depends, per a primary logic in naval warfare, on force concentration.¹¹⁷ Through extensive and encompassing sea control and sea denial operations at the open ocean, the Northern Fleet will therefore obtain only marginal strategic advantages with great risk for significant loss of critical forces and material.¹¹⁸

In this framework, a tactical tandem between the particularly the Navy and Air Force is increasingly observable in practice, emerging in combination as the primary suppliers of

¹¹⁵ In Russian defence discourse, the Karakurt class is designated as a “small missile ship”, *malye raketnyy korabli*, rather than a corvette.

¹¹⁶ The anti-ship and land-attack variants of the Kalibr missile possess a range of approximately 660 and 1,600 kilometres, and the Paket-NK anti-submarine and antitorpedo-torpedo respectively 10 and 1,4 kilometres.

¹¹⁷ In naval warfare, defensive considerations rather than, offensive desires, decide whether or not a naval force should be concentrated or distributed, cf. Hughes W.P. Jr., *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019, 280-281.

¹¹⁸ Strømme, T.I. “Bulwark and balancing act: the strategic role of the Royal Norwegian Navy”, pp. 133-151, in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security: Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, by McCabe, R., D. Sanders & I. Speller Oxon: Routledge, 2019, 142.

fire support for the Russian mission on land. This shift is in line with the Russian military's overall transition from Air Land Battle to Air Sea Battle, focusing on the interplay between air- and seapower elements rather than army manoeuvres. The new exercise series Ocean Shield appears initiated precisely due to the General Staff's conviction that a future conflict will be decided by confrontation primarily in the air and at sea, which in Russian thinking to some extent replaces the need for massive presence of boots on the ground. This conviction furthermore harmonises with the High North's military geography, rendering warfare in the region fundamentally maritime and necessarily carried over vast distances. In Northern exercises, the Air Force's ASW contributions in general and land attack roles during amphibious operations in specific are particularly critical components.

While the number of operational aircraft varies in open sources, OSK North's four fighter regiments hosts up to 85 Sukhoi Fencer, Frogfoot, Flanker C and D as well as Mikoyan Fulcrum and Foxhound, invariably equipped for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Anti-Air Warfare (AAW), Anti-Surface Warfare (ASuW) and land-attack roles. Meanwhile, ASW Squadrons field 10 Ilyushin May and 11 Tupolev Bear Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) in addition to an unknown number of Ka-27 Kamov helicopters. Meanwhile, three Ilyushin Coot A and B aircraft perform Electronic Signals Intelligence (ELINT) missions, and nine Antonov An-26 and Tupolev Tu-134, as well as an unknown number of Ka-29 Kamov and Mi-8 Hip helicopters, are tasked with troop transport. While plans of establishing a new regiment of Su-34 Fullback with Uran capability is underway, future Russian air power in the North will likely feature the fifth-generation stealth Su-57 Felon fighter equipped with the next-generation Kinzhal hypersonic missile.

However, the Northern Fleet's emerging coastal power and its next-generation platforms and weapon systems notwithstanding, its coastal fortifications combined with long-range naval and air assets will, as per the Russian perspective, not obtain sufficient tactical and strategic victories in isolation. Successfully avoiding a protracted war and eventually ending it in NATO's disfavour, will rather depends on parallel strategic campaigns premised on impacting NATO's overall ability, and most importantly will, to continue hostilities altogether. Russian coastal power for damage limitation, positioning Russian forces in a favourable position for continued conflict in the AO and theatre, are thus complemented by simultaneous strategic operations attempting to manage and manipulate its course in Russia's favour—ultimately ending it on more favourable terms.¹¹⁹ In combination, both approaches work in unison to deny NATO a swift victory in a conflict's early phase, thus attempting to affect the Alliance's cost-benefit calculus of engaging at all—primarily through nuclear brinkmanship and sabre rattling.

¹¹⁹ Kofman, Fink and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management".

The Northern Fleet's Nuclear Options

In contrast to Russian coastal power's primary aim of establishing a favourable room of manoeuvre for the inferior Northern Fleet vis-a-vis a superior opponent such as NATO, its strategies at the strategic level prescribe equally offensive operations targeting the Alliance's "military-economic potential" in order to keep such engagements short.¹²⁰ By inflicting calibrated damage on the West's critical economic and military HVUs supporting the overall war effort, the main objective is to impact the opponent's political will. The intent is to raise the costs of aggression well beyond the expected benefits to the extent the opponent desists from attacking or are otherwise forced de-escalate hostilities or terminate the conflict.¹²¹ Such an approach is an inherently asymmetric attempt at solving Russia's foremost strategic dilemma in the High North, namely the Northern Fleet's inability to deter and to win a high-intensity conflict with a stronger adversary such as NATO and the US.¹²² The credibility of this strategy in the High North primarily relies on adequately convincing the West in peacetime that the SSBNs will launch a retaliatory strike to any nuclear, and in some cases, conventional aggression in wartime. Still, the SNF's limited utility in lesser conflicts has underscored the need for deterrence alternatives in Russian strategy, flexible enough to manage the complexity of 21st Century warfare.¹²³

The solution is seemingly an escalation ladder with mutually dependent and reinforcing steps adding credibility to the mechanisms upon which they are built, aiming to combine all of OSK North's forces in the most efficient way possible towards a superior opponent.¹²⁴ These stratagems appear thus designed to facilitate, demonstrative, single or grouped employment of nuclear and non-nuclear means at various stages of development of inter-state conflicts corresponding to the situation, intended to provide for various levels of deterrent damage, the upper limit of which is unacceptable damage.¹²⁵

Scalable implicit and direct threats of, and actual progressive use of force, can be used to coerce an opponent and shape the course of conflict by demonstrating intent and resolve to increase its intensity. To that end, OSK North's strategic offensives are seemingly adapted in scope depending on the conflict type, in the Russian tradition divided into local, regional, large-scale and nuclear war. In peacetime, nuclear signalling is one of the main means of Russian deterrence and coercion, and since Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin has made several overt nuclear threats directed at

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ven Bruusgaard, K. "Russian Strategic Deterrence", *Survival* 58:4, 2016, pp- 7-26.

¹²² Zysk, "Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy".

¹²³ Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion".

¹²⁴ Olikier O. and A. Baklitskiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'De-Escalation': A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem", *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2018.

¹²⁵ Kofman, Fink and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management"; Tagirov, Pechatnov, and Burenok, quoted in Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities", 39.

NATO member states in the High North, particularly in response to perceived increased US presence in the region.¹²⁶

In a “period of increased military threat”, OSK North escalation management strategies may include demonstration tests of new weapons, strategic deployment and demonstrative military actions as well as threats to inflict, or actual infliction of, damage on economic facilities and populaces with non-nuclear means and demonstrative and single precision strikes on specifically selected targets.¹²⁷ In this phase, the Northern Fleet will likely combine non-kinetic force with nuclear and conventional signaling, considered central in an early phase for compelling or coercing the opponent to cease current course of action or otherwise to impose the Kremlin’s will. If these measures are unsuccessful and a crisis evolves into a local war, such threats may escalate to include limited PGM strikes inflicting in particular damage on both economic and military targets of adequate value for desired deterrent effects.

The General Staff’s preference for using strategic conventional capabilities’ in a crisis or IPW in general and local wars in specific is a significant change in continuity. Such forces operating in the Northern Fleet are expected to swiftly obtain escalation control by imposing tailored damage on an appropriate military or economic target through various conventional use of force.¹²⁸ Such strategic offensive and defensive conventional capabilities are considered to possess particularly coercive effects whilst carrying less escalatory risk, especially when paired with a credible threat to follow through with nuclear threats.¹²⁹ To that end, targets are likely selected on the basis of raising the potential of OSK North’s nuclear forces, first and foremost by striking the opponent’s defensive capabilities such as anti-missile systems such as sea-based BMD assets.¹³⁰ In the High North, the “coastal bastion” and its tactical forces thus carry out this function in parallel with its littoral warfighting missions, aiming to extend the conventional phase of conflict and increase the ability to signal resolve and threaten high costs in situations where nuclear threats are otherwise considered implausible.

As these conventional systems are dual-use, i.e. may be nuclear tipped when and if considered necessary, OSK North possess tactical and strategic flexibility if, despite its efforts to the contrary, hostilities were to intensify. The biggest concentration of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) in the North is in the naval forces. Several Soviet anti-ship missiles (AShM) that may be fitted with a nuclear warhead are still in service, and are increasingly being replaced by the Kaliber and Oniks missiles. These dual-capable capabilities will soon be augmented when the newly developed Tsirkon enters

¹²⁶ Web reference, RuMoD nuclear threats post-USMC base rotation in Norway.

¹²⁷ Johnson, “Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities”, 48-49.

¹²⁸ Johnson, “Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities”, 47-48.

¹²⁹ Ibid; Zysk, «Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Military Strategy», 5.

¹³⁰ Kofman, Fink and Edmonds, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management”.

service.¹³¹ Ashore, the OSK North's Coastal Troops and Air Defense Forces' possibly nuclear-tipped arsenal includes the mobile anti-ship missile batteries and strategic air defense complexes. In the future, the Army will possess a deadly NSNW triad with Iskandr, Avangard and Burevestnik which all are expected to be deployed in the High North. Modernisation plans also include retrofitting OSK North's Su-30 Flanker-C and MiG-29 Fencer with Kh-32 and Kinzhal anti-ship cruise missiles, respectively. In the meantime, the Western Military District's Tu-22 bombers equipped with Kh-22 frequently patrol the High North's air space.

In a regional war, the Northern Fleet may thus combine massive use of conventional precision weapons with the threat of or actual demonstrative or limited employment use of NSNWs and the SSBNs' sea-based ballistic missiles towards rivalling forces operating in the region and critical military-economic infrastructure ashore.¹³² At this stage, all combat actions are likely combined in support of guaranteed infliction of a possible follow-on nuclear strike.¹³³

In the Northern Fleet, the Air Force is seemingly prescribed a particularly offensive role for obtaining such objectives at longer ranges, frequently patrolling the Norwegian coastline with critical infrastructure in most of Northern Europe within range. In combination with the Western and Southern Military District's forces, equally equipped with a substantial long-range firepower, Russia may engage the majority of NATO forces in theatre as well as the West's critical civilian infrastructure supporting the overall war effort. The Alexandra Land's air strip appears particularly lengthened primarily to accommodate such excursions across the North Pole to similar HVUs on the US mainland or forces in home port before they deploy.¹³⁴

This likewise appears as the foremost objective of the Northern Fleet's next-generation guided attack submarines (SSGN), frequently disappearing in the North Atlantic where they may operate with a low degree of risk. From there, the majority of American bases along the US East Coast are within reach with the possibility of attacking them before they deploy to enforce the European continent.¹³⁵ From there, the SSGNs may simultaneously target the US Navy's own "Boomer Basin" in strategic anti-submarine warfare operations, similarly targeting NATO's transatlantic Achilles heel. If the Northern Fleet were to operate its SSGNs from Venezuela in the future, as facilitated by the bilateral cooperation agreement signed in August 2019, the much-debated "GIUK

¹³¹ Operational Soviet-era NSNWs in the Northern Fleet include the SS-N-9, SS-N-12, SS-N-19, SS-N-21 and SS-N-22 anti-ship cruise missiles, the SS-N-15 and SS-N-16 anti-submarine missile system and the SA-N-20 surface-to-air missiles (SAM) alongside a multitude of torpedoes and depth charges.

¹³² Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion"; Kofman, Fink and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management"; Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities", 89.

¹³³ Kofman, Fink and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management".

¹³⁴ Staalesen, A. "Northernmost Arctic airfield now operational all-year, says Russian Military", *The Barents Observer*, April 28, 2020.

¹³⁵ Kvam, "The Northern Fleet's Abilities for Coastal Power Projection".

problematique” may therefore be avoided altogether as the submarines will already be in theatre once hostilities break out.¹³⁶

In high-intensity conventional conflicts, SNF’s application beyond demonstration purposes remains in this regard a last resort. Their limited use as an intra-war deterrent, i.e to prevent conflict from escalating in size and scope into a possible nuclear war, is likely the most probable option and most prudent course of action. Eventual use of the Northern Fleet’s SSBNs would as such likely be reserved for a situation when a regional conflict in the High North were to escalate into large-scale war involving several theatres. In the event of such a horizontal escalation, Russian military theory posits that limited strategic nuclear strikes coupled with massive use of NSNWs increases Russia’s likelihood of settling the conflict in the Kremlin’s favour.¹³⁷ Thus instead, at the strategic level, the Northern Fleet’s strategic non-nuclear and non-strategic nuclear forces appear in combination as the tip of the spear, having absorbed the majority of tasks from the SNF and its SSBNs operating in the region for controlling the course of conflict and attempting to end it on more acceptable terms.

This development, pushing the role of tactical nuclear weapons further into regional or large-scale war, combined with other ambiguities in Russian nuclear policy has prompted much debate in the West on the possibility of Russian planners adopting a so-called “escalate to de-escalate doctrine” and thus the risk of unintentionally escalating great power tension in the High North into pre-emptive nuclear strikes.¹³⁸ To that end, the Kremlin’s recently publicized Nuclear Policy Strategy document is often-times analysed and interpreted as an “actionable military plan” rather than an intentionally confusing and misleading document with a rhetoric intended to increase its deterrent effects while confusing Western observers. By contrast, nuclear weapons have in the Russian theory of victory always had a central warfighting role and the belief that a conflict is unlikely to remain conventional as it escalates is longstanding—as are the thresholds of employing nuclear force in the High North.¹³⁹

If anything, conventional modernisation successes have rather reduced Russian emphasis on pre-emptive strategic nuclear use.¹⁴⁰ When manoeuvring through increased great power rivalry along NATO’s Northern flank, the key takeaway is rather “the timing for when nuclear options come into play, pushed further and further into conventional scenarios”.¹⁴¹ When combined with the Northern Fleet’s emerging coastal power obtaining tactical advantages, such nuclear capabilities are thus considered particularly efficient in Russia’s strategies for creating off-ramps or otherwise ending the

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Zysk, «Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Military Strategy», 5.

¹³⁸ Kofman, M. and A. Loukianova Fink, “Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy”, *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2020.

¹³⁹ Oliker and Baklitskiy, “The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian ‘De-Escalation’”; Bruusgaard, “Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority”.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Kofman et al., “Russian Escalation Management Strategies».

conflict through negotiations, preserving the Russian regime in their aftermath. In sum then, the High North's strategic dynamics remains inherently based on nuclear power—next-generation stand-off technology and a revamped coastal power have simply augmented the breadth of deterrence alternatives all the while increasing the efficacy of Russian military strategy in the region.

Key features of Russian military strategy in the Black Sea Region

In post-Cold War international relations, the Black Sea and riparian states have once again become a point of interest, both economic and strategic, not only for themselves, but also for global decision-makers. Energy resources and security issues have focused attention on the recognition, definition and possibly even development of a regional identity, a geostrategic and geopolitical area with specific problems whose management concerns not only the contiguous powers of the sea, but also the entire “concert” of nations.¹⁴²

All Russian leaders, from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin today, have paid a special attention to the Black Sea, as having control over this sea ensures a permanent access to the Planetary Ocean through its warm water ports that are not found elsewhere along the Russian coasts. Controlling Black Sea can also help project power onto the European continent, mainly in the Balkans and Central Europe, but also in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the South Caucasus and the Northern Middle East.¹⁴³

On the other hand, from a geostrategic point of view, the Black Sea has always been a vulnerable area for Russia's national security and integrity. This explains why Russia has been seeking to maintain a buffer zone consisting of the Black Sea basin and its former Soviet riparian states, in which it wanted to exercise control and influence to limit the presence of the West, and to prevent the integration of these countries into NATO and the EU. Moscow does not have a comprehensive strategy in this regard, but has adapted its strategy and objectives for each country in the so-called “near abroad”, using a wide range of tools, from its arsenal of both soft (political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, confessional) and hard power, including the threat and the use of military force. Thus, in the absence of a clear strategy for the Black Sea region, Russia has embarked on an accelerated process of increasing its military capabilities in all operational environments (maritime, air, land, electromagnetic/cyber) to achieve its political goals.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Syntagma used in the 19th Century

¹⁴³ Lukacs, A. & Nistor, V.G (Eds.). *Marea Neagră: istorie și geopolitică, Culegere de studii, Volumul 1*. București: Editura Academiei, 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Flanagan, S.J. & Chindea, I.A. Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategy. Regional Perspectives from a 2019 Workshop. *RAND Corporation* 2019 at https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF405.html

The Black Sea did not have the same geostrategic importance after the USSR dissolution in 1991, but Russia permanently included it in the so-called concept of "near abroad" being characterized by a series of conflicts which arose with the revamping of the national identity in the Soviet republics and their desire to emancipate themselves from Moscow's influence¹⁴⁵. The USSR/Russia has supported separatist regimes politically, financially, and militarily, which challenged the independence movements and then the legitimacy of the new states that have emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union. As a result, post-Soviet protracted (frozen) conflicts are all concentrated in the Black Sea region. Russia exploits the existence of these "grey zones" that potentially could or are already fuelling organised crime, smuggling and radicalization. All these conflicts have significant potential to destabilise the whole region hastily¹⁴⁶.



Figure 2. Source: New Strategy Center - WHY THE BLACK SEA MATTERS – Policy Paper, May 2017

After the North Atlantic Alliance's second enlargement wave, following the Prague Summit in November 2002, when Romania and Bulgaria were invited to join, the Black Sea area became an area where NATO and Russian strategic interests collided. It was the most comprehensive enlargement of NATO, because in addition to the two states mentioned, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia also became members. The buffer zone between the West and Russia was shrinking, and former allies from the Warsaw Pact or the former Baltic Soviet republics were relieved to have entered under the protective umbrella of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Being too weak militarily, economically, and politically at the time, Russia could not resist enlargement and started a strong militarization process in the region.¹⁴⁷

During his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, President Vladimir Putin indicated the Kremlin's disapproval towards the NATO expansion in the East, perceiving the proximity to Russia's borders as a direct threat. This speech signalled also that Putin's strategic objective the restoration of Russia's status as a global political and economic power, which in turn was to help Russia restore some of the spheres of influence lost after the 1990's. To achieve these goals Russian policy makers decided to rely on its military instruments. However, Russia's victorious war with Georgia in 2008 revealed some of the weaknesses of Russian armed forces and this compelled Russian

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem

¹⁴⁶ NATO and EU identify the protracted conflicts in the Black Sea Region as a challenge "to the European security order".

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem

policy makers to launch an ambitious program of military modernization that was to result in improvement of Russian military capabilities.

At the end of 2010, an ambitious state program for overall modernization of Russian armed forces was therefore initiated. Its aim was to modernize and increase the inventory of military capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and to replace or modernize 70% of military equipment by 2020. The state program for armaments, with a budget of 1.1 trillion rubles for 10 years¹⁴⁸ gained momentum after the appointment of Sergei Shoigu as defense minister in 2012, but not for long because falling oil prices forced substantial cuts in the defense budget while international economic sanctions imposed after the invasion of Crimea and later the COVID-19 pandemic were other factors hampering its realization. The top priority was modernization of the Strategic Rocket Forces and the Aerospace Forces. In addition, Russia has succeeded in modernizing naval platforms without introducing new ships as planned. Also, the Land Forces, although still relying heavily on military equipment developed during the Cold War, were partly modernized. As far as the planned structural reorganization of the armed forces the most important change was the establishment in 2020 of the fifth military district, by renaming the Northern Fleet and redefining some of its objectives.¹⁴⁹

The annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 led to a substantial revision of the defense policies of all states in the region. Russia also revised its security and defense policy in this context, its defense planning documents reflecting deteriorating relations with the West. At the same time, with the revision of foreign policy and defense priorities in the Black Sea region, Moscow has accelerated its military modernization program, especially in the naval domain.¹⁵⁰

The following sections will present in more detail how these developments played out in the Black Sea region that was turned into an important power projection platform where Russia introduced substantial changes to its military posture to reflect this structural change. To address challenges emerging in the region Russia decided also to upgrade its military presence in Abkhazia, South Ossetia (Georgia), Nagorno Karabakh and Transnistria (R. Moldova). Over the time Russia cemented also its military presence

¹⁴⁸ Defense Intelligence Agency. *Russia Military Power - Building a military to support great power aspirations*. 2017 at www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications.

¹⁴⁹ International Institute of Strategic Studies. *The Military Balance 2021 - Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia*. London: Routledge, 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Kuimova, A. & Wezeman, S. T. *Russia and Black Sea Security*. *SIPRI Background Paper*, SIPRI 2018 <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/sipri-background-papers/russia-and-black-sea-security>

in the South Caucasus by signing security agreements with Abkhazia¹⁵¹ and South Ossetia¹⁵² and modernizing the military equipment deployed to its bases.

The Black Sea Region in Russian strategic designs

The 2015 naval doctrine of Russia regards the Black Sea, along with the Mediterranean, as a regional priority zone of the Atlantic, meaning that it perceives the Black Sea “primarily through the prism of the perceived threat from NATO”.¹⁵³ As defined in the doctrine, main priorities are modernization and armament of the Black Sea Fleet.¹⁵⁴ Currently, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has become Kremlin’s primary tool for projecting its power beyond the Black Sea region into the Mediterranean, as well as an instrument in its pursuit strategic objectives in the Balkans, Middle East, and Northern Africa. The region is thus characterised by the potential for conflict and an unpredictable environment, “in which military forces with advanced weapons, including systems that may have nuclear capabilities, are increasingly active in close proximity to each other”.¹⁵⁵

Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the Peninsula has become the centrepiece of Russia’s military force in the Black Sea Region and plays a pivotal role in Russia’s strategy of countering NATO in the immediate neighborhood and in the Middle East. Because of the neighboring NATO countries sharing the Black Sea with Russia, Moscow has no choice but to reinforce its military presence in the Peninsula.

¹⁵¹Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on the Joint Russian Military Base on the Territory of the Republic of Abkhazia, signed 17 Feb. 2010, entered into force 20 Jan. 2012 (in Russian); Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on the Combined Grouping of Troops (Forces) of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Abkhazia, signed 21 Nov. 2015, entered into force 3 Dec. 2016 (in Russian).

¹⁵²Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia, signed 17 Sep. 2008, entered into force 20 Jan. 2009 (in Russian) contains a mutual defence guarantee in case of attack. Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on the Joint Russian Military Base on the Territory of the Republic of South Ossetia], signed 7 Apr. 2010, entered into force 7 Nov. 2011 (in Russian). Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration, signed 18 Mar. 2015, entered into force 30 July 2015 (in Russian), Article 2; and Civil Georgia, ‘Moscow, Tskhinvali sign “integration treaty”’, 18 Mar. 2015.

¹⁵³ Celac, S., Dinu, L., Scutaru, G. ., “Classic and Hybrid Challenges in the Black Sea Region”, 2021, p.18 <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Policy-Paper-NSC-Classic-and-Hybrid-Challenges-in-the-Black-Sea-Region-aug2021-1.pdf>

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁵ Celac, S., Dinu, L., Scutaru, G. Ion, M., Aslan, M., Bozhilov, Y. Sokolov, M. The Crimean Aircraft Carrier. Russian Federation Militarization of the Black Sea. *New Strategy Center, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, Sofia Security Center*. 2021 at <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FLANKS-Working-Paper-The-Crimean-Aircraft-Carrier.-Russian-Federation-Militarization-of-the-Black-Sea.pdf>

Russia uses Crimea as a platform for military domination of the Black Sea region,



ensuring control over maritime routes in the entire basin, and constraining NATO's ability to operate in the maritime sphere. With the annexation of Crimea, Russia's strategic vision has focused on its historical ambition of accessing warm water ports, which is why Russia needed to modernise and expand the Black Sea Fleet.¹⁵⁶ More than that, Crimea plays a key role in Russia's policy designed to put pressure on Ukraine short of a full-scale war and control Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Russian sentiments in the region.¹⁵⁷ Russian military presence in Crimea also exerts political and military pressure on riparian states, thus

limiting what Russia perceives as negative effects of NATO enlargement. It also allows for the expansion of Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which not only ensures new gas and oil resources for Russia, but also puts pressure and disrupts the free movement and trade of riparian states and facilitates the protection of its strategic gas pipelines from Russia to the Southern Europe.¹⁵⁸ The freedom of navigation is also threatened by the Black Sea Fleet's expansive naval exercises which often encroach on the EEZ of the riparian states.¹⁵⁹ Beyond this, Moscow uses the Sevastopol port to ensure the mooring of heavy ships and to hold maintenance and repair facilities for most type of surface and submarine platforms.¹⁶⁰

The Russian actions to consolidate the military capabilities in the region represent the main concern from a military perspective, however coordinated actions in other domains intended to influence regional states are also to be considered. The recent developments point out to an increase of such actions, as well as to the extension of the geographical area and the domains where threats are identified. The use of the military instrument is differentiated, depending on the targeted state and its own specific vulnerabilities.

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 10

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 15, Gressel, G. Waves of ambition: Russia's military build-up in Crimea and the Black Sea. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2021 at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/waves-of-ambition-russias-military-build-up-in-crimea-and-the-black-sea/>

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem

¹⁵⁹ Celac, S. & Dinu, L et al. 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 16.

When it comes to Russia's naval presence and the expansion of the Black Sea Fleet, we have recently observed some new developments. According to a recent study by *European Council on Foreign Relations*, beyond the Soviet-era guided-missile cruiser Moskva and two Krivak-class frigates, three new Admiral Grigorovich-class guided-missile frigates have been added, while a fourth one is being built. The fleet also disposes of seven Kilo-class submarines, and "its small craft and patrol vessels have roughly doubled in number".¹⁶¹ Moreover,

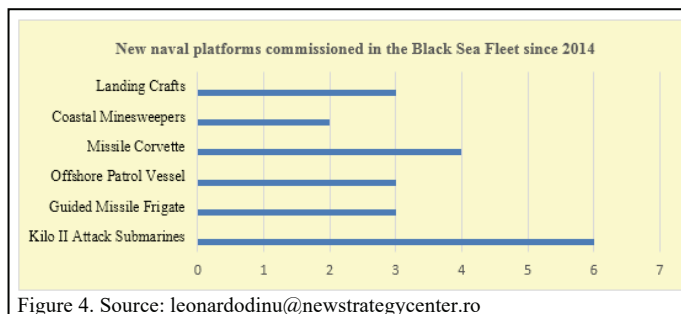


Figure 4. Source: leonardodinu@newstrategycenter.ro

the Black Sea Fleet includes three Alligator-class and four Ropucha-class landing ships, which can land up to 160 armoured fighting vehicles. It is also important to note that Russia can reinforce the fleet with ships from the Caspian Flotilla, via the Volga-Don Canal, and these reinforcements could include two frigates and six corvettes.¹⁶² Apart from increasing the military capability of its forces, Russia has established an extended Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) umbrella over the Black Sea region, thus creating a continuous line of air defense and interdiction all the way from the Kola Peninsula to the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶³

Defense Planning and Policy

On 13 November 2020 Vladimir Putin signed the decree "*On the Implementation of the Defense Plan of the Russian Federation for 2021–2025*". This top-secret document, which entered into force on January 1, 2021¹⁶⁴ is supposed to rest on three major pillars¹⁶⁵: to undermine the efficacy of NATO forces operating near Russia's borders, boosting Russian capabilities in the realms of command and control (C2), increasing the effectiveness of Russia's military mobilization capabilities, and executing steps needed for capacity building in the rearmament program.¹⁶⁶

In order to achieve these goals, there is a need for a radical change in the predictive strategic thinking of Russian military planners and decision makers, of the coordinating role of the main directorates of the General Staff, of the military training and education system and proper preparation of the military and national infrastructure as part of the national preparedness to respond to the current and future military and security challenges.

¹⁶¹ Gressel, G. 2021, p. 9-10

¹⁶² Ibidem

¹⁶³ Celac & Dinu et al., "Classic and Hybrid Challenges in the Black Sea Region", p. 8

¹⁶⁴ Sukhankin, S. "Putin Approves Secret Russian Defense Plan for 2021–2025". *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 17 Issue: 170, 2020 at <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-approves-secret-russian-defense-plan-for-2021-2025/>

¹⁶⁵ Perendzhiev, A., member of the military-patriotic movement "Officers of Russia" – Ibidem.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem

Translating the Russia's new defense plan objectives into operational measures at the Black Sea Region level would require the following concrete actions to be undertaken¹⁶⁷:

- a. Contingency plans should be reviewed, and military response capability increased on the Southwest Strategic Direction, following the expansion of NATO's presence and actions in the Black Sea region, but also in the case of security and military situation deterioration in Ukraine and a possible military intervention on its part to recapture the lost territories, as well as in the case of a political and military crisis in Transnistria (Republic of Moldova) and in the Caucasus Region;
- b. Early Warning system should be strengthened, Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance (ISR) structure should be developed at the operational and tactical level to improve the predictive analysis capacity for political and military intentions and NATO's mode of action in conjunction with its member states, as well as with the PfP partners (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) bordering the Black Sea. In terms of strategic intelligence, a particular attention should be paid to Turkey, which in addition to having the most important military potential in the region, has shown that it does not hesitate to defend its interests, including in the traditional areas of influence of the Russian Federation in the Caucasus and Middle East;
- c. The expeditionary capabilities of the Black Sea Fleet should be strengthened to protect the Russian Federation trade and energy infrastructure and supply routes in the Black Sea and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, respectively to the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Diplomatic instruments should be used more actively to regain influence in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, strengthening the expeditionary capacity aimed to counterbalance the presence of NATO and the US in these regions and remotely block any aggressive plans and actions against the Russian Federation;
- d. Capabilities should be developed in the areas of action/reaction of hybrid threats response, especially engaging deep reconnaissance capabilities, special / clandestine operations forces, electronic and cyber troops. In this context, Russia should make use of its minorities' presence in the Black Sea and Balkans regions, appeal to the Slavic fraternity, the commonality of language and religion, as well as the presence of the economic infrastructure and Russian capital, especially in the NATO member states, transforming these capabilities into nuclei of the intelligence services and in possible bases of action of hybrid type;

¹⁶⁷ The details of the plan are classified. The analysis was conducted by the author based on the main deficiencies identified after the invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine reported by different Western and Russian media sources.

e. The process of modernizing military equipment and high-precision air and naval striking systems should be accelerated, followed by completion of the operationalization process of the new units and large tactical units already established within the Southern Military District, increasing the mobility of forces and technical resources in order to ensure an optimal maneuver depending on the military response variants. Emphasis should be placed on the rapid deployment capability of high-precision striking systems from the Russian Federation continent to the Crimean Peninsula, including tactical nuclear capabilities depending on the concrete strategic situation;

f. Expanding the human resource selection base needed to fill the Southern Military District military personnel shortage, improving the training process by introducing new methods compatible with the newly introduced military equipment and actual technology. Training the troops in the new conditions will not necessarily increase the number of tactical and strategic exercises, of evaluations of training levels such as snap checks and exercises, but rather by using more simulators integrated into computer networks;

g. The logistical support system should be improved to support combat actions, especially for ground forces, by revitalizing land transport communication lines as well as equipping them with adequate means of transport. Civilian and military infrastructure in the Crimean Peninsula and in and from the Southern Military District to it should be the top priority. Also, based on the experience in Syria, new auxiliary military ships should be built to reduce dependence on civilian transport and to ensure long-range expeditionary capabilities. The existing air bases and port facilities on the Black Sea should be modernized.

h. Mobility of troops should be improved to enable them to operate in the emerging security context in the Black Sea region, but also internally in Russia ones, mainly social and economic, in Russia to make them better prepared to meet the objectives and main directions listed above, and to increase the level of readiness of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Improving mobilization capacity also includes revitalizing the defense industry sector, developing modern equipment and weapons systems, and reducing the military technological gap between Russia and the West.

Also, on May 28, 2021, the Security Council of the Russian Federation, chaired by Vladimir Putin, discussed and adopted the new version of the "Security Strategy of the Russian Federation", which, according to Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, was renewed to make Russia better prepared to address new emerging security threats. It could also be assumed that this document provided important input in the work on

Defense Plan of the Russian Federation for 2021–2025. According to his press statements, the Security Strategy of the Russian Federation has the following priorities¹⁶⁸:

- special economic measures that aim to improve the well-being of the population
- cementing internal unity;
- achieving national development goals;
- include "coercive forceful methods" to strengthen the country's defense capabilities;
- preserving Russia's nuclear deterrence at a sufficient level;
- maintaining the combat readiness of the armed forces;
- keeping a leading position in the development and production of advanced weapons;
- protecting Russia's sovereignty in cyberspace given foreign attempts to interfere in Russia's internal affairs through cyberattacks and large-scale disinformation campaigns;

According to Patrushev,¹⁶⁹ Moscow could implement “symmetric and asymmetric measures to thwart or avert unfriendly actions that threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation”, actually setting the stage for the Russian Federation geopolitical and international security play, including from the High North to the Black Sea and all the way around to Far East, 360 degrees.

Russian Black Sea Armed Forces Structure



Figure 5. Demarcation of Russian Military Districts (Source: NATO)

The Caspian Sea, the North Caucasus and the Black Sea (including the Crimean Peninsula) is the area of responsibility and operations of the Southern Military District, the smallest of the five military districts¹⁷⁰ of the Russian Federation.

¹⁶⁸ The Associated Press. Russia's security strategy envisages 'forceful methods' *Defense News*.2021 at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2021/06/01/russias-security-strategy-envisages-forceful-methods/>

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem

¹⁷⁰ On January 1, 2021, Russia's Northern Fleet was officially upgraded to the status of a Military District (MD), as part of a reorganization of the overall system of military districts. Northern Fleet has double status of an MD and Joint Strategic Command.

However, it's very active from an operational point of view, considering that it is the only region where frozen conflicts are present in Transnistria (Moldova), Donbas (Eastern Ukraine), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia) and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), to which can be added the fragile security situation in Chechnya, as well as the military intervention in Syria (2015), which has increased the importance of Russian forces in this region.

The Southern Military District was created as part of the 2008 military reforms, and founded by Presidential Decree No. 1144 signed on September 20, 2010, to replace the North Caucasus Military District, and absorbing the military commands of the Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla. The Southern Military District is headquartered in Rostov-on-Don, and its current district commander is Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov, who has held the position since September 20, 2016.¹⁷¹

The Southern Military District was the subject of an extensive process of structural, functional reorganization and modernization after the invasion of Crimea, of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, but also due to the increasing presence of NATO, especially the USA in the region, the main objectives being the modernization of the military infrastructure (air and naval bases) in Crimea and the endowment of Black Sea Fleet with new fighting capabilities.

Land Forces of the Southern Military District

The Land Forces of the Southern Military District comprises three Combined Arms Armies (CAA) : 8th CAA – Novocherkassk, 58th CAA – Vladikavkaz and 49th CAA – Stavropol, three Special Forces (Spetsnaz) Brigades: 100th Reconnaissance Brigade – Mozdok, 10th Spetsnaz Brigade – Krasnodar, 22nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade – Rostov-on-Don and different other manoeuvre units: 2 motor rifle divisions (armored and mechanized), 1 reconnaissance brigade, 7 motor rifle (armored and mechanized) brigades and 1 light mountain brigade. Also, three Short Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM) Brigades equipped with Iskander-M.¹⁷² are directly subordinated the Southern Military District.

In addition, military forces from the four motor rifle brigades are deployed to Russian Military Bases in Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), Gudauta (Abkhazia, Georgia) and Gyumri and Yerevan (Armenia). The so called Russian peacekeeping forces are deployed in Transnistria, R. Moldova (forces from 82nd and 113th Motor Rifle Battalions – Tiraspol) and in Nagorno-Karabakh (15th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade – Stepanakert). Two artillery, one multiple launcher rockets, one Electronic Warfare one NBC and two

¹⁷¹ Southern Military District – Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Military_District

¹⁷² Compiled primarily based on: International Institute of Strategic Studies. *The Military Balance 2021 - Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia*. London: Routledge, 2021 and Southern Military District – Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Military_District and other media sources

logistics brigades provide also combat support and service support services to forces from the Southern Military District.

Simultaneously with the completion and operationalization at full combat capability of the units already created, especially within the 8th CAA – Novocherkassk, it was announced the establishment of other two large tactical units. In 2020, 19th Motor Rifle Brigade within 58th CAA – Vladikavkaz was granted divisional status¹⁷³, being in full operationalization process, becoming 19th Motor Rifle Division. And, within 8th CAA – Novocherkassk another division is envisaged to be created beginning with 2021 through reorganization of 20th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade that is to be transformed into 20th Guards Motor Rifle Division¹⁷⁴. Both divisions of the Southern Military District will be equipped with modernized T-90M "Breakthrough" tanks with reinforced armor against shells and missiles, as well as a redesigned turret with protection against cumulative ammunition. The engine power has also increased, which made it possible to increase its mobility. The new modernized variant "Breakthrough" of T-90M tank was tested during Russian operations in Syria.¹⁷⁵

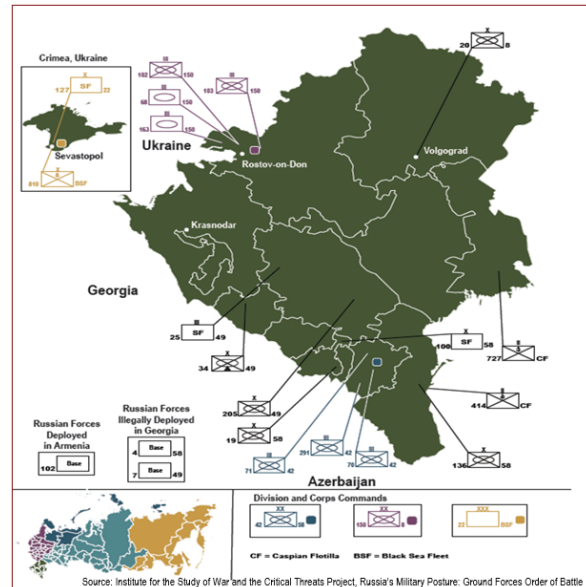


Figure 6. Southern Military District of the Russian Federation. (Source: Institute for the Study of War - ISW)

The new established divisions should be considered an enhanced striking capability of the Southern Military District to a level giving it superiority over the Ukrainian army, enabling it to prepare and conduct military operations against Ukraine relatively independently.¹⁷⁶

Also, in the Southern Military District Area of Responsibility (AoR) are deployed 7th Guards Mountain Air Assault Division – Novorossiysk and 56th Guards Air Assault Brigade – Kamyshin subordinated to the Airborne Troops Command.¹⁷⁷ During Crimea annexation and operations in Eastern Ukraine invasion in 2014 both units were supporting Russian forces. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced on March

¹⁷³ In 2009 as part of the wider restructuring of the Russian Ground Forces the division became the 19th Motor Rifle Brigade.

¹⁷⁴ In 2009 as part of the wider restructuring of the Russian Ground Forces the division became the 20th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade

¹⁷⁵ Izvestia - Divisions of the Southern Military District will receive modernized T-90M tanks 2021 at <https://iz.ru/1173141/2021-06-02/divizii-iuvo-poluchat-modernizirovannye-tanki-t-90m>

¹⁷⁶ Wilk, A. Eyes west! A shift in focus in Russia's Southern Military District . *OSW Commentary - Centre for Eastern Studies*, 2020 at [http://aei.pitt.edu/103289/2/OSW_Commentary_350\(1\).pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/103289/2/OSW_Commentary_350(1).pdf)

¹⁷⁷ Wikipedia – Russian Airborne Troops at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Airborne_Forces

25, 2021, that the 56th Airborne Assault Brigade is planned to be reorganized into an Airborne Assault Regiment with a permanent deployment base in Feodosia, Crimea.¹⁷⁸

The organizational increase of the large units previously presented, the establishment of new units, as well as the modernization of military equipment and the professionalization of military personnel lead to the conclusion that the operational capacity of the Southern Military District has almost doubled in the last seven years, reaching about 100,000 troops.¹⁷⁹

In terms of military equipment, Southern Military District has about 800 tanks, more than 2,500 armoured combat vehicles, more than 2,000 100 mm and higher calibre artillery pieces, 240 combat aircraft, and 130 combat and combat support helicopters.¹⁸⁰

Black Sea Fleet

The Black Sea Fleet is a large unit of the Russian Military Naval Forces and along with Caspian Flotilla is subordinated to the Southern Military District as its naval arm. As a large unit, the Black Sea Fleet comprises land, air, air defense and naval components. The headquarter and the main base of the Black Sea Fleet are in Sevastopol at Karantinnaya Bay and Streletskaia Bay.

The basis of the **Land Component** of the Black Sea Fleet is 22nd Army Corps established at the end of 2016 with the ground troops stationed in Crimea after its annexation in 2014. The 22nd Army Corps comprises 810th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade, 382nd Naval Infantry Battalion, two coastal defense missile brigades (11th and 15th), 126th Coastal Defense Brigade armed since 2019 with the Tornado-G MLRS¹⁸¹. As combat support and service support, Black Sea Fleet subordinates a series of regiments: one fleet rocket artillery, one field artillery designed mostly for coastal defense, engineers and CBRN, one logistics brigade and communications and electronic warfare centers.¹⁸²

According to the Ukrainian sources, the 22nd Army Corps is envisaged to be transformed in the future into a Combined Arms Army.¹⁸³

Table 2. Quantity of Main Weapons and Equipment Systems of the Russian Federation Armed Forces on the territory of Crimea according to the VD-11 Annual exchange of military information Main Weapons and Equipment Systems (July 2020):¹⁸⁴

Main Weapons and Equipment Systems	01.01.2014	01.01.2020	Difference
------------------------------------	------------	------------	------------

¹⁷⁸ Izvestia. Shoigu announced the creation of a new airborne regiment in Crimea, 2020. .

¹⁷⁹ Wilk, A. 2020.

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem

¹⁸¹ Multiple Launch Rocket System designed to destroy enemy fortifications and artillery systems with a high degree of precision.

¹⁸² Ibidem

¹⁸³ OSCE. Lieutenant-General Leonid Holopatiuk, Chief of Main Department of Military Cooperation and Verification of the Armed Forces of Ukraine - 950th Meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation, 2020 at <https://www.osce.org/forum-for-security-cooperation/457468>

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem

Main Weapons and Equipment Systems	01.01.2014	01.01.2020	Difference
Battle tanks	0	31	+31
Armored combat vehicles	117	305	+188
Armored combat vehicles look-alikes	53	62	+9
Artillery systems	30	128	+98
Combat aircrafts	22	85	+63
Helicopters	0	34	+34
Anti-tank guided missile launchers permanently/ integrally mounted on armored vehicles	9	39	+39
TOTAL	231	684	+453

The table implies that the number of Russian main weapons and equipment systems in Crimea increased almost three times.

The **Naval Component** of the Black Sea Fleet includes 30th Surface Ship Division comprising 11th Antisubmarine Ship Brigade with five frigates (3 Admiral Grigorovich Class, and 2 Krivak Class) and the Guided Missile Cruiser Moskva (Slava Class)¹⁸⁵ which is also the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, 197th Assault Ship Brigade with another 7 landing ships (3 Aligator Class and 4 Ropucha Class). In terms of submarine warfare 4th Independent Submarine Brigade operates 6 Kilo II Class operational submarines and one Kilo I Class in the course to be refitted or presumed for training purposes.¹⁸⁶

The Black Sea Naval Component includes also 68th Coastal Defense Ship Brigade with coastal defense and minesweeping capabilities, 41st Missile Boat Brigade with 4 Buyan Class Corvettes, two Bora Class Corvettes and five Tarantul III-IV Class and 184th Coastal Defense Ship Brigade with small patrolling ships and tactical antisubmarine capabilities.

The combat capabilities of the Black Sea Naval Component have been increased in the last seven years totalling up to 70 warships, 6 submarines with a total volley of 84 missiles.¹⁸⁷

Table 3. Naval platforms commissioned in the Black Sea Fleet since 2014¹⁸⁸

Class	Name	Main Armament	Commissioned
Attack Submarine	B-261 Novorossiysk	4 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2014
Attack Submarine	B-237 Rostov-on-Don	4 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2014
Attack Submarine	B-262 Stary Oskol	4 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2015

¹⁸⁵ According to a TASS report on 3 July 2020, the ship completed repairs and maintenance and according to a source it will remain in service until 2040.

¹⁸⁶ Compiled from "Black Sea Fleet" at <https://www.kchf.ru/eng/ship/today.htm> and Wikipedia at [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flota_M%C4%83rii_Negre_\(rus%C4%83\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flota_M%C4%83rii_Negre_(rus%C4%83))

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem

¹⁸⁸ Black Sea Fleet - Russian Navy 2021 at <http://russianships.info/eng/today/>

Attack Submarine	B-265 Krasnodar	4 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2015
Attack Submarine	B-268 Velikiy Novgorod	4 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2016
Attack Submarine	B-271 Kolpino	4 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2016
Guided Missile Frigate	Admiral Grigorovich	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2016
Guided Missile Frigate	Admiral Essen	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2016
Guided Missile Frigate	Admiral Makarov	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2017
Offshore Patrol Vessel	Vasily Bykov	8 Igla portable SAM	2018
Offshore Patrol Vessel	Dmitry Rogachev	8 Igla portable SAM	2019
Offshore Patrol Vessel	Pavel Derzhavin	8 Igla portable SAM	2020
Missile Corvette	Vyshniy Volochek	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2018
Missile Corvette	Orehovo-Zuyevo	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2018
Missile Corvette	Ingushetiya	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2019
Missile Corvette	Grayvoron	8 Kalibr Cruise Missiles	2021
Coastal Minesweepers	Ivan Antonov	-	2018
Coastal Minesweepers	Vladimir Emelyanov	-	2018
Landing Crafts	D-199	-	2014
Landing Crafts	D-296	-	2015
Landing Crafts	D-309	-	2018
21 platforms with at least 80 Kalibr Systems introduced in the Fleet inventory in seven years			

Annexed Crimea is also an opportunity for the Russian shipyards in the area. Immediately after the occupation of the peninsula, the Russian Ministry of Economy announced that it would begin a process of modernizing the shipyards in Kerch, Sevastopol and Feodosia, the latter having a tradition in the construction of air-

cushioned landing crafts.¹⁸⁹ The Zaliv shipyard in Kerch has begun forming the hulls of two future Project 23900 universal amphibious assault ships. The work is being carried out with the experience gained in constructing Mistral-class ships. In May 2020, the Russian Ministry of Defense signed a contract for the construction of two helicopter carrier worth about 100 billion rubles. The laying ceremony of the Project 23900 ships was held with the participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin on 20 July 2020.¹⁹⁰

Crimea offers a strategic base for expeditionary military operations on different directions: the Balkans and Caucasus, while naval forces deployed in either the Black Sea or the Eastern Mediterranean Sea could provide multiple defensive barriers in the direction of the Turkish straits, constraining entry by a potential adversary.¹⁹¹

Once the security situation in the Black Sea was settled after Crimea and Eastern Ukraine invasion in 2014, Moscow shifted its ambition of being a global maritime player from Black Sea towards Mediterranean Sea and beyond to the Planetary Ocean. It started after 2013 with reinforcing of Russia's permanent naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and continued after the military intervention in Syria. The Black Sea Fleet contributed by sending its 5th Operational Squadron and its Commander was also responsible for performing the command and control of naval operations functions.¹⁹² A naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea also offers Russia the opportunity to expand its presence and influence in important regions of the Middle East and North Africa.

The **Black Sea Fleet Air Component** comprises one regiment with anti-surface warfare and ISR capabilities (Su-24M and Su-30SM), two squadrons for anti-submarine warfare (Ka-27 and Mi-14) and one patrol transport squadron (An-26, Be-12PS and Mi-8). In Crimea is also deployed 27th Mixed Aviation Division (Belbek) consisting of 3 regiments: fighter aviation (Su-27P/SM), mixed aviation (Su-24M2 and Su-25) and helicopters (Ka-52, Mi-28N, Mi-35M, Mi-8) subordinated to the 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army (Rostov-on-Don) under Southern Military District.

Air and Air Defense and A2/AD of the Southern Military District

The Air and Air Defense forces and capabilities in the Southern Military District are the second largest in the Black Sea Region after Turkey and are grouped into 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army headquartered at Rostov-on-Don, comprising three mixed aviation divisions with a total of 15 squadrons of fighters (MiG-29 Fulcrum and Su-27 Flanker), fighter and ground attack aircrafts (Su-24M Fencer, Su-27SM3, Su-30M2 and

¹⁸⁹ The Ministry of Economy and Trade considers the development of the three Crimean shipyards to be promising, May 20, 2014 at https://flotprom.ru/news/?ELEMENT_ID=166077

¹⁹⁰ White, R. Russian Navy's Project 23900 LHDs Taking Shape in Kerch. *Naval Post*, 2020 at <https://navalpost.com/zaliv-kerch-project-23900-udc-amphibious-assault-ship/>

¹⁹¹ Delanoe, I. Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force. *CNA Occasional Paper*, pp. 19–21, 2019 at https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf

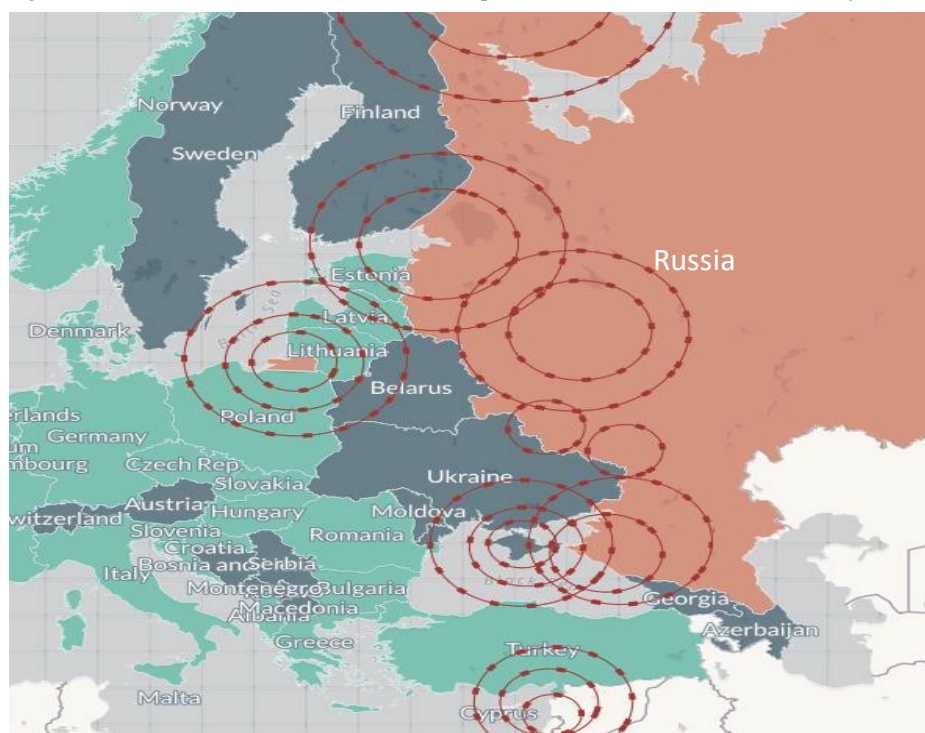
¹⁹² Kuimova & Wezeman. 2018.

Su-34) and attack aircrafts (Su-25 Frogfoot).¹⁹³ According to different Russian media reports¹⁹⁴ first batch-produced multi-role fifth-generation fighter jet Sukhoi-57 started to be introduced in the inventory of 1st Guards Mixed Aviation Division (Krymsk) and 27th Mixed Aviation Division (Belbek, Crimea). Directly subordinated to the 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army Headquarter are 535th Independent Mixed Aviation Regiment (Rostov-on-Don) with two mixed transport squadrons with An-26RT, An-12BK, Tu-134, L-410UVP-E20 and 3624th Air Base (Erebuni, Armenia) with one fighter and one mixed helicopter squadron (MiG-29, MiG-29UB, Mi-24P, Mi-8MTV, Mi-8SMV-2). MiG-29 deployed in Armenia is supposed to be replaced starting with 2021 with Su-30. Besides Erebuni Air Base in Armenia, 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army subordinate other nine air bases on continental Russia¹⁹⁵.

In terms of air defense, 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army comprises 51st Air Defense Division (Rostov-on-Don) and 31st Air Defense Division (Sevastopol) besides 7th Military Base (Primorskoe, Abkhazia Russian-occupied Georgia) and 988th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment (Gyumri, Armenia).

The 1017th Air Defense Command Post near Rostov-on-Don of 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army is the core of the **Anti-Access/Denial Area (A2/AD)** in the Black Sea Region, coordinating land, air, coastal and naval air and air defense capabilities to

Figure 7. The A2/AD medium from Eastern Europe (Source: CSIS Missile Defence Project)



¹⁹³ Compiled by the author from Military Balance in the Black Sea, Russian International Affairs Council at <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blackseamilitary> and Wikipedia at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_Air_and_Air_Defence_Forces_Army

¹⁹⁴ TASS. First batch-produced Su-57 delivered to regiment in Southern Military District, 2020 at <https://tass.com/defense/1239789>

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem

provide quick response options against any hostile military action against Russia, succeeding in establishing in the last 7 years an interconnected and multilayered air defense network protecting Southern Military District military capabilities.

Right after Crimea annexation the A2/AD bubble was extended to the West by at least 300 km by seizing the two Ukrainian SAM regiments in the peninsula that were subordinated to the 31st Air Defense Division (Sevastopol). Also, Russia captured other three SAM regiments from the Ukrainian Army, two comprising S-300 battalions and one with three Buk-M1 batteries. By 2018, S-300 regiments were replaced with S-400 Triumf systems,¹⁹⁶ complemented with Pantsir-S1 short-range SAM for their own air defense protection.

The A2/AD was further extended by introducing in the Black Sea Fleet inventory the new naval platforms equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles, with a 1,500 km radius or 2,600 km in the modified version. Coastal defense relies on Bal systems with a 120 km range using Kh-35 turbojet subsonic cruise anti-ship missile, that can also be launched from helicopters, and Bastion-P using P-800 Oniks supersonic anti-ship missile. Along with this, new early warning and modernized radars were introduced in the air and air defense Southern Military District architecture and interconnected with the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems.

In the Russian Armed Forces modernization process a special focus is on digitalization of the automated command and control (C2) with the aim to enhance the speed and efficiency of the military decision-making process in order to achieve superiority over any potential adversary. The system is called “Automated Control System” or ASU and include other C4ISR elements and there are different variants depending on the arm or branch of service, the latest one being introduced in the Aerospace Forces in the Central Military District named “Fundament-M” enhances air-defense capabilities by integrating the various platforms such as the S-400 and Pantsir-S1 with related radars and unites these in a single circuit. Unlike other variants of ASU, the “Fundament-M” can interface simultaneously with several radars and missile systems of different types and purposes. It can also be used to monitor the air traffic of civil aircraft.¹⁹⁷

Even though there are not specific reports regarding the operationalization of the ASU “Fundament-M” in Southern Military District, there are indications that parts of this are already in place especially along the Ukrainian Border and Black Sea Coast, Crimea included and other components were tested during KAVKAZ-2020 strategic exercise. According to a press statement of the Chief of the Aerospace Force’s Radio-Technical

¹⁹⁶ Flanagan, S. et al. Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security, Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security. *RAND Corporation*. 2020 at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA357-1.html

¹⁹⁷ McDermott, R. Russia’s Air Defense Capabilities Boosted by Automated Systems. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 18 Issue: 44. 2021 at <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-air-defense-capabilities-boosted-by-automated-systems/>

Troops, Major-General Andrei Koban *"The Aerospace Force is setting up mobile radio-technical units to promptly boost the combat capabilities of radio-technical troops in endangered directions. The radio-technical troops' units outfitted with the latest Fundament-M automated command and control systems, alert and combat alert radars, such as Nebo-M, Podlyot, Kasta-2-2, Sopka and others are on combat duty in that region"*.¹⁹⁸

Depending on military and security threats against Russian interests in the region the possibility of deploying Iskander nuclear-capable cruise missiles (500 km range)¹⁹⁹ and Tor-M2 missile system in Crimea with profound impact on local military capabilities is also considered.²⁰⁰ Moreover, long-range supersonic nuclear capable bombers Tu-22M3 of Southern Military District often perform long range and long endurance flights over Black Sea escorted by fighter jets. Regularly, Russian long-range aviation performs flights over the waters of the Arctic, the Northern Atlantic, the Black and Baltic Seas and the Pacific Ocean.²⁰¹

Two years after military intervention in Syria, on January 20, 2017, Russia and Syria signed a long-term agreement with Syria to expand their naval and air base in Tartus and Latakia, respectively,²⁰² with the declared purpose of combating terrorism in the region. In fact, through this agreement Russia extended and permanentized its military



Figure 8. The main stage of the Kavkaz-2020 strategic command and staff exercises (Source: <http://www.kremlin.ru>)

presence in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and along with this, a new A2/AD bubble was created that overlaps the Black Sea A2/AD umbrella. By achieving this, Russia created a continuous line of defense along the NATO Eastern and South Eastern border from Kola

¹⁹⁸ TASS. Russia sets up mobile radar reconnaissance units, 2020 at <https://tass.com/defense/1234725>

¹⁹⁹ New Strategy Center. Why the Black Sea Matters. *New Strategy Center and Center for American Seapower, Hudson Institute*. 2016 at <http://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Policy-Paper-NSC-and-Center-for-American-Sea-Power.pdf>

²⁰⁰ Sukhankin, S. Russia Pours More Military Hardware Into 'Fortress Crimea'. *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 14 Issue: 147 2017 at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0d7ace4.html>

²⁰¹ TASS. Two Russian Tu-22M3 strategic bombers perform flight over Black Sea, 2020 at . <https://tass.com/defense/1121939>

²⁰² Nordland, R. Russia Signs Deal for Syria Bases; Turkey Appears to Accept Assad. *The New York Times*, 2017 at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deal.html?_r=0

Peninsula in the North, Kaliningrad in the Centre, Crimea in the South West and Syria in the South,

Besides the objective of denying air, land, and naval access to regions of interest from a potential adversary, such capability brings considerable political and security challenges for NATO and strengthen the Russian quest as a global power player. For sure, Russia's quest to expand A2/AD bubble will continue along with its expanding political and military presence in North Africa in order to cover the Southern NATO border also, NATO being at the risk of being confined within its own borders through airspace denial and naval and ground force maneuverability limitations.²⁰³

Military Training and Exercises in the Southern Military District

Since the dissolution of USSR, Russia was confronted with various armed conflicts and small wars, inside its territory and the war in Georgia that brought a series of lessons learned about the level of readiness, training and capabilities of its Armed Forces. So, at the beginning of 2009 new military reforms were initiated by the Russian defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov,²⁰⁴ The goal of these reforms was to make Russia able to fight large scale, regional wars against a relevant conventional adversary. The effects of these reforms were later demonstrated during operations that led to annexation of Crimea, and during Russia's interventions in conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and in Syria.

Since 2014, Russia embarked on a continuous program of training and readiness checks of forces and command and control systems and processes to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Armed Forces and to make the necessary adjustments. During the last seven years, Russian Armed Forces conducted thousands of military exercises at all operational levels, that have grown both in size and complexity. The most important ones are the annual strategic-operational exercises that rotate at four years: Kavkaz (Caucasus), Tsentr (Center), Vostok (East) and Zapad (West) including all other preliminary training activities and snap-readiness inspections reintroduced after 2013.²⁰⁵

If, from professional and complexity training point of view, the Southern Military District does not differ from other military districts, the main characteristic is that it shifted its main focus from the mountainous terrain training ranges from continental Russia to the joint land, naval and air exercises in the Black Sea basin and Crimea. Also, the increased number of undeclared military training activities, snap exercises, and verification inspections along with increased number strategic aviation, fighters and

²⁰³ Kangas, E. Containing NATO: Russia's Growing A2/AD Capability in the Mediterranean. *Georgetown Security Studies Review*. 2017 at <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2017/02/21/containing-nato-russias-growing-a2ad-capability-in-the-mediterranean/>

²⁰⁴ Anatoly Eduardovich Serdyukov (born 8 January 1962) is a Russian politician and businessman who was the Minister of Defense of Russia from 15 February 2007 to 6 November 2012. During his tenure as defense minister, he launched several major reforms of the Russian military.

²⁰⁵ International Institute of Strategic Studies. *The Military Balance 2018*. London: Routledge, 2018.

bombers sorties and longtime presence of naval platforms and submarines deployments in the Black Sea are of great regional security concern.²⁰⁶

Due to the lack of transparency, the precise number of exercises and the military personnel involved in these remains somewhat uncertain. It is believed that, depending on the strategic communication political objectives the exact size of military exercises is prone to both exaggeration and understatement.

Anyway, all these intense military training activities together with military annexation of Crimea, invasion of Eastern Ukraine and the expeditionary campaign in Syria gave to the Russian military a great deal of special up-to-date experience operating in a wide range of scenarios and conditions and, from political point of view, brought a sort of confidence for the leadership that embarked on a more assertive policy on the international stage.

The most important training event in the Southern Military District is the series of quadrennial strategic-operational exercises codenamed “Kavkaz”. During “Kavkaz” exercises part of mobilization systems are also checked by rotation, including coordination between civilian and military agencies at federal, regional and local levels and involved reserves and other ministries like health, communications and transport. During “Kavkaz 2016” a real-time test was conducted by the Russian Defense Ministry taking the direct command of regional and local authorities.

After Crimea annexation and Eastern Ukraine invasion, starting with “Kavkaz 2016” and later on during “Kavkaz 2020”, Russia intended to reaffirm its control over the occupied Crimean Peninsula and to demonstrate its military supremacy and domination in the Black Sea region.

According to a study conducted by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence²⁰⁷, during the exercise “Kavkaz 2020” Russia delivered the following key messages:

- effort to improve its network-centric warfare potential and C4ISR capabilities;
- rehearsing coordination, mobilization, combined-arms action, force integration and tactical interoperability while paying attention to testing of territorial-defense measures
- rehearsing operations in an electronically contested operational environment;
- ability to adapt to a new security dynamic and quickly incorporate lessons learnt from its military operations abroad into its strategic military exercise;
- ability to operate on two fronts (Southern Military District and Western Military District);

²⁰⁶ Ibidem

²⁰⁷ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Exercise *Kavkaz 2020* - a final test of Russian military reform? 2020 at <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/exercise-kavkaz-2020-a-final-test-of-russian-military-reform/4>



Figure 9. The main stage of the Kavkaz-2020 strategic command and staff exercises (Source: <http://www.kremlin.ru>)

• conducting a sophisticated theatre-level operation using different military tactics, while continuing managing other operations across the globe in Syria, Ukraine, Libya and elsewhere.

During “Kavkaz 2020” new weaponry and multiple domains

strike capabilities were tested, including UAV’s and Electronic Warfare as force multipliers against Russia’s adversaries. Also, during “Kavkaz 2020” Russia sent to the international community the geopolitical message that its readiness and mobilization potential remain high even during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰⁸

The whole spectrum approach

Beyond using and demonstrating its military capabilities, Russia is also applying asymmetrical means of political and economic warfare²⁰⁹ in this region, aimed to disrupt and incapacitate the nations’ sovereign decision- and policy making and their democratic institutions.

From a geo-economical, commercial and energy point of view, the Black Sea is an area of maximum interest for the Russian Federation, being a major hub for commercial, energy and natural resources transport to and from Europe, Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia. Moscow’s goal is to strictly control these sea routes to ensure freedom of movement in the Black Sea basin, but also to the Turkish straits, respectively the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, Moscow uses the energy dependence of some states on Russia to drive political wedges undermining the cohesion and unity of action of the EU and NATO.

Gazprom began shipping gas via Turkish Stream (former TurkStream), including to Bulgaria and North Macedonia, on 1 January 2020, replacing supplies via the Trans-

²⁰⁸ Ibidem

²⁰⁹ Isolation policy, access denial, stirring conflicts in other regions, propaganda (injecting pro-Moscow, anti-NATO stories, encouraging euro-scepticism), manipulation, subversion, political corruption, patronage networks, and election stalemates to paralyze the government, financing the socialist and nationalist parties, supporting separatists, energy dependence, it exploits ethnic, financial, and social factors to unsettle the local government, engaged in media and cultural warfare and so on.

Balkan pipeline through Ukraine and Romania. The pipeline was inaugurated on 8 January 2020 by presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.²¹⁰ By completing this energy project, Russia gained the strategic goal to change the regional gas flows in South-East Europe by diverting the transit through Ukraine and the Trans Balkan Pipeline system, making Turkey a major hub for Russian gas delivery to Europe. Construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in southern Turkey by the Russian state nuclear corporation ROSATOM will further deepen cooperation between Turkey and Russian on energy field. The first unit expected to commence operations by 2023. The nuclear power plant is expected to have an operational life of 60 years, with an extension period of 20 years, with an installed capacity of 4.8GW. The estimated project cost is 20 billion USD.²¹¹

In an attempt to decrease its dependence on Russian natural gas, Turkey started to import natural gas from other states such as Algeria, Nigeria, Iran, Azerbaijan and the United States. Concurrently, Turkey signed new projects, such as Turk Stream and TANAP, and increased its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports. These steps have made it possible for Turkey to decrease the share of Russian gas from 59 percent in 2012 to 34 percent in 2019.²¹²

Thanks to the discoveries of important offshore natural gas fields in the last decade, the Black Sea is emerging as an important regional energy hub, supplementing through its own resources the internal consumption needs of riparian states, but also for transit to markets in the region, which generates additional revenues, respectively new opportunities and security challenges in the region when it comes to Russia, but not only.

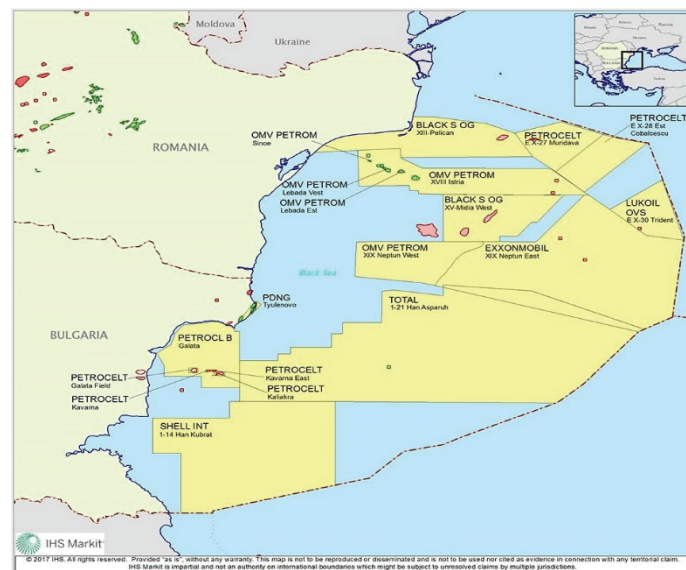


Figure 10. Offshore gas perimeters of Romania and Bulgaria (Source: IHS Markit)

Romania has gas reserves in the offshore area of the Black Sea estimated at 200 bcm, Bulgaria has estimated reserves of about 30-100 bcm. Turkey, after several searches in

²¹⁰ Gazprom. *The pipeline has two lines with a total capacity of 31.5 billion m³/year of natural gas. The first line supplies Turkey and the second line transport natural gas further to South East and Central Europe.*

TurkStream gas pipeline officially launched in grand ceremony. 2020 at

<https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2020/january/article497324/>

²¹¹ Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant. *NSEnergy*, <https://www.nsenenergybusiness.com/projects/akkuyu-nuclear-power-plant-mersin-turkey/>

²¹² Özdemir, G.S. *Perspective: Turkey And Natural Gas. A Second Discovery in the Black Sea. SETA*, p. 2, 2020 at <https://www.setav.org/en/perspective-turkey-and-natural-gas-a-second-discovery-in-the-black-sea/>

the perimeters of Sakarya, near the intersection of the exclusive economic zones of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, discovered the reserve of about 450 bcm.²¹³

To be able to conceptualize the impact of such discoveries, we specify that Romania has an annual consumption of 11 bcm, Bulgaria of about 3.4 bcm, and Turkey reaches a consumption of 48 bcm per year. Apart from Romania, which can cover about 88% of domestic gas consumption from domestic sources, the rest of the states in the Black Sea region depend heavily on imports. The main supplier is Russia, which creates an additional vulnerability for states that import gas from Russia, with Moscow showing more than once that it knows how to use gas as a tool of political pressure.²¹⁴

The interconnection of Romanian national natural gas transport system with those of neighboring countries alongside the BRUA corridor (Bulgaria-Romania-Hungary-Austria), will create the necessary premises for regional diversification and, in the long run, will allow the use of resources extracted from the offshore of the Black Sea. Additional, in the context of contract's expiration regulating the regime of pipelines ensuring the transit of Russian gas, on the territory of Romania, to Bulgaria, Turkey and Balkan countries (pipelines T1, T2, T3), the capacities offered by this pipeline system can create an additional natural gas supply link between the European market and Ukraine and Republic of Moldova which can reduce their dependence on Russian gas.



Figure 11. BRUA gas pipeline. (Source: <http://digi24.ro>)

²¹³ Kraemer, R., Joja, I. Black Sea Gas Campaigning. *Middle East Institute*, 2020 at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/black-sea-gas-campaigning-2020>

²¹⁴ Information on the annual natural gas consumption of the countries in the Black Sea region can be found by consulting the website www.enerdata.net

In this context, Russian *modus operandi* in the Black Sea area is complex and unpredictable, differentiated and looking for long-term solutions. It consists of the use of traditional active measures and reflexive control, creating and maintaining post-Soviet protracted conflicts, maintaining energy insecurity and dependency, exploiting economic and trade advantages and military reinforcement and augmentation.

If up until the 2008 conflict Moscow perceived the Black Sea as a buffer zone between the West and the East, at present this area is now seen as an immediate neighborhood, in which Russia has the ambition to directly influence its political, diplomatic, security, economic, energy, and even socio-cultural interests.²¹⁵ This position, and the need to deny NATO access, is also reflected in Russia's key strategic documents, which underline the threat of NATO proximity and the need for Russia to protect its borders. The 2015 National Security Strategy denounced NATO "increased military activity" and approach of its "military infrastructure toward Russia's borders". An interesting development in the newly approved 2021 National Security Strategy is that while the document repeats the denouncement of NATO's presence near Russian borders, there is no mention of any interest in having a dialogue with NATO.²¹⁶

4. Western responses to Russia's full-spectrum approach in the High North and the Black Sea Region

Russia's willingness and ability to use and to project increasingly more capable military force demonstrated in 2008 in Georgia, in 2014 in Ukraine and in 2015 in Syria have forced NATO, member states and NATO partners to adapt to changing strategic environment and adopt various types of measures aiming to deter possible Russian aggression.²¹⁷ The Western measures to be adopted in response to Russia's more active application of military instruments of national power must however be meticulously tailored to fit the broader strategic and narrower regional context. They should aim to achieve desired deterring effect preferably without triggering Russian reactions that could in turn make the existing conflict of strategic interests spiral out of control. To be effective, these measures must therefore take into consideration possible Russian reactions.

To understand how Russia could react to these Western measures it is therefore important to understand how what Russia does fits into the strategic plans and calculations of the current political elite. When calculating what strategic costs can be imposed on Russia without triggering an overwhelming, dangerous and escalating Russian reaction, Western policymakers must therefore strike a difficult strategic

²¹⁵ Ibidem.

²¹⁶ Buchanan, E. Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy: Cool Change Forecasted for the Polar Regions. *RUSI*. 2021 at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-2021-national-security-strategy-cool-change-forecasted-polar-regions>

²¹⁷ For more on Western deterrence of Russia post-2014 crisis see Vanaga, N. and T. Rostoks, eds. *Deterring Russia in Europe. Defence Strategies for Neighbouring States*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.

balance. On the one hand they must aim to provide a desired level of security to their own constituencies facing an increasingly assertive Russia, but on the other hand they must make Russia understand that these Western measures have an exclusively defensive character. This dual approach based on the idea of building a sufficient level of deterrence combined with high level of strategic transparency and communication with Russia is at the core of NATO strategy of dealing with the Russian challenge as signalled on many occasions by NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg who recently again underlined that NATO's approach to Russia 'combines strong deterrence and defense, with openness to dialogue.'²¹⁸ In the following sections we discuss how these general policy guidelines have been translated into actual NATO policies in the two regional contexts this report examines in more detail.

Western responses in the High North and in the Black Sea Region

In a recently published report RAND identified several issues of particular concern to NATO related to increased Russian military capabilities in general and in the High North more specifically.²¹⁹ These were: improvements in command and control (C2) of Russian joint operations; deployment of long-range strike capabilities and other weapons for anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) in the Western and Northern Fleet OSKs; increasing ambition and ability to hold sea lines of communication (SLOCs) at risk with long-range naval, air and missile systems; sophisticated use of information, cyber, space and electronic warfare (EW) means to contest or deny NATO use of all operational domains; increased force levels and improved readiness, bolstered by major snap exercises and efforts to enhance the professionalism of the Russian Armed Forces; ability to mobilise and rapidly re-deploy forces between OSKs, including into the Kola Peninsula and Russia's Arctic territories.

These developments pose a practical challenge to the ability of Western forces to operate in the High North and thus have a negative impact on the security of countries in the region. Since 2014 Russia has demonstrated not only will but also ability to use its military instruments in the pursuit of its strategic interest both in the neighborhood (Ukraine) but also further away (Syria). This has compelled Western decision makers to implement various countermeasures to limit negative impacts these Russian moves have had on the security in the region and to increase deterrence potential to make the use of these military instrument prohibitively costly for Russia.

²¹⁸ In his recent comments on the results of the discussions on the meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs Stoltenberg underlined that Russia remains the main challenge to be dealt with, that building necessary level of deterrence is still NATO's main task, but dialogue with Russia on issues of mutual interests remains also an important element of NATO strategy. For more details see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_182510.htm

²¹⁹ Black, J., S. J. Flanagan, G. Germanovich, R. Harris, D. Ochmanek, M. Favaro, K. Galai and E. Gloinson *Enhancing deterrence and defence on NATO's northern flank: Allied perspectives on strategic options for Norway*. Santa Monica CA, Rand 2020.

These countermeasures have been taken on both national levels and jointly, within NATO. Since two of the High North countries, Sweden and Finland, are not members of NATO also EU's policies in the field of security could have some importance for improving security situation in the region. However, it seems that the EU's focus on deepening security and defense cooperation has had only limited impact on the security situation in this specific region, although the use by the EU of non-military measures, such as restrictive economic measures against Russia could have had some sobering impact on Russia's strategic behaviour. In addition, the need to deal with a more assertive Russia has provided important incentive for a better co-ordination of EU and NATO policies and efforts at addressing the new set of security challenges.

Two recently published reports provide details on how the national governments in Northern Europe, NATO and the EU have responded to these recent developments by increasing military capabilities and thus improving national and regional resilience.²²⁰ In the first of the reports focus was on collective efforts, including regional and bilateral efforts, while the second one paid special attention to national policies in this field.

Multilateral measures

Among the EU initiatives one of the most important ones was PESCO cooperation introduced in the Lisbon Treaty.²²¹ The aim was to deepen defense cooperation between those EU member states that have expressed interest and willingness to engage in this type of deeper cooperation as best way of cooperative addressing of problems related to defense capabilities. In addition, the EU also launched two other initiatives. The first one was the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD) that is to provide a picture of the existing defense capability landscape in Europe and to identify potential cooperation areas.²²² The second one was the establishment of the European Defense Fund (EDF) that is to facilitate defense cooperation by offering grants for collaborative research in innovative defense technologies and products and by joint development and acquisition of defense equipment and technology.²²³ For various political reasons only Finland and Sweden among the High North countries are members of both PESCO and the EDF but Norway has also signalled its interest in joining the EDF during the new period.²²⁴

In the Black Sea region, Romania and Bulgaria are both participating members in PESCO, as well as the European Defense Fund. While both are involved in various PESCO projects, it is worth noting that the projects where both riparian states cooperate are the

²²⁰ Frisell, E. H., Pallin, K., Engvall, J., Aronsson, A., Gustafsson, J., Dalsjö, R., et al. Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020. Part I: Collective Defence. *FOI Report*. Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency 2021 and Frisell, E. H., Pallin, K., Engvall, J., Aronsson, A., Gustafsson, J., Dalsjö, R., et al. Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020: Part II National Capabilities. *FOI Report*. Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2021.

²²¹ <https://pesco.europa.eu/about/>

²²² [https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/coordinated-annual-review-on-defence-\(card\)](https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/coordinated-annual-review-on-defence-(card))

²²³ https://ec.europa.eu/defence-industry-space/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf_en

²²⁴ https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/participation_programmes/id2843246/

European Union Network of Diving Centers (EUNDC) – focused on training courses for divers and rescue swimmers; *European Medical Command* – a coordinated entity meant to increase the readiness of military medical support; *Military Mobility* – aimed at supporting member states' commitment to simplify and standardize cross-border military transport procedures.²²⁵ Beyond the need for more cooperation between riparian countries at a bilateral level, regional security could benefit greatly from a more enhanced cross-border cooperation between these states within the EU framework.

NATO has been adapting to the new strategic situation in the conceptual domain, by developing new strategies of dealing with this new challenge, and by increasing military capabilities in its area of responsibility. These steps were intended to improve the Alliance's responsiveness, readiness and capability for reinforcement as well have positive impact on NATO's ability to deter any aggression and defend its members in the Euro-Atlantic area. For various reasons related to the way NATO and its partners are supposed to function as well as specific traits of the Russian political system, the Alliance had to deal with serious gaps and vulnerabilities when implementing its policies, also in the High North. Being an alliance made up of 30 countries with their specific security interests and strategic cultures whose policy should, at least in theory be consensus based, NATO faced Russia with national command over its armed forces and relatively recent experience of waging wars in its neighborhood. What was also an important factor influencing NATO's and EU's decisions and policies was the lack of a common understanding of Russia as a strategic threat or challenge. According to a recently published study on Western security policy Russia is viewed in Europe as unimportant and not posing any serious threat, as one of threats, but not the most important one, as one of threats similar to other threats, as the highest threat with other threats being equally significant or as the dominant threat by far.²²⁶

The dramatic changes of the security environment in the Black Sea Region after the Russia's Crimea annexation and the Eastern Ukraine invasion triggered a deep process of reflection at NATO level followed by important initiatives and decisions on deterrence and defense adaptation posture. At the 2014 NATO Summit, in Wales, Allies agreed the Readiness Action Plan (RAP),²²⁷ which set the direction for the strategic adaptation of the Alliance, as a reassurance about NATO's capacity to defend the Allies.

A complex and comprehensive process was initiated after NATO Summit in Wales (2014) which was concluded with the following capability augmentation:

²²⁵ European Council. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)'s projects – Overview, 2021 at . <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46846/pesco-projects-20-nov-2020.pdf>

²²⁶ Meijer, H., & Brooks, S. G. "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back". *International Security*, 45(4), 7-43, 2021 at doi:10.1162/isec_a_00405, On the classification of Russia as a threat see Table 1 on page 17.

²²⁷ The implementation of RAP measures continues based on voluntary contributions of Allies, through a vigorous program of military activities mainly on the Eastern flank.

- a threefold increase of the NATO Response Force (NRF) up to a division level and an increase of its readiness and responsiveness level, with a Spearhead Force at its core, able to be deployed within days throughout the Alliance (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – VJTF);
- the establishment of new command and control structures on the territory of the Eastern NATO member states to facilitate training and reinforcements.²²⁸

Two years later, at the Warsaw Summit (2016), based on concrete intelligence and comprehensive strategic analysis, NATO made key decision to continue its adaptation to provide for a better protection for its citizens and territories by strengthening the deterrence and defense posture materialized in:²²⁹

- creation of a rotational forward presence on the Eastern flank, namely the **enhanced Forward Presence/eFP** in the north-eastern part and the **tailored Forward Presence/ tFP** in the south-eastern one;
- declaration of the Initial Operational Capacity for the NATO Ballistic Missile defense system;
- increased strategic awareness and anticipation;
- reinforced Allied maritime posture;
- the cyber defense pledge;
- enhancing resilience and civil preparedness of Allied states;
- reconfirmation of the role of nuclear deterrence as an essential element of the Allied deterrence and defense posture.

More practical decisions were adopted at Brussels NATO Summit (2018) where besides reconfirmation NATO commitment to preserving the credibility, coherence and resilience of the deterrence and defense posture, the increasing of its responsiveness, heightening readiness and improving reinforcement were also included.

Concrete, the most important decisions take were the ones on:²³⁰

- having, by 2020, 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels ready to use within 30 days;
- increasing the deployment, reinforcement and sustainment of Allied forces, also by the rigorous enablement of SACEUR's Area of Responsibility;
- preparing the necessary procedures for invoking Article 5 in hybrid scenarios;
- adapting the NATO Command Structure, including developing a Corps-level land component command HQ on the Romanian territory.

The 31st NATO summit in Brussels (June 2021) was one of the visionary decisions, starting from the NATO 2030 strategic reflection process, launched in London in 2019, followed

²²⁸ NATO Wales Summit Guide https://www.nato.int/assets/pdf/pdf_publications

²²⁹ Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Collective Defense, Deterrence and Defense Posture, Allied decisions, 2021 at <https://nato.mae.ro/en/node/1030>

²³⁰ Ibidem

by the major directions of action for the next decade, including the elaboration of a New Strategic Concept. It was decided to further strengthen the military deterrent and defense stance, strengthen the political profile, increase engagement with partners, increase resilience and maintain technological advancement for a stronger, adapted, active and globally relevant Alliance, ready to defend its citizens and territory. Also, deepening NATO's relationship with the European Union and with partners who share the same values in both the High North and the Black Sea region was on the agenda.

The Black Sea Region represents for Romania an area of maximum strategic interest, from a military, economic, energetic and commercial point of view and integrates overlapping dimensions of risks and threats that require a coordinated response, both from riparian and allied states consolidating Romania's profile as a security provider in this region²³¹.

Tailored Forward Presence

Romania played an essential role in the development of the **tailored Forward Presence**, offering its own forces and command structures that have become multinational NATO structures, dedicated to the defense of the Southeastern region of the Eastern flank.

By the establishment of the Headquarters Multinational Corps South-East (Sibiu, temporary in Bucharest) in Romania, NATO's tailored Forward Presence was provided with a coherent command and control architecture along with the Headquarters Multinational Division South East (Bucharest), which coordinates other two NATO Forces Integration Units, one in Romania (Bucharest) and one in Bulgaria (Sofia), and the Headquarters Multinational Brigade South East (Craiova). It is worth to mention that Polish mechanized forces are present at Multinational Brigade South East in Romania while a Romanian self-propelled defense battery and support elements participates in Poland within the US-led fighting group.

Ballistic Missile Defense Shield (BMD)

The development of the Allied missile defense architecture transposes the decisions taken at the last NATO Summits, based on the principles of indivisibility of security, solidarity and defense of the entire allied territory. The Initial Operational Capability (IOC) of NATO's ballistic missile defense system was declared at the NATO Summit in Warsaw (July 2016). This is a significant step towards a NATO BMD that offers a more advanced capability to defend populations, territories and allied forces against a potential ballistic missile attack. The decision was made possible by the transfer of command and control actions (C2) of the Aegis Ashore site from Deveselu (Romania) to

²³¹ Ministerul Apărării Naționale. Cartea Albă a Apărării 2021. (Ministry of National Defense – The Defense White Book 2021), 2021 at <https://sgg.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CARTA-ALBA-A-APARARII-.pdf>

NATO, the facility hosted by Romania representing a significant part of this increase in NATO capabilities in the field.²³²

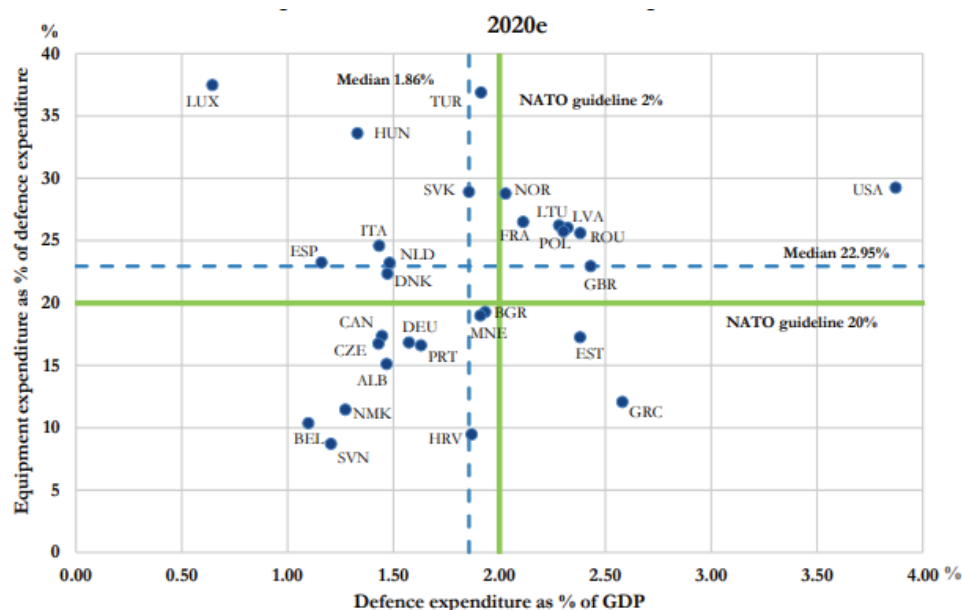


Figure 12. NATO countries allocations

Defense allocation increase

The Wales Summit Pledge on Defense Investment was agreed at the NATO Summit in Wales, aiming at a commitment by Member States to reach the target of 2% of Gross Domestic Product allocated to defense spending over 10 years (by 2024). The commitment indicates the allocation of at least 20% of the defense budget for the acquisition of major equipment and research and development activities, as well as the improvement of individual results on the level of deployment and sustainability of troops in Theaters of Operations.

Among the three NATO countries in the region (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) only Romania met both requirements in 2020 (see graphic)²³³, while Bulgaria recorded 3.18% from GDP in 2019, the biggest relative increase in military spending globally, as a result of the full payment for eight new F-16 Block 70 fighter jets along with the related equipment and weapons from the United States.²³⁴

According to SIPRI, Bulgaria and Romania increased their military spending in the period between 2010 and 2019 by more than 165% and 154%, respectively.

²³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Romania and NATO, 2021 at <https://www.mae.ro/node/46982>

²³³ NATO. Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2020) 2020 at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_f12014/assets/pdf/2020/10/pdf/pr-2020-104-en.pdf

²³⁴ Ralev, R. Bulgaria tops 2019 global ranking of military spending increase – SIPRI. 2020 *SeeNews*. At <https://seenews.com/news/bulgaria-tops-2019-global-ranking-of-military-spending-increase-sipri-696750>

Training and exercises

On the training dimension of tFP, a **Combined Joint Enhanced Training Initiative (CJET)** was established and has been fully operational since the fall of 2018, allowing contributing Allies to affiliate/send troops in Romania for an integrated training during peacetime, in order to increase interoperability and defense capacity.²³⁵

On the air dimension an **Air Combined Training Initiative (ACTI)** was implemented, as a framework for joint training activities and exercises with the Allies, including on the Romanian and Bulgarian territory.²³⁶

In terms of common training activities is worth to underline the exercise **SABER GUARDIAN 19** which was the largest multinational exercise conducted on Romanian soil in 2019 (June 3-24, 2019), involving 13,500 troops and 3,500 technical and military equipment from six Allied and partner countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and US. The exercise demonstrated the cohesion, unity and determination of Allies and partners, as well as NATO's reaction capacity on its South-Eastern flank. On naval training, **BREEZE 20** exercise organized by Bulgaria in Western Black Sea took place between July 10-18, 2020 with the participation from Georgia, Italy, Romania, Turkey and the US, based on complex scenarios of fighting surface threats.²³⁷ Two naval groups, Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group Two (SNMCMG2) participated. 14 countries participated in this exercise, with 30 ships and 2,065 personnel. The participating countries were Albania, Belgium, Great Britain, Georgia, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, USA, Turkey, and Ukraine.²³⁸ Moreover, this autumn SNMCMG2 units have entered the Black Sea for the third time this year, in order to conduct routine operations, as well as a port visit to Batumi, Georgia. SNMCMG2 consists of ships from Spain, Italy, and Turkey, and is joined by a ship from Romania and one from Bulgaria once the group enters the BSR.²³⁹

The biggest training exercise held in 2021 was **NOBLE JUMP 21** (19 May-2 June), planned under the authority of the SACEUR and under the supervision of the Allied Joint Force

²³⁵ Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Collective Deterrence and Defence Posture, 2021 at <https://nato.mae.ro/en/node/1030>

²³⁶ Ibidem

²³⁷ Ibidem

²³⁸ MARCOM. NATO ships exercised in exercise Breeze 2021 in the Black Sea 2021 at <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2021/nato-ships-exercised-in-exercise-breeze-in-the-black-sea> ;

²³⁹ MARCOM NATO ships return to Black Sea, 2021 at <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2021/nato-ships-return-to-black-sea>

Command Naples (JFC Naples), Italy. NOBLE JUMP 21 exercised the rapid dislocation of Allied forces on the territory of Romania.²⁴⁰

In addition to this perceptual challenge NATO and its partners must also deal with the major NATO capability problem – the fact that the alliance’s forces are spread across many countries, kept in low readiness and are not configured or trained for war. Although the FOI report saw some progress being made by NATO as the alliance managed to secure forward presence as well rotational and rapid reaction forces NATO still has visible problems with assembling the same numbers of ground forces as Russia that the alliance wants to deter.²⁴¹

Regional frameworks

In addition to these multilateral solutions also several regional bilateral cooperation frameworks were established involving countries from the High North and the Black Sea Region. A detailed overview over frameworks operating in the Northern Europe and involving Nordic High North countries – Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland – is provided in a recently published study on their place in the new European security architecture.²⁴²

The **Framework Nations Concept (FNC)** is the most inclusive of all regional arrangements with Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and 16 other NATO and NATO partners. The aim of this network is to enhance NATO’s deterrence and defense by linking forces up to brigade-level, to the German force structure. Although not all NATO members responded positively to this initiative it is clear that any decisions on the use of the available capabilities will be subject to ordinary force generation procedures in NATO or the EU. The main task of this format is to facilitate common training and exercises, improve interoperability and modernisation of equipment. As all High North countries take part in this framework it could be expected that this participation will translate in better coordination of their efforts also in the High North context. As far as participation among BSR countries is concerned, both Romania and Bulgaria are part of the grouping led by Germany. The focus of Germany’s FNC grouping is broader, as it encompasses the participation of 15 Allies, and “a dual focus on capability development and the delivery of usable forces”.²⁴³ Following the Wales Summit, the Germany-led grouping’s focus was expanded to also encompass building up larger multinational formations. The intention of this scheme is to further a more structured and

²⁴⁰ NOBLE JUMP 21 was the third stage of the Allied exercise STEADFAST DEFENDER 2021, collective defense exercise based on an Article 5 scenario, with the participation of 20 Allied and partner states, which took place in May-June 2021.

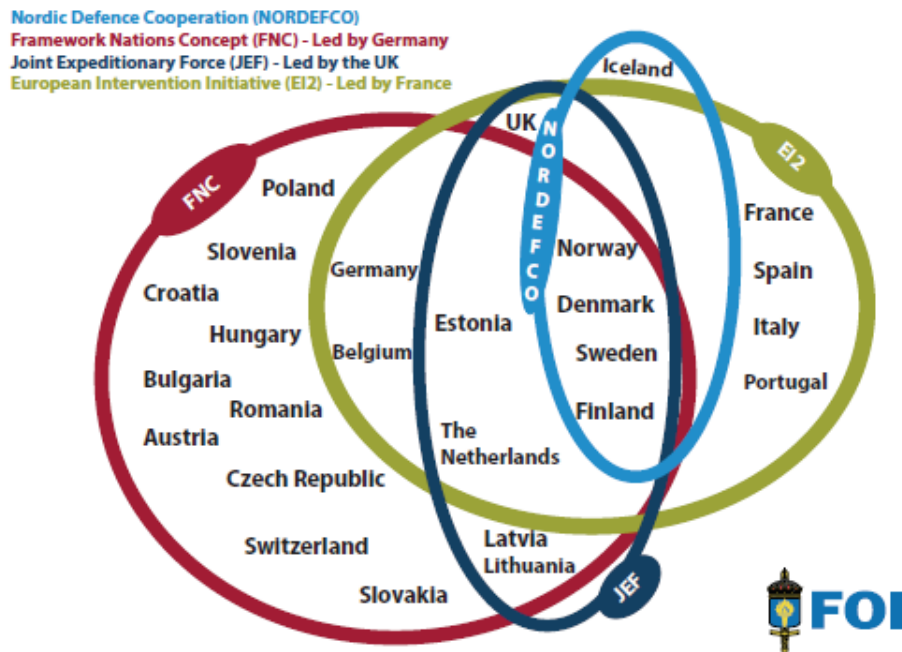
²⁴¹ Frisell, E. H., Pallin, K., Engvall, J., Aronsson, A., Gustafsson, J., Dalsjö, R., et al. Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020. Part I: Collective Defence, p. VIII, 2021.

²⁴² Fägersten B. The Nordics and the New European Security Architecture, Stockholm: UI 2020 at <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2020/ui-report-no.-3-2020.pdf>

²⁴³ Ruiz Palmer, D.A. The Framework Nations’ Concept and NATO: Game-Changer for a New Strategic Era or Missed Opportunity?, *Research paper 132*, p. 13-14, . 2021 at <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=965#>

collaborative force planning. Moreover, it highlights that following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, deterrence and defense have to be "underpinned by a new, tangible capacity for high-end, combined-arms manoeuvre".²⁴⁴

Figure 13. Regional frameworks for military cooperation in Northern Europe²⁴⁵



All High North countries take also part in the UK led **Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)** initiative launched in 2012 which is a military partnership between a smaller group of countries in Northern and Western Europe. The main aim of this initiative is to develop a UK-led high-readiness intervention force with contributions from partners in order to deter Russia. As its main area of geographical 'responsibility' is the Northern Europe and its task is to engage early in a crisis situation and act as a bridging force until other allied forces are able to join it can play a major part in early crisis management efforts in the region. To improve its chance to play this role the countries engaged, which in addition to the four High North countries include UK, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and the Netherlands conduct joint training and exercises, work on improving interoperability as well as issues related to rapid decision-making.

European Intervention Initiative (EI2) is another of regional frameworks initiated by the French President Emanuel Macron and launched in 2018.²⁴⁶ It aims at facilitating the emergence of a European strategic culture and at creating the pre-conditions to conduct coordinated and jointly prepared future commitments, on the whole spectrum of

²⁴⁴ Ibidem; Glatz, R.L. & Zapfe, M. NATO's Framework Nations Concept, *Center for Security Studies*, 2017 p. 2, at <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse218-EN.pdf>

²⁴⁵ Source: Frisell, E. H., Pallin, K., Engvall, J., Aronsson, A., Gustafsson, J., Dalsjö, R., et al. *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020. Part I: Collective Defence*, 2021 p.42.

²⁴⁶ <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/international-action/l-iei/l-initiative-europeenne-d-intervention>

possible crises. EI2 is built around a limited number of European countries that proved their political willingness and their military capability to shoulder an engagement in operation for the sake of the European security. Although initially, in 2018, only Denmark joined this format together with France, Spain, the UK, Portugal, Estonia, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, by 2021 also Finland, Norway and Sweden joined in. This cooperation is to bolster Europe's military credibility, reinforce Europe strategic autonomy and contribute to a fairer burden sharing. With all four High North countries this cooperation that involves also major European powers France, Germany and the UK can have some positive impact on security situation in the High North although this specific region is not the main focus as this project aims to address problems from a broader spectrum.

The last regional format that deserves close attention because it has a clear High North/Nordic focus is **NORDEFCO** involving Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. The aim of NORDEFCO that was formally launched in 2009 is to strengthen the participants' national defense, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions.²⁴⁷ At the political level, the Nordic defense ministers meet regularly to exchange information about the regional security situation and engage in scenario-based discussions. At the military level, the various Nordic armed forces are increasingly focusing on operational cooperation in crisis situations. The EU members and NATO partners Sweden and Finland have developed the deepest bilateral cooperation on common operational planning for crisis and war.

Various cooperative formats exist in the Black Sea region. One such format is the **Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC)** established in 1992 at the initiative of Turkey and comprising of 13 members of the wider Black Sea region. BSEC focuses on multilateral political and economic initiatives, aimed at fostering cooperation, stability, and prosperity in the region. The organization operates in various fields, including energy, finance, tourism, trade and transport among many others.²⁴⁸ The current chairmanship belongs to Georgia and its main priorities are tourism industry, innovative resources and technologies and renewable energy resources.²⁴⁹ One thing to note is that Russia is also a BSEC member, and while the organization has the potential to be a fruitful format for cooperation and constructive dialogue in areas of interest at a regional level, it is important to highlight the fact that in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, BSEC activities were reduced to formal meetings, civic forums and technical discussions on specific topics. As such, it becomes increasingly obvious that a proper regional cooperation is highly dependent on the evolution of the security environment in the Black Sea.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ <https://www.nordefco.org/the-basics-about-nordefco>

²⁴⁸ <http://www.bsec-organization.org/our-mission>

²⁴⁹ Priorities of the Georgian BSEC Chairmanship-in-office (1 July – 31 December 2021), <http://www.bsec-organization.org/chairmanship>

²⁵⁰ Celac & Dinu et al., p. 12-13



Figure 14. Via Carpathia project – Three Seas Initiative (Source: <https://trans.info/>)
opportunities of blue economy sectors in the area.²⁵¹

Black Sea Synergy is a EU regional initiative launched in 2008 supporting the development of cooperation in domains such as energy, transport and the environment. In 2019, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine have endorsed a common maritime agenda for the Black Sea, the overarching objective being to reinforce regional dialogue between countries and stakeholders to address challenges and

An initiative involving NATO member states on the Eastern Flank (namely Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia) was launched in 2015 by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda. **Bucharest Nine or the Bucharest Format (B9)** aims to consolidate views on issues of interest in the Alliance for the participating nations, and to support joint security projects. The latest meeting took place on May 10th, 2021, and also featured the participation of US President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. According to the Joint Declaration, Russia's aggressive actions and military build-up, including the escalation in the Black Sea, were discussed, deemed as one of the distinct threats and challenges NATO is currently facing.²⁵²

²⁵¹ European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/ocean/sea-basins/black-sea_en

²⁵² President of Romania. Joint Declaration of the Heads of State Bucharest 9 Meeting 2021 at <https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-releases/joint-declaration-of-the-heads-of-state-bucharest-9-meeting>

Aimed at bridging the gap between the countries from the Baltic Seas to the Adriatic and Black Sea, the **Three Seas Initiative** (3SI), focuses on strengthening the cohesion of the member states while reducing the economic development gap and improving the interconnectivity of the region in fields such as energy, transport and digital technologies.²⁵³ With its many infrastructure projects the 3SI can prove to be an important component of ensuring military mobility in the region and strengthening regional cooperation.

BLACKSEAFOR (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group) was created in 2001 to promote confidence in the Black Sea, increasing regional cooperation and enhancing peace and stability in the BSR. The initiative was first established at Turkey's behest. This was meant to be done by establishing a multinational naval force and a rotating command from all six Black Sea littoral states: Turkey, the Russian Federation, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia.²⁵⁴ As it included both members of NATO, partners and the Russian Federation, the initiative was widely promising. Over the next years, all six member states showed interest and made positive comments about the promising nature of this initiative. In 2003, all member states carried out multilateral naval exercises in Atiya, Bulgaria, which included warships from all states, as well as two submarines for logistical support from Turkey and Bulgaria. BLACKSEAFOR continued to carry out such exercises over the next few years.²⁵⁵ Overall, in the periods of its activation, BLACKSEAFOR has focused on tasks of search and rescue operations at sea, humanitarian aid, environmental protection and cleaning sea mines, goodwill visits and other tasks determined by the member states.²⁵⁶ Even in the aftermath of the 2008 conflict, Russian officials insisted on good relations with the Turkish Navy in the framework of BLACKSEAFOR. The initiative continued to function, despite the impact



Figure 15. Rail-2-Sea project, connecting Constanța to Gdansk — Three Seas Initiative (Source: <https://clubferoviar.ro/>)

²⁵³ Celac & Dinu et al, p. 13

²⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey. BLACKSEAFOR at <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>

²⁵⁵ Sanchez, W.A. Did BLACKSEAFOR Ever Have a Chance?" 2012 at <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/11/18/did-blackseafor-ever-have-a-chance/>

²⁵⁶ Karadeniz, B. Security and stability architecture in the Black Sea, 2007 at . <http://sam.gov.tr/pdf/perceptions/Volume-XII/winter-2007/BulentKaradeniz.pdf>

of the Georgian war. Georgia refused to take part in common navy drills with Russia.²⁵⁷ Some common exercises took place over the next years, but the partnership was effectively frozen following the 2014 events in Ukraine. Russia suspended its participation in BLACKSEAFOR drills after Turkey downed a Russian plane in 2015.²⁵⁸

In 2004, Turkey launched **Operation Black Sea Harmony** (OBSH) in the Black Sea, which emerged as an alternative to NATO's Active Endeavour mission to tackle transnational terrorism and smuggling.²⁵⁹ The Russian Federation joined OBSH in 2006, Ukraine in 2007 and Romania in 2008.²⁶⁰ Russian annexation of Crimea, however, changed the security environment and Turkish perspective on cooperation in the BSR.²⁶¹

In March 2021, a protocol between Romania and Bulgaria regarding cross-border airspace operations was signed to upgrade the previous agreement from 2011. The ratification of this agreement allows Allied member states to conduct cross-border operations in the exercise of airspace protection, on the basis of the territories of the two countries.²⁶² The agreement was long overdue and an important step in order to strengthen Allied air policing over the two territories.²⁶³ The agreement was ratified by the Romanian Parliament²⁶⁴, as well as by the Bulgarian one.²⁶⁵

National measures

When examining the impact of national policies on the security situation in the region it is important to have in mind that these policies are to a certain extent influenced by national threat perceptions.

National reactions to the re-emergence of Russia as a source of strategic threat in the High North and in the Black Sea Region are therefore influenced by the diverging views on Russia as a threat in these specific regional contexts. According to the quoted study Denmark views Russia as one of equally significant threats, Norway and Sweden treat

²⁵⁷ Sanchez, 2012; Lesia, S. BLACKSEAFOR: An attempt at regional security cooperation, 2015 at http://dspace.onua.edu.ua/bitstream/handle/11300/3148/Shyshko%20Lesia%20APP_55-3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

²⁵⁸ TASS. Russia suspends participation in BLACKSEAFOR drills after Turkey's downing of Russian jet, 2015 at <https://tass.com/defense/839869>

²⁵⁹ Tol, G. Balance in the Black Sea: The complex dynamic between Turkey, Russia, and NATO, 2019 at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/balance-black-sea-complex-dynamic-between-turkey-russia-and-nato>. See also OSCE. Turkish-Russian declaration on Operation Black Sea Harmony, 2007 at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/1/23842.pdf>

²⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>

²⁶¹ Tol, G., 2019.

²⁶² Independent Balkan News Agency. Bulgaria, Romania agree on third-country NATO air policing operations in their airspace, 2021 at <https://balkan.eu.com/bulgaria-romania-agree-on-third-country-nato-air-policing-operations-in-their-airspace/>

²⁶³ Barbera, G. M. & Todorov, S. Bulgaria Pressed to Ratify NATO Cross-Border Patrols Protocol, *Balkan Insight*, 2021 at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/28/bulgaria-pressed-to-ratify-nato-cross-border-patrols-protocol/>

²⁶⁴ (2021). Ratificarea Protocolului dintre România și Belgia de amendare a Acordului privind operațiunile transfrontaliere de poliție aeriană <https://www.juridice.ro/733953/ratificarea-protocolului-dintre-romania-si-belgia-de-amendare-a-acordului-privind-operatiunile-transfrontaliere-de-politie-aeriana.html>

²⁶⁵ <https://parliament.bg/bg/desision/ID/163651>

Russia as the highest threat but see also other threats as significant, while Finland – and four NATO members, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland view Russia as the dominant threat. Romania adopts a less critical view on Russia treating Russia as the highest threat but describing other threats as equally important, while Bulgaria is the most relaxed and means that Russia is not a threat.²⁶⁶

When it comes to the general public stance in the region, the opinions seem to be divided too. For example, according to a study conducted by Pew Research Center, while Ukraine and Turkey see Russia rather unfavourably, Bulgaria seems to have a more favorable view of Russia and more confidence in Vladimir Putin,²⁶⁷ and overall does not regard Moscow as a threat.²⁶⁸ On the other hand, recent studies undertaken in Romania show that there is little trust in Russia,²⁶⁹ while the opinion on whether or not Russia is the biggest security threat is divided.²⁷⁰ At the same time, in Georgia, recent poll indicates that Russia is not regarded as one of the most important national issues.²⁷¹

What military capabilities are available in the region to deal with possible security challenges depends therefore not only on what multinational and regional frameworks are at work in the given region, but on national priorities and decisions on what resources to allocate to defense related tasks. These decisions, in turn, depend on political priorities as well as the decision-makers' reading of the gravity of security challenges to be dealt with. It's only when these national perspectives are taken into consideration that a more complete picture of the situation could be presented. As the Norwegian Minister of Defense Frank Bakke-Jensen said when commenting on the bilateral Norwegian US Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA) Norwegian defense policy is based on three principles – national defense capabilities, the NATO-based collective defense and bilateral cooperation with key partners, like the USA.²⁷²

Similar approaches to dealing with security challenges in the region can be found in all four High North countries that build their national capabilities and use all available frameworks to address possible security challenges in the region. There are though some specific national features to be understood. For instance, Sweden and Finland are not

²⁶⁶ Meijer, H., & Brooks, S. G. 2021, p.17.

²⁶⁷ Huang, Ch. and J. Cha, Russia and Putin receive low ratings globally, *Pew Research Center*, February 7, 2020 at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/>

²⁶⁸ Meijer & Brooks, p. 17

²⁶⁹ INSCOP. Neîncrederea publică: Vest vs. Est, ascensiunea curentului naționalist în era dezinformării și fenomenului știrilor false. Capitolul 2. Vest vs. Est, Încredere în țări și lideri internațional, 2021 at <https://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/7.10.2021-Prezentare-grafica-Sondaj-STG-GMF-Capitolul-2.pdf>

²⁷⁰ LARICS. Barometrul de Securitate a României. p. 9 2021 at https://larics.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Barometru-de-Securitate-a-Romaniei_CCSL_ISPRI_aprilie-2021_lansare.pdf

²⁷¹ CRRG Georgia. Public attitudes in Georgia. p. 23, 2021 at <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20-%20Poll%20Results%20-%20July%202021%20Pol%20-%20ENG%20-%20FINAL%20-%281%29.pdf>

²⁷² Regjeringen.no. Basepolitikken består (Base policy remains) 2021 at <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/basepolitik/id2849535/>

NATO members but have sought closer cooperation with NATO over the past decade and even possibility of becoming NATO members is on the national agendas. This makes the EU frameworks for security cooperation a more natural, though probably less effective solution when they consider how to deal with the possible Russian challenge. Denmark on the other hand has been NATO member since the very beginning but has put up option when it comes to security cooperation within the EU which makes NATO the main security cooperation partner. Norway is not a member of the EU but has been a staunch supporter of NATO cooperation from the very beginning. Norway is also the most exposed of the four High North countries because of Russian perceived strategic vulnerability caused by the deployment of the Russian second-strike capability assets close to the Russian-Norwegian border. As Norway is increasingly perceived by Russia as 'NATO in the North' and as a Washington's strategic puppet, from a Russian perspective the border between the two countries is viewed as primarily a Russia-NATO border.²⁷³

We are fortunate to have national measures and achievements in the field of national defense and security in Northern Europe analysed in detail in a fresh FOI study and there is therefore no point in repeating here this exhaustive study's main findings and conclusions.²⁷⁴ In this brief examination of the regional context we will therefore focus on some trends illustrating the 'willingness' of the countries in the region to invest in their security as illustrated by their willingness to spend money on their defense related tasks. In order to figure out whether there has been any impact of the 2014 Ukraine crisis that has clearly 're-instated' Russia as the key regional threat on this willingness to invest in national security we will look at the national defense spending in the period between 2013 (the last pre-crisis year) and 2020.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Friis, K. Norway: NATO in the North? In N. Vanaga, & T. Rostoks (Eds.), *Deterring Russia in Europe. Defence Strategies for Neighbouring States* (pp. 128–145). London and New York: Routledge, 2018.

²⁷⁴ Frisell, E. H., Pallin, K., Engvall, J., Aronsson, A., Gustafsson, J., Dalsjö, R., et al.. *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020: Part II National Capabilities. FOI Report*. Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2021.

²⁷⁵ IISS Military Balance issues from 2014 to 2021 have been used as the point of departure for these calculations of national defence spending, with data collected from IISS respective annual overviews in sub-chapters dealing with respective countries. Figures in USD were used for calculations conducted by the authors of this study.

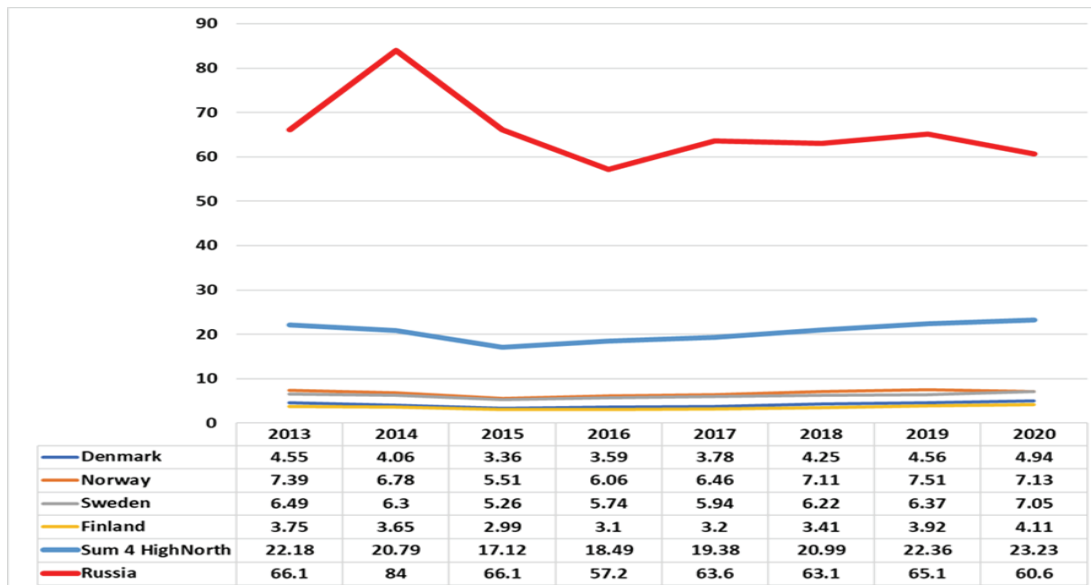


Figure 16. Defense spending 2013-2020 of the four High North countries and Russia, in USD billion (IISS data)

Another way of illustrating the national willingness to invest in national defense in a situation of the growing tensions in relations between the broadly understood West (the four Western High North countries) and Russia is to compare data on the share of defense spending in GDP in the same period. Figure 5 presents this set of data in a synthetic form.

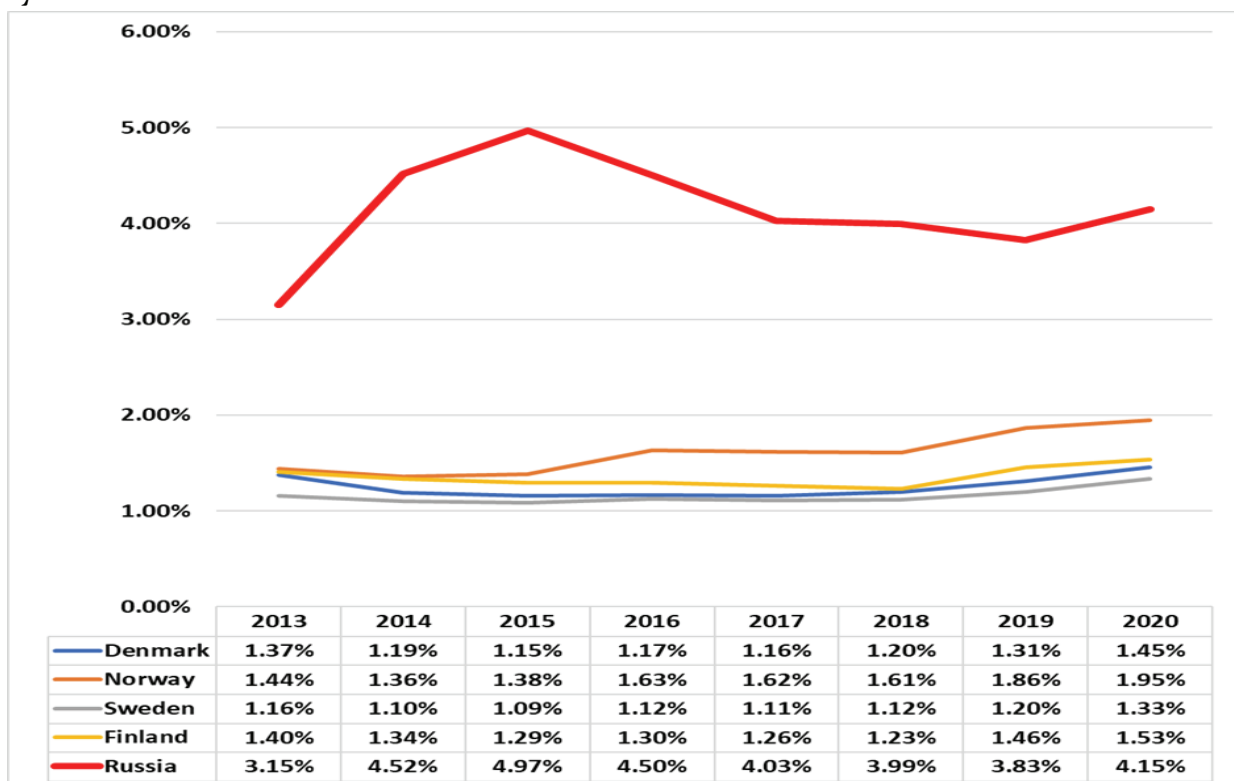


Figure 17. Share of defense spending in GDP – four High North countries and Russia (IISS data 2013-2020).

Finally, it could also be interesting to compare two other ‘national/regional’ parameters in this specific regional context – the relative defense burden in the four High North countries and Russia. For instance, in 2013 the combined defense spending of the four High North countries represented 33.6% of Russia’s defense spending while the GDP of the four High North countries represented almost 80% of GDP of Russia. In 2016 and in 2020 the combined defense spending of the four High North countries represented 32.3% and 38.3% of Russia’s defense spending, while their combined GDP in these years represented 112.4% and 102.9% of Russia’s GDP. This comparison provides a good illustration of how Russia’s economy is apparently strongly ‘overmilitarized’ compared with economies of the four High North countries.

Having in mind the apparent lack of willingness to overmilitarize their economies even in the face of what is often presented in the public debate as a growing Russian military threat it should not come as a surprise that Russia’s military capabilities are much bigger than the combined capabilities of the four High North countries that ‘meet’ Russia in the region. All those national, bilateral, and international efforts notwithstanding there is therefore a clear strategic disparity in the region in terms of military capabilities between the four High North states and Russia, as illustrated in Table 4. This has also serious consequences for the perceptions of security situation in the region – Russia is a great power that has in many respects regained strategic confidence casting long strategic shadows in the region, while the four High North countries’ security, if confronted by Russia, will depend on how they manage their relations with their NATO allies and partners.

Table 4. Regional balance of power in the High North.²⁷⁶

Category	Defense share GDP	Defense spending in USD billion	Active	Reserve	Artillery	IFV	MBT	Fighter aircraft	Combat helicopter	Submarine	Major combatant	Other surface combatants
Denmark	1.45	4.94	17,000	46,000	32	44	34	44				12
Norway	1.94	7.13	16,000	40,000	76	116	52	63		6	10	6
Sweden	1.33	7.05	17,000	36,000	120	411	120	80		5		14
Finland	1.53	4.11	22,000	260,000	1,503	212	209	62		6		13
HN Totals		23.23	72,000	382,000	1,731	783	415	249		17	10	45
Northern Fleet								38		26	10	16
Russia	4.14	57.1	900,000	2,000,000	4,684	5,220	2,840	1,160	394	49	31	125

²⁷⁶ Most data from Hodges, B., Lucas, E. and Schmiedl, C. Close to the Wind. Baltic Sea Regional Security, Washington DC: CEPA 2021 at https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CEPA-Close-to-the-Wind-ES-v6_web.pdf. Data on the Northern Fleet and defence spending from IISS (2021) Military Balance. London: Routledge for IISS.

Although the four High North countries perceive their relations with Russia as problematic and treat Russia a potential source of challenge and even threat, they haven't recently experienced direct military confrontation between Russia and some of its northern neighbors.

The situation is completely different in the Black Sea region where Russia's two of the three major military operations beyond Russia's borders in the post-Soviet period (2008 war in Georgia and 2014 war in Ukraine) took place. To examine what is the risk that the next Russian major military operation will take place also in the Black Sea Region it is therefore important to get a better understanding of how the evolution of the strategic situation in the region has compelled the Western actors in the region to prepare to meet this possible Russian challenge.

Russia's occupation and militarization of the Crimean Peninsula has significantly impacted the regional security balance, increasing the level of threat not just for Ukraine, but also for the other littoral states, with implications for the entire Alliance. From a Romanian perspective the the Black Sea should be perceived by NATO as highly important in geostrategic terms. Since the 1990s, Romania has prioritized the Euro-Atlantic direction of its foreign policy, thus setting both EU and NATO accessions as top priorities. Romanian strategic documents outline the country's defense priorities and see NATO membership as the optimal solution for the security challenges in the region.²⁷⁷ As a result, Romania prioritizes NATO and its bilateral relationship with the USA. Moreover, Romania has made a firm commitment of spending 2% of its GDP on defense, citing the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation as one of the main regional threats.²⁷⁸

While Bulgaria has taken measures and is undergoing a complex modernisation process of its military capabilities, it is "still a largely untapped reserve of opportunities regarding the build-up of the NATO deterrence and defense potential in the region". Over the past years, Bulgaria has been manoeuvring between Russia, NATO, and the EU.²⁷⁹ However, Bulgaria's defense system has long been a target of Russian subversion. Over the past months, there have been various charges of former Bulgarian officials on suspicion of spying for Russia, which is just one example of the Kremlin's efforts to use Bulgaria as a channel for obtaining classified NATO information.²⁸⁰ In 2021, Bulgaria has adopted a

²⁷⁷ Becker, J. Defence 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 (2021): 393-413, p. 13-15. 2021 at doi:10.1080/14683857.2021.1906942.

²⁷⁸ Administrația Prezidențială. Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2015-2019. 2021 at https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_1.pdf, Administrația Prezidențială. Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2020-2024, 2020 at https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf.

²⁷⁹ Becker, 2021, p. 11.

²⁸⁰ Naydenov, M. "Bulgaria in the Black Sea: Defending against Russian hybrid warfare", *Middle East Institute*. 2021 at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bulgaria-black-sea-defending-against-russian-hybrid-warfare>

new Armed Forces' Development Program 2023, focused on capability building, the aim of which is to strengthen its defense potential in the context of the NATO Article 5.²⁸¹

Turkey has the military capabilities and strategic location to be a leader in the deterrence efforts against Kremlin. However, Turkey's policy shifted its focus to its southern border and the Eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, growing tensions in US-Turkey relations and within NATO have made Turkey distrustful of the overall willingness and readiness of the Alliance to come to its aid. It is clear that in this case, Allies need to find a common ground with Turkey, as Ankara remains an essential deterrence asset in the Black Sea region.²⁸² At the same time, Turkey's foreign policy shift inwards has led to a somewhat lack of clarity regarding its strategy and official security policies. This is further complicated by the fact that the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense do not usually share their policy directions.²⁸³ In terms of relations with Russia, Turkey has less of a firm stance against Kremlin, being reluctant to challenge Russia or "disrupt the status quo in the BSR".²⁸⁴ Militarily, the two have also at times cooperated closely, but Turkey seems to have a strategy aimed at balancing Russia, as following the annexation of Crimea, Turkey became concerned over the changing balance of power in the BSR.²⁸⁵

Russia has a great advantage through its conventional capabilities, particularly when countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia do not benefit from collective security guarantees.²⁸⁶ Having been affected by the 2008 war, Georgia acknowledges the strategic importance of the Black Sea and the need to address the security situation, as well as attract more attention from NATO. While Georgia's accession to NATO is a tension-generating topic from the Kremlin perspective, Georgia remains a model partner of the alliance, especially through its constant involvement in NATO missions. Georgia's foreign policy continues to be focused on Euro-Atlantic integration and strategic partnership with the USA.²⁸⁷

In Ukraine, the recently approved Strategic Defense Bulletin highlights the need to ensure "the rebuff and deterrence of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, restoration of the sovereignty and territorial integrity".²⁸⁸ Like Georgia,

²⁸¹ Ibidem.

²⁸² Hodges, B. The Black Sea... or a Black Hole? *CEPA*. 2021 at <https://cepa.org/the-black-sea-or-a-black-hole/>

²⁸³ Neset, S. & Strand, A.. Turkey as a regional security actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Levant Region. *CMi Report*. 2021 at <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7820-turkey-as-a-regional-security-actor-in-the-black-sea-the-mediterranean-and-the-levant-region#author-details>

²⁸⁴ Hodges, 2021.

²⁸⁵ International Crisis Group. Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus, 2018 at <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/250-russia-and-turkey.pdf>

²⁸⁶ Shaishmelashvili, G. Russia's permanent War against Georgia. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. 2021 at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/03/russia-permanent-war-georgia/>

²⁸⁷ Ibidem; Brzozowski, A. Focus on Black Sea, Caucasus highlights Georgia's strategic importance". *EURACTIV* 2021 at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/focus-on-black-sea-caucasus-highlights-georgias-strategic-importance/>

²⁸⁸ President of Ukraine. Head of State approves Strategic Defense Bulletin of Ukraine, 2021 at <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-strategichnij-oboronnij-byulet-en-70713>

Ukraine is also focused on its partnership with NATO, hoping for accession, as well as the bilateral security cooperation with the US.²⁸⁹ Ukraine's increased defense spending and modernisation efforts are a positive sign, but as data shows, while better equipped than in 2014, it is unlikely that Ukraine could cope with a full-scale attack from Russia.²⁹⁰

Moldova has recently taken a clearer stance in regards to Russia, with President Maia Sandu declaring that relations with Russia would be based on pragmatism, working to prevent a destabilisation of the situation regarding the frozen conflict in Transnistria. Furthermore, there have been calls from Sandu for the Russian troops in Transnistria to be "removed in favor of civilian monitors under the auspices of the OSCE". This was however cut short by Russia, claiming it could lead to a "serious destabilization".²⁹¹ In its National Defense Strategy 2017-2021, Moldova acknowledges the potential threat of Russia, noting that Kremlin's relations with the West will probably continue on the same trend, with Russia continuing to extend its influence, but Moldova remains open for a transparent dialogue with the Russian Federation.²⁹²

One thing to note is that NATO has deficits in terms of naval power in the region. Of the three Black Sea NATO countries, only Turkey has significant naval military power, as well as the capacity to transfer additional assets if necessary. Romania and Bulgaria, while undergoing modernization programs, still have deficits to address. When it comes to Georgia and Ukraine, these, too, have significant less naval power, and are also heavily constrained by the military Russian presence.²⁹³

Table 5. Regional balance of military power in the Black Sea Region²⁹⁴

Category	Defense GDP share	Defense spending in USD billion	Active	Reserve	Artillery	IFV	MBT	Fighter aircraft	Combat helicopter (ATK+MRH)	Submarine	Major combatant	Other surface combatant
Ukraine	3.04	4,32	209,000	900,000	1,818	1,184	858	125	35	-	1	12
Moldova	0.37	0,0422	5,150	58,000	221	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

²⁸⁹ (2021). Fact Sheet – U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework Aug. 31, 2021 at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Aug/31/2002844632/-1/-1/0/US-UKRAINE-STRATEGIC-DEFENSE-FRAMEWORK.PDF>

²⁹⁰ Peleschuk, D. "Ukraine's military poses a tougher challenge for Russia than in 2014", *Politico* 2021 at <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraines-military-poses-a-tougher-challenge-for-russia-than-in-2014/>

²⁹¹ RFERL. Moldovan President Seeks 'Pragmatic Relationship' With Russia, 2021 at <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-sandu-interview-russia/31424192.html>

²⁹² Guvernul Republicii Moldova. Strategia Națională de Apărare, p. 10 2017 at https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/intri8_109.pdf

²⁹³ Celac & Dinu et al., 2021, p. 30

²⁹⁴ Data from International Institute of Strategic Studies. The Military Balance 2021. London: Routledge, 2021.

Romania	2.09	5,21	68,500	53,000	1,118	142	377	60	30	-	3	24
Bulgaria	1.7	1,16	36,950	3,000	176	160	90	24	6	-	3	4
Turkey	1.69	11	355,200	378,700	7,833	645	2,378	306	117	12	16	45
Georgia	1.76	0,288	20,650	-	240	71	123	3	6	-	-	24
Black Sea Fleet ²⁹⁵								25		6	6	35
Russia	4.14	57.1	900,000	2,000,000	4,684	5,220	2,840	1,160	394	49	31	125

The US factor

Because it seems that national, regional and Europe-centred formats of cooperation do not provide the required level of deterrence, bilateral and multilateral security cooperation with the USA is still necessary to strengthen security in the region and provide the level of deterrence that will be sufficient to make Russia think twice before engaging in any adventurous activity in the High North. However, a deeper US engagement in the region can also have some unintended consequences for the security situation in this region. If Russia feels that the US presence in the region can pose a threat to its strategic assets whose primary task is to threaten the strategic rival with a retaliatory strike against its own territory, decision-makers in Moscow can be willing to take higher risks or be misled to act without the necessary level of strategic prudence, triggering a conflict with grave consequences both for the region and beyond its borders.

Facing such a strategic dilemma and notwithstanding Russian protests and disinformation campaigns the High North countries have opted for strengthening their security cooperation with the USA. In 2018, the US Marine Corps enhanced its presence in Norway and deployed around 700 troops on a rotational basis for training and exercise purposes. However, a rethinking of the priorities for the US Marine Corps led in August 2020 to the US announcement of a restructuring of the US presence in Norway. The US Marine Corps decided therefore to conduct shorter-term deployments, reduce its presence in Norway and remove some of its heavy equipment stored in Norway. This decision was viewed with certain anxiety in Norway as having a possible negative impact on the security of the country facing a Russian challenge and in 2021 Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA) with the United States was signed.²⁹⁶ In addition to Norway, a full-fledged NATO member cooperating closely with the US for more than 70 years also NATO partner countries and EU members Sweden and Finland have formalized their cooperation with the USA by reaching in 2018 a trilateral

²⁹⁵ See also: tables p. 46-48

²⁹⁶ Regjeringen.no. Norway signs Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States, 2021 at <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/undertegner-tilleggsavtale-om-forsvarssamarbeid-med-usa/id2844970/>

agreement to strengthen defense cooperation, including enhanced security policy dialogue and exercises.²⁹⁷

“Security and stability of the Black Sea are in the U.S. national interest and are critical to the security of NATO’s Eastern Flank...Russia’s destabilizing activities in and around the Black Sea reflect its ambitions to regain a dominant position in the region and to prevent the realization of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace”, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated on October 20, 2021 during a joint press conference after a bilateral meeting at Romanian Ministry of Defense.²⁹⁸

In terms of ensuring the full security on the Black Sea Region, of the allied states (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) and partners (Georgia, and Ukraine)²⁹⁹, the United States is the most important and critical actor, its military forces, both those deployed in Romania and on the rotational base in the region have the essential role of strategic deterrence in the region.

Romania is home to about 1,000 US rotating forces at “Mihail Kogălniceanu” Air Base (MK), is located at the terminus of the Danube and has a key regional port in Constanta. It has also made some notable efforts to strengthen regional resilience, including the new European Cybersecurity Competence Center and the Euro-Atlantic Center for Resilience.³⁰⁰

In the 2010s, the Deveselu air base, which is situated in the Southern part of the country, was selected a U.S. land-based SM-3 interceptor ballistic missile defense system (also referred to as the Aegis Ashore site).³⁰¹ In 2016, the missile shield base become operational. Despite misleading accusations from the Kremlin, both NATO and the US have repeatedly reassured Russia that the Romanian shield does not undermine Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent.^{302 303}

²⁹⁷ <https://www.defensenews.com/training-sim/2018/05/09/finland-sweden-and-us-sign-trilateral-agreement-with-eye-on-increased-exercises/>

²⁹⁸ Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Remarks at Romanian Ministry of Defense Post-Bilat Joint Press Event, Oct.20, 2021 at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2816800/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-remarks-at-romanian-ministry-of-defens/>

²⁹⁹ Georgia and Ukraine retain Enhanced Opportunity Partner (EOP) status in the alliance, while R. Moldova is constitutionally neutral with respect to NATO and the CTSO.

³⁰⁰ Alina Polyakova - Black Sea Security: Reviving US Policy Toward the Region - CEPA, October 21, 2021, at <https://cepa.org/black-sea-security-reviving-us-policy-toward-the-region/>

³⁰¹ US Embassy in Romania, “United States Ballistic Missile Defense Site at Deveselu Air Base in Romania”, [https://ro.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/implementing-missile-defense-europe/united-states-ballistic-missile-defense-site-at-deveselu-air-base-in-romania/#:~:text=In%20May%202011%2C%20the%20United,as%20the%20Aegis%20Ashore%20site\).](https://ro.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/implementing-missile-defense-europe/united-states-ballistic-missile-defense-site-at-deveselu-air-base-in-romania/#:~:text=In%20May%202011%2C%20the%20United,as%20the%20Aegis%20Ashore%20site).)

³⁰² BBC, “US activates \$800m missile shield base in Romania”, May 12, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36272686>

³⁰³ Digi24, “Putin reia afirmația falsă că scutul de la Deveselu poate opera rachete Tomahawk. „Amenințările cresc exponențial”, February 21, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/putin-reia-afirmatia-falsa-ca-scutul-de-la-deveselu-poate-opera-rachete-tomahawk-amenintarile-cresc-exponential-1845553>



Figure 18. Deveselu Air Base (Source: US Embassy in Romania)

Even though United States enhanced the land, air, and naval forces presence in the region, performing more air and naval patrols and more tactical exercises with the Black Sea allied and partner states, some states like Bulgaria and Turkey prefer a softer approach.

During a US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation hearing on “Black Sea security: Reviving US policy toward the region”³⁰⁴, Ian Brzezinski concluded that an effective “*US strategy to enhance Black Sea security must be comprehensive, integrating the full spectrum of geopolitical competition that defines today’s world - including, among others, their military, informational, economic, and diplomatic dimensions.*” According to him, this strategy will have the greatest prospects of success when it is able to marshal the engagement of European allies and partners from beyond the Black Sea, as well as NATO and the European Union.

In the study “*One Threat, One Flank, One Presence*”, LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, former commander United States Army Europe, advocates for a common approach of the security of the entire Eastern Flank and the need for a strategy regarding the Black Sea area, emphasizing that this is an extremely vulnerable space and, as a result, Russia's containment policy needs to be strengthened.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ Ian Brzezinski, Brzezinski testifies to US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Black Sea security, November 1, 2021 at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/testimony/brzezinski-testifies-to-us-senate-foreign-relations-committee-on-black-sea-security/>

³⁰⁵ Hodges, B., Bugakjski, J., Wojcik, R., Schmiedl, C., “One Flank, One Threat, One Presence”, *Center for Policy Analysis*, 2020. https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2020-CEPA-report-one_flank_one_threat_one_presence.pdf

Conclusions: Russia as a common strategic denominator – regional similarities and differences

It is important to notice that from the regional High North and BSR perspective one of the main challenges considered is the risk of the so-called horizontal spill-over, e.a. a situation when a conflict involving Russia that breaks out in another part of the Russian-Western neighborhood triggers a Russian reaction in the High North where Russia has its important strategic assets located only 100 km from the Norwegian/NATO border, or in the Black Sea region where Russia has also strong military footprint and interests. This means that credible strategic countermeasures that are to deter possible Russian aggression should be implemented not at the regional level, but along the whole Eastern perimeter of NATO, from the High North to the Southern Flank where Russia has also increased its presence and capabilities, as demonstrated in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria and Libya over the past decade.³⁰⁶

The pattern of Russian military exercises, deployment of Russian forces, Russia's increased ability to conduct combined operations involving several military districts as well as what is often perceived as strategic geopolitical NATO vulnerabilities make the possibility of Russian aggression against the Baltic countries a worst case scenario for the alliance and its members. Also those who will not be in the first line of such a conflict fear that the situation can easily spiral out of control and result in both a horizontal and vertical spill over and escalation. It is therefore crucially important to prevent such a dangerous development with unforeseen strategic consequences. There is growing understanding of this serious challenge in NATO, as illustrated for instance by the newly published CEPA report on this issue.³⁰⁷ In addition, it is also well understood that there are strong strategic and security interconnections between all regions located along the Eastern flank and that a comprehensive approach is therefore needed, taking into account both regional strategic idiosyncrasies and the overall picture.³⁰⁸ This report is a modest contribution to the debate on the importance of regional settings in addressing the all-encompassing challenge posed by a strategically revitalised Russia in its neighborhood.

Russia considers Black Sea region as its immediate and critical national security buffer zone and for this Moscow reacts nervously to any challenge from the countries in the

³⁰⁶ For more on the importance of the Southern Flank see Ülgen S. and Kasapoglu C. A Threat-Based Strategy for NATO's Southern Flank, 2021 at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/10/threat-based-strategy-for-nato-s-southern-flank-pub-63785>.

³⁰⁷ Hodges, B., Lucas, E. and Schmiedl, C. Close to the Wind. Baltic Sea Regional Security 2021. See also Flanagan, S. J., Osburg, J., Binnendijk, A., Kepe, M., & Radin, A. Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance. Santa Monica CA: RAND, 2019.

³⁰⁸ See for instance Åtland, K., & Kabanenko, I. "Russia and its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions". *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(2), 286–313, . 2020. Pedro, N. D., Manoli, P., Sukhankin, S., Tsakiris, T., & Fayos, F. G. D. L. Facing Russia's strategic challenge: Security developments from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Brussels: European Parliament Directorate-General For External Policies. 2017 or Flanagan, S. J., Binnendijk, A., Chindea, I. A., Costello, K., Kirkwood, G., Massicot, D., et al. *Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security*: RAND Corporation, 2020.

region or/and NATO. Recent examples like the military build-up of more than 100,00 troops in Eastern Ukraine in April that triggered international concern and (maybe) later the Biden-Putin summit in Geneva, the dramatic incident sparked by British warship HMS Defender passing deliberately nearby Crimea in June, Russia's massing of its troops along the Ukrainian borders perceived as a preparation to invasion followed by Russia's "ultimatums" in December 2021 demanding immediate stop of NATO enlargement to the east and NATO's withdrawal of its forces and infrastructure from new members states underline the level of tensions in the region and Russia's "aversion" to be challenged as the dominant power in the Black Sea region. The Russian Black Sea Fleet has responsibilities not only in this region, but also provides full support to the Russian Expeditionary Force in Syria and carries out missions in the Eastern Mediterranean and off the coast of Libya. It is a tool for projecting Moscow's strength and strategic interests in the Middle East and North Africa. The growing Russian influence in Africa is supported by an intense logistical effort of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Thus, NATO states in the Western Mediterranean, such as Italy, France or Spain, can see how Russian military ships in the Black Sea are not a threat only to NATO states bordering the Black Sea but pose a challenge to the whole alliance.

What makes addressing this set of challenges even more problematic are differences in the pattern of security and military decision-making between NATO that must first take serious political decisions involving, at least formally, 30 capitals, and Russia where strategic, operational and even tactical decisions can be taken by a small circle around Putin. What is therefore of paramount importance is to conduct a well-orchestrated and coherent Western policy towards Russia, combining instruments of hard and soft power available to both NATO and the EU. Such a well-orchestrated and coherent policy should combine several elements: 1) clear strategic messaging and signalling convincing Russia that the West is ready to act jointly and has the political will and necessary resources and instruments to counter any hostile actions; 2) a good situational awareness along the whole Eastern NATO/EU perimeter to make Russian leadership be less prone to take risky actions against allies; 3) additional measures at the institutional and national levels to improve military capabilities and mobility, elements crucial to making the Western deterrence more credible; 4) more openness concerning Western military activities in areas close to Russia's borders as a way of reassuring Russia.

What is crucial to achieve the wished deterring/reassuring effects is the effective use of various channels and forms of communication to make Russian political leadership aware that the costs of aggressive actions would be far higher than the doubtful strategic gains, that the West does not have aggressive intentions towards Russia and its actions are of defensive character. The West should also, if possible, try to use public diplomacy measures to influence Russian public opinion and change its attitude towards the West that is strongly demonized by Russian official propaganda as a way of making population rally behind the regime. It seems that the Russian public, especially the younger

generation, has over the past decades become less receptive for Russian official propaganda and less supportive of the current regime's costly, aggressive and militarised foreign policy and is more interested in opening of a new chapter in Russia's relations with the West. Also, some members of the Russian political elite still close to V. Putin, like the former finance minister and the head of the Audit Chamber A. Kudrin, seem to support policies leading to lowering tensions between Russia and the West. This change of mood in the Russian society and elite could make them more receptive to the Western policy of stretching hand to those segments of the Russian society that want to see Russia's relations with the West as less conflictual. It seems that also some decision-makers close to Putin notice this change of public mood in Russia and this may have a sobering effect and make them more prudent in dealing with other actors in Russia's neighborhood, lowering in that manner the risk of conflict by accident that could spiral out of control, also in the Russia – NATO/EU neighborhood.



The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading centre for research on international issues in areas of particular relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. NUPI has three main pillars of research and expertise: security and risk, growth and development, and international order and governance. The Security and Risk pillar covers traditional security and defence policy and peace operations, as well as other aspects of risk in Norwegian foreign policy related to greater investment, travel and presence abroad. Growth and development focuses on the emerging powers, international economics and developmental issues. Order and governance covers the multilateral system, regional organizations and how diplomacy as an institution works and evolves.



New Strategy Center is a Romanian think tank specialising in foreign, defence and security policy, a non-partisan, non-governmental organisation. New Strategy Center operates at three main levels: providing analytical inputs and expert advice to decision-makers; holding regular debates, both in-house and public, on subjects of topical interest; expanding external outreach through partnerships with similar institutions or organisations in Europe and the US, joint policy papers and international conferences. The Balkans and the Black Sea space are priority areas of interest for New Strategy Center.

www.newstrategycenter.ro

www.nupi.no