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Romania Faces the Militarization of the Black Sea Region

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Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has profoundly impacted the military balance in the Black Sea. Amidst mutual distrust and conflicting insecurity perceptions, militarization has become the dominant security paradigm. Both Moscow and the NATO members in the region are steadily building up their military capacities and engaging in tit-for-tat defense enhancements. Romania's ambitious defense procurement program is a prime example of this development. Aiming to offset Russian military capabilities in Crimea - only 420 kilometers from the Romanian coastline - Bucharest has vowed to reliably allocate 2% of its GDP to defense spending and has acquired a number of high-profile, American-made weapons systems such as the Patriot air defense system, the HIMARS artillery system, and F-16 fighter jets.

The Russian Militarization of Crimea

Following the annexation of the peninsula, the Kremlin quickly instructed the Russian armed forces to expand the pre-2014 deployments and upgrade the military infrastructure. The Russian military now operates at least 15 air and naval bases and stations more than 20,000 soldiers in Crimea. The port of Sevastopol serves as the headquarters of the 30,000-men-strong Black Sea Fleet (BSF). Besides the Azov and Black Seas, the BSF is tasked with operations in the Mediterranean region and commands the Syrian-based Russian Mediterranean Task Force. At least 18 new or modernized warships are slated to join the BSF by 2020.

Russia furthermore fields a myriad of short to long-range air defense systems and frequency-diverse radars in Crimea, which create a nearly impenetrable airspace. Since 2016, Russia has

deployed at least three battalion sets of its most advanced air defense system, the S-400, supplementing the S-300 systems already present on the peninsula. Since 2015, Crimea's coast is defended by the Bastion coastal defense system.

The Russian naval aviation and air force have also enhanced their presence in Crimea and significantly increased the number of tactical fighter jets, bombers, and anti-submarine helicopters. Moreover, Moscow has recently announced that it intends to deploy the nuclear-capable long-range Tu-22M3 bomber to Gvardeyskoye Air Base in Crimea, citing the presence of the U.S. Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMD) in Romania as a reason. Russia's combined capabilities in Crimea effectively form an anti-access/area denial (A2AD) zone, which restricts its neighbors' freedom of movement in the Black Sea.

Besides the military build-up in Crimea, Russia's blockade of the Kerch Strait in November 2018 has once again demonstrated the escalatory potential of the Ukraine conflict, heightening fears that Moscow will establish a zone of exclusive control in the Sea of Azov. Turning the Sea of Azov into a Russian "domestic lake" and cutting the Black Sea access of Eastern Ukrainian ports, would not only disturb trade and endanger the economic security of the Black Sea neighborhood, but also tilt the military balance even further in Moscow's favor.

The Romanian Defense Procurement Program

Russia's wholesale militarization of Crimea has been a constant source of anxiety for its neighbors. Romania is particularly concerned, as it now shares a de facto maritime border with Russia and its military capabilities are no match for the Russia build-up. To counter Moscow's threatening posture, Romania is first and foremost seeking to strengthen the NATO partnership and enhance the bilateral cooperation with the US. Over the past years, Bucharest has welcomed a number of strategic US and NATO military installations on its soil, including the U.S.-operated Aegis system in Deveselu, the NATO Multinational Brigade Southeast in Craiova, the NATO Force Integration Unit in Bucharest, the US air base "Mihail Kogălniceanu" in Constanta, and the Enhanced NATO Air Policing mission in Borcea.

Furthermore, Romania has pledged to modernize its military capabilities to increase its own contribution to NATO's defense efforts on the Eastern flank. Despite financial constraints, Romania has built a cross-party consensus to meet NATO's 2% defense spending goal. Approximately one third of Romania's defense budget is dedicated to equipment acquisitions, which was the second highest percentage among NATO countries in 2018 (after Luxembourg). The armament strategy developed by the Romanian Defense Ministry focuses on strengthening Romania's territorial defense capabilities, highlighting four acquisition priorities: A long-range air defense system, multirole fighter jets, multiple-rocket launchers, and multifunctional corvettes.

In 2017, Romania ticked the long-range air defense system off the list, by acquiring the latest version of the American Patriot air defense system. With a \$4 billion price tag, this is the single most expensive military purchase that Bucharest has ever made. The Patriot systems will likely cover Romania's southeastern region. Interlinked with the American Aegis BMD system in Deveselu, the Patriot will provide an additional air defense layer for the Romanian territory and NATO's Eastern flank.

With only obsolete Soviet-era MiG-21s in service, the Romanian Air Force has been promised an update since the late 2000s. In 2013, Bucharest agreed to purchase 12 second-hand F-16 "Fighting Falcons" from Portugal. The jets were declared operational in 2018 and

flew their first air policing mission in the spring of 2019. The Romanian government has vowed to acquire another 36 fighter aircraft, likely brand-new F-16s. For the time being, Romania relies on the Italian and American air policing squadrons under NATO's enhanced air policing framework.

The Romanian land forces have also received significant updates. The Romanian government has placed orders for over 300 high-end armored and infantry fighting vehicles to boost troop mobility. In 2016, Romania acquired the American-made HIMARS long-range rocket artillery system to improve the infantry's striking capability. If positioned in Romania's southeast, the HIMARS can potentially reach Crimea's western seashore, bringing major Russian bases within range.

While Romania has promised to update its maritime capabilities, the Romanian Navy still remains the most underequipped branch of the armed forces. After years of failed bids, Romania's multifunctional corvette program has again been suspended. Bucharest has also stated its intention to re-launch the Romanian submarine program, after converting its sole Kilo-class subsurface submarine into a training platform. The promise to restore Romania's subsurface capabilities does, however, currently remain lip service.

Bulgaria's and Turkey's Response

The other NATO allies in the Black Sea, Bulgaria and Turkey, have also intensified their efforts to build up military capabilities. Bulgaria supports NATO activities in the Black Sea, participating in regional NATO exercises, opening a major training area for NATO troops, hosting joint military facilities with the US, and - like Romania - receiving periodic visits from US Aegis-capable warships. Despite its limited means, Bulgaria has increased military spending and developed plans to modernize its armed forces. Recently, Sofia has announced its intention to purchase twelve brand-new F-16 Block 70 fighter aircraft. However, Bulgaria continues to tread carefully when it comes to Russia. Bulgaria has, for example, vetoed the Romanian initiative to establish a joint Romanian-Bulgarian-Turkish fleet in the Black Sea, fearing that the increasing militarization of the region will endanger Bulgaria's economic interests.

While Turkey is by far the most military potent NATO ally in the Black Sea region, the Turkish stance on Black Sea security is becoming increasingly ambiguous. Although Turkey used to be starkly opposed to Russia's militarization of the Black Sea, Ankara has grown more critical of NATO and US initiatives and improved relations with Russia since 2017. Turkey continues to participate in NATO exercises, but is also conducting bilateral naval exercises with Russia in the Black Sea. Due to its strategic position and heavy military investments, Turkey is able to project significant military power in the Black Sea and counterbalance the Russia build-up. Currently, the Black Sea does nevertheless not seem to be a Turkish priority, as Ankara is preoccupied with threats in the Middle East.

A New Arms Race in the Black Sea?

The Russian militarization of the Crimean Peninsula has shifted the military balance in the Black Sea and rattled the neighborhood. Romania has been at the forefront of promoting a strong NATO response to the Russian military build-up and is seeking to strengthen its territorial defense capabilities vis-à-vis Russia. With tensions continuously running high, an end to the military build-up cycle is not in sight. As long as Russia continues to arm "fortress Crimea" as a base for projecting power in the Black Sea region and the Middle East, Russia's neighbors will seek to enhance their guards. Having US-made equipment like the Aegis, Patriot, and HIMARS at its doorstep, contributes to Russia's notion of encirclement in turn. In

order to prevent the military build-up from spiraling into a new arms race, Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community will have to address their mutual threat perceptions. Rolling back the militarization of the Black Sea will require trust building through transparency and sustained dialogue between all stakeholders.

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