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## **NATO AND EUROPEAN SECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DETERIORATING SITUATION IN THE BLACK SEA AREA**

**M. DINCĂ; A. M. DINCĂ**

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**Col.(r)dr.ing. Marian DINCĂ**

University of Oradea, associate professor

E-mail: [mariandinca2006@yahoo.com](mailto:mariandinca2006@yahoo.com)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3538-0739>

**Alexandru-Marian DINCĂ**

University of Oradea, master Year II, ES

E-mail: [alexdinca1@yahoo.com](mailto:alexdinca1@yahoo.com)

### ***Abstract***

*Euro-Atlantic security has always been a priority for the North Atlantic Alliance, especially at the beginning of the 21st century, when mankind is facing a complex, dynamic and unpredictable security environment, one of profound economic and social imbalances. The conflict in Ukraine is and will remain a hot topic of the utmost interest, due to its political-military and economic-social implications, both regionally and internationally. For some years now, the entire Black Sea region has been boiling over from a geostrategic point of view, thus becoming Europe's new powder keg. Romania is deeply interested in a stable, democratic Black Sea region, closely linked to Euro-Atlantic structures.*

***Key words:*** NATO, security, military conflict, war.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Euro-Atlantic security has been and will remain a highly topical issue of real interest to all major international players, not just those in Europe and North America. In this context, the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans, which in recent decades have been areas of politico-military instability and economic and social uncertainty, real sources of conflict, occupy a special place.

Although NATO is an international security organisation of a defensive nature, the major challenges posed by the post-Cold War security environment,

coupled with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the unprecedented technological advances of recent decades, have led to the initiation of profound and rapid changes at the conceptual-strategic level of the North Atlantic Alliance.

The political and military approaches specific to the beginning of the millennium are reflected in the NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Washington in 1999, which gave the Alliance the necessary tools to meet the new security challenges and prospects of the 21st century and to guide its future political and military development. It starts from the premise that NATO must protect common security interests in a changing environment, maintain collective defence, strengthen the transatlantic relationship and ensure a balance that allows European Allies to promote greater responsibility.

While during the Cold War security was ensured by deterring a Soviet attack on Western Europe, the 'age of Jihad' and terror, which is typical of the early 21st century, has required a more active preventive approach to security, especially after the blow dealt by international terrorism to the most important democracy, the United States, on 11 September 2001. This has been a real milestone in the transformation of Euro-Atlantic structures and their adaptation to the realities of the new international security environment, which is dynamic, fluid and highly unpredictable.

However, with the NATO Summit in Bucharest<sup>1</sup> in April 2008, the largest foreign policy event organised by Romania and the largest summit in NATO's history, international security seemed to be moving in the right direction, towards normal international relations.

But the first big question mark for the allies came with Russia's unilateral decision to annex Crimea in 2014, in defiance of virtually all international opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> The Summit was attended by 26 member states, 23 partner states, senior representatives of international organisations and states contributing to NATO operations in Afghanistan, at the level of President (23 states), Prime Minister (22 states), Foreign Minister (7 states), Defence Minister (Kazakhstan) and Political Director (Ireland). The Summit was a unique event not only for Romania but also for NATO. It was the largest Summit of the Alliance, both in terms of number of participants (over 6500) and format. For the first time in the history of the Alliance, in addition to the established meetings (North Atlantic Council, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, NATO-Ukraine Commission and NATO-Russia Council), there was an enlarged meeting of the states and organisations participating in the Alliance's operation in Afghanistan, attended by the UN Secretary General, the President of the European Commission, the Secretary General of the EU Council, the Director of the World Bank, together with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and senior officials from the contact states (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Jordan). The President-in-Office of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, attended the first NATO-Russia Council Summit since its creation in 2002.

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Image nr.1: Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation/2014  
(<https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/stiri/in-lume/id175222.html>)

Moreover, Russia's recent illegal, brutal, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against sovereign and independent Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe and fundamentally changed the vision of Euro-Atlantic security, demonstrating once again that the unpredictable never ceases to surprise us.

To the Kremlin's surprise, the war in Ukraine has confirmed that the Alliance is a strong united Alliance, acting in solidarity. It has also dispelled criticism that NATO no longer has a place in the context of current international relations. Its existence not only guarantees peace and stability in member countries, but also the importance of cooperation between states. Even in this case, we note that NATO has enough problems in the Balkans, problems which can very quickly turn into a hot conflict. Frustrations among members can easily be exploited by other international actors pursuing interests in the area or simply looking for a way to divide the Alliance. This is also confirmed by the growing presence of Chinese investors in Serbia, Greece and Turkey in particular. The Balkans remains Europe's powder keg, but also a potential loophole where other states can gain geopolitical advantages and influence in the area.

### **I. CONFLICT IN UKRAINE AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA AREA**

Throughout history, the Black Sea basin has been an area of cooperation and trade, but also an area of military and political confrontation. The Wider Black Sea Area (BSMA) has been and will remain an area of *systemic tensions between the Russian Federation and the West*.

The world changed after the Russian Federation unleashed its illegal aggression in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and everything has been rewritten in terms of security and needs to be revisited in the Black Sea region where much of Russia's war in Ukraine is being fought.

The Black Sea region, whether we refer to the riparian countries or to the wider area, has a long and rich history of conflicts and diverging interests,

becoming in recent years an area where three major players are vying for influence: NATO, the EU and Russia (Dincă, 2012, p.95). In addition to the six riparian states, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Georgia, the NMSA also includes Armenia and Azerbaijan (Image 2).

Today, the Black Sea is a border area between the European Union and NATO on the one hand and the Caucasus region on the other. As a geopolitical area, the Black Sea basin is characterised by frozen conflicts, prolonged by the persistence in the region of Soviet cultural, social and politico-military remnants, the rivalry between Turkey and the Russian Federation for naval supremacy, and attempts by the littoral states and the European Union to develop economic cooperation and strengthen democracy.

The Black Sea region has been and will remain a conflict zone, an area of permanent disputes and systemic tensions between the Russian Federation and the West.



Image nr. 2 Wider Black Sea Area

The Black Sea is a special region in terms of regional security, marked over the last decades in its extended region<sup>2</sup>, a series of frozen conflicts such as Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia or Nagorno-Karabakh.

<sup>2</sup> The Wider Black Sea Area (WNSA) is an economic and political area that includes not only the states bordering the Black Sea (Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Turkey) but also states in relatively close proximity to it - the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan - and is a convergence area of distinct regions in terms of their own characteristics. From a geographical perspective, the Black Sea area is a region circumscribed by the Pontic Basin located in Eurasia, in the contact zone between the European and Asian continents. From a geopolitical point of view,

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Moreover, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and Moscow's support for separatist forces in eastern Ukraine has brought the Black Sea back into the international media spotlight, particularly from the perspective of areas controlled by the littoral states (Image 3). But the security risks are far from over. Although NATO had envisaged the Baltic Sea as the main potential future theatre of escalating tensions in its relationship with Moscow, the reality of recent years has contradicted and surprised us all, bringing the Black Sea area back into the world's attention.

The fears are due to the fact that Russia has turned Crimea into a gigantic military base that calls into question the security of the entire Black Sea area, which is also highlighted in Romania's new Military Strategy, where it is stated that "the main military risks and threats to national security are determined by the further strengthening of the military potential in Romania's neighbourhood (militarisation of Crimea and the Black Sea basin by the Russian Federation), the conduct of military exercises (especially those with short notice) and the development of offensive and defensive capabilities on NATO's eastern flank".



Image nr. 3 Areas controlled by Black Sea littoral states

The war in Ukraine directly affects security in the Black Sea region, where Romania is also located. A return to a reasonable level of regional security depends, of course, on the restoration of peace. But not just any peace. A peace with your hand on the trigger or, worse still, on the nuclear button, is not security. From this point of view, it matters less who wins the war, what matters more is the ability of regional and global actors to return to peace while building a new regional security architecture.

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the region includes the Black Sea area where the strategic interests of geopolitical actors, be they littoral states or other actors whose interests lie in the area and who have the capacity to support them, are manifested..

The issue of security in the Black Sea region also raises the question of the presence of non-neighbouring powers in the region. The principle that should be followed is that "the Black Sea must be a sea of riparians". The more actors from outside the region want to consolidate their positions of strength in the region, the greater the regional insecurity will be.

As an alliance, NATO is already legitimately present here through Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. The EU, for its part, as a union of states and citizens operating on a federal basis, has reached the Black Sea through Romania and Bulgaria. Strengthening these states militarily and economically, under the conditions of their political association, must be the way to guarantee regional security directly and thereby the security of these entities in their entirety.

*"A stable and prosperous Black Sea region will generate security and economic benefits for Europe, the Euro-Atlantic region and the whole world"* – said Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu at the end of the Conference on Black Sea Security under the auspices of *Crimea International Platform*.<sup>3</sup>

The freedom of navigation in the Black Sea is being abused by the Russian Federation and that is why there is a need for a reinforced NATO presence in the region, Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă said at the opening of the seventh edition of the "Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum", an event held on 18-19 May 2023 in Bucharest.

More than a year after the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has not changed much in its approach to the conflict. Russia is doing what it has done before: bombing targets indiscriminately, civilian and military targets. And it certainly wants to prove that it still has offensive potential.

One of the most important reflections on the war in Ukraine is to always distinguish between hope and reality. At this time in Russia it is one of the most vulnerable situations for Putin. Not just militarily, not just economically, but more importantly politically.

At the moment in Russia we are dealing with an accelerated accumulation of conditions that will lead to the overthrow of the regime. First, there is increasingly explicit and clear pressure from all the elites who supported this regime. There are privileged people whose wealth has increased during this period, but they are far fewer than they were before.

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<sup>3</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs Bogdan Aurescu hosted on Thursday, 13 April 2023, together with the Minister of Defence of Romania Angel Tîlvăr, the first Conference on Black Sea Security under the aegis of the International Crimean Platform, organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, the Ministry of National Defence of Romania, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, in partnership with the Centre for Defence Strategies of Ukraine. This was the first event of this scale dedicated to the Black Sea co-organised by Romania and Ukraine under the aegis of the International Crimean Platform. (<https://www.mae.ro/node/61634> and <https://www.mae.ro/node/61634>).

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Moreover, most of those who committed war crimes in Ukraine are former prisoners recruited by Wagner. They committed the crimes on Prigojin's direct orders and were later, after the contracts were completed, personally decorated by Putin, which makes it possible to establish responsibility, a direct link between Prigojin, Putin, Wagner and the war crimes.

Most of the world's political leaders will no longer be able to contextualise these crimes in the overall context of relations between Russia and the West, this is about the direct responsibility of the President of the Russian Federation for committing war crimes, and they are heinous war crimes, starting from prisoners collectively executed by throwing grenades into the pits where they were being held to the deliberate execution of entire families in areas occupied by Wagner troops.

### **Possible scenarios in the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine**

On the possible evolution of the conflict in Ukraine, in an analysis published by *The Conversation*, Natasha Kuhrt, senior lecturer at Kings College London, and Marcin Kaczmarek, lecturer at the University of Glasgow, attempt to provide *three possible scenarios for the end of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict* and an analysis of the international context from China's perspective. As the war drags on, Russia's ties with China will be tested more than ever. Whether Russia wins or loses, or the war becomes a frozen one, the scenarios China faces are problematic, write the two British authors..

#### ***Scenario 1: Ukraine wins.***

Russia's defeat on the Ukrainian front would send a very strong signal, confirming both the resilience of the West and the vulnerabilities of the authoritarian regime in the Kremlin. Such a development would deal a serious blow to the mainstream narrative within the Chinese Communist Party, developed since the 2008 financial crisis, that the West is in decline and its rivals - especially China - are on an upward trend..

If Russia were defeated, the consequences would depend on the nature of the defeat. If defeat meant ousting not only President Vladimir Putin but also his inner circle, a new Russian government could weaken relations with China and reprioritise good relations with the West, which would be a blow to Beijing.

Of course, a weakened or defeated Russia could mean an opportunity for China. For example, it could take a more active role in Central Asia or force Moscow to accept a more dependent relationship with China in the economic and financial sector.

#### ***Scenario 2: the war is won by Russia.***

If Russia were to win because western support for Ukraine would erode, this would empower other big players such as China. Beijing might be tempted to move to more risky and aggressive behaviour, especially in its neighbourhood.

Under these circumstances, Taiwan would face immense pressure from the Chinese military, forcing the US to decide whether to respond militarily, given its pledge of support to the island nation.

In addition, China's position vis-à-vis Europe will be greatly strengthened, allowing Beijing to discourage European states from siding with America both globally and in East Asia.

***Scenario 3: the war enters a frozen phase.***

The war is likely to go on for some time, with no clear winner in sight. In a way, this would suit China, as it can continue to benefit from Russian goods sold cheaply.

Russia's dependence on China, which has continued to grow since 2014 when it illegally annexed Crimea, will only increase - leading Moscow to rely permanently on Chinese raw materials. This scenario, which could now become reality, has been one that Russian politicians have constantly feared since the 1990s.

The frozen conflict scenario allows Beijing to continue its policy of supposed neutrality while promoting its role as peacemaker without having to make difficult choices.

On the other hand, China sees the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a war against the West, as does Russia. A Russian victory or defeat is not just a problem for the Kremlin, but rather could represent either victory or defeat for the liberal international order.

For Beijing, however, it is important to avoid a complete Russian failure in Ukraine. The role of peacemaker is one way to prevent such a development. To this end, it may decide to increase support for Moscow, from financial assistance to arms deliveries.

However, the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive, which began in June with the support of Western-supplied heavy weaponry, is progressing rather slowly against Russian troops, who have had sufficient time to build solid defences on successive alignments, including formidable minefields, and who still have sufficient firepower to hit Ukrainian forces.

Under these circumstances, we can say without fear of being wrong, that for several years, the entire Black Sea area has been boiling from a geostrategic point of view, thus becoming the new powder keg of Europe, the very essence of the interests of the most relevant geopolitical actors, globally.

**Romania - an important pawn for Black Sea security**

The major international players have long understood that whoever controls the Black Sea controls the Middle East, whose democratisation implies the formation of a secure, prosperous and democratic region in BSEZ.

In this context, Romania will have a particularly important role, having the necessary political quality, as a full member of the European and Euro-Atlantic security structures, but also in terms of political-military, economic-social and



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demographic sources and resources, not to mention its geostrategic position (particularly important) at the gates of the Balkans, from where practically all crisis situations in the Near and Middle East can be managed. This has always been one of the most decisive aspects.

The fact that Romania is today the outpost of the North Atlantic Alliance at the Black Sea and that the US has decided to place a military base in our country, as well as some land components of the missile defense system developed by the US in Eastern Europe (in the location of the former military air base at Deveselu, Olt county), shows very clearly that the chess game for the domination of this area is in full swing, and Romania is a really important piece of it, but also the eastern border for both NATO and the EU.

Thus, the Black Sea and the Danube River can provide Romania with one of the main conditions for development and a very favourable and friendly economic perspective. Our country is also deeply interested in a stable, democratic and closely linked BSEZ with European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

### CONCLUSION

*In conclusion, regional security in the Black Sea area remains a subject of major interest for the littoral states and their strategic partners. In order to face the security challenges, close cooperation and strengthening of defence and security capabilities in the region is necessary.*

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