



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE L'OTAN

DEFENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE (DSC)
SUB-COMMITTEE ON FUTURE SECURITY AND DEFENCE CAPABILITIES (DSCFC)

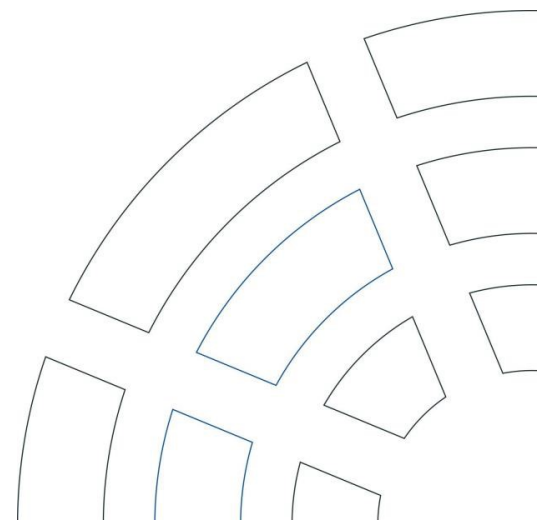
PRELIMINARY DRAFT

TROUBLED WATERS – HOW RUSSIA’S WAR IN UKRAINE CHANGES BLACK SEA SECURITY

Preliminary Draft Report
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020 DSCFC 23 E – Original: English – 2 May 2023

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The Black Sea is a strategic fault line between the NATO Alliance and Russia. Except for Türkiye, the region came into the post-Cold War era profoundly unsettled about the strategic direction of its littoral states. The region's east-west split resulted in a series of conflicts, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022. Russia's war in Ukraine developed quickly into the most violent and consequential conflict since the Second World War.

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, however, was the second time in eight years Russia had used military force to seize Ukrainian sovereign territory unlawfully. Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula permitted Russia's Black Sea fleet a virtual stranglehold across the entire Black Sea. Still, despite this growing challenge on its southeast flank, NATO's post-2014 eastern flank defence and deterrence posture adaptations largely focused on reinforcing perceived vulnerabilities in the Baltic Sea region. The reasons for this imbalance lay in a lack of Allied consensus, particularly among NATO's Black Sea Allies, on what is the best posture for NATO in the Black Sea Region (BSR), particularly on the troubled waters of the Black Sea. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine shocked Allies sufficiently to reconsider their position in the BSR, resulting in several new initiatives to reassure regional Allies and strengthen the Alliance's regional defence and deterrence posture – the most visible being the multinational battalions stood up in Bulgaria and Romania.

As this preliminary draft report makes clear, however, much more needs to be done to shore up Allied defence and security across the BSR. It also encourages Allies to surge the types of capabilities to Ukrainian forces to block Russia's ability to secure more robust bastion defence capabilities in the Black Sea, which would permit it to continue to hold Ukrainian critical infrastructure at risk, block Ukrainian consolidation of its recaptured territory and threaten the southern regions with a renewed invasion down the line with a reconstituted force. Among other recommendations, this report also advocates for: a focused strategy for the BSR, supported by a robust regional defence plan; increased forward-positioned assets, including modern integrated air and missile defence systems; increased forward force presence in the air, at sea and on land; and significantly more support to the region's vulnerable partners.

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I- INTRODUCTION

1. The Black Sea is a strategic fault line between the NATO Alliance and Russia. Except for Türkiye, the region came into the post-Cold War era profoundly unsettled about the strategic direction of its littoral states¹. The region's east-west split resulted in a series of no less than ten conflicts², culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022. Russia's war in Ukraine developed quickly into the most violent and consequential conflict since the Second World War.
2. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, however, was the second time in eight years Russia had used military force to seize Ukrainian sovereign territory unlawfully. Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula permitted Russia's Black Sea fleet a virtual stranglehold across the entire Black Sea. To consolidate this position, Russia worked assiduously to connect Crimea to Russia via the Kerch bridge and revamp and expand the peninsula's military facilities to be able to host Russia's rapidly modernising military forces. To defend its Crimean position and expand its strike reach across Black Sea, Russia built out a sophisticated anti-access/area denial 'bubble' replete with modern standoff weapon systems (including dual-capable advanced precision missile systems), ISR assets, electronic warfare capabilities, and expanded and modernised the Black Sea Fleet.
3. Russia was able to leverage its Black Sea dominance post-2014 to sustain its new-found will to demonstrate its international military might: The Black Sea fleet was essential to Russia's operations in Syria, incursions in Libya and increased presence in the Mediterranean. Still, despite this growing challenge on its southeast flank, NATO's post-2014 eastern flank defence and deterrence posture adaptations largely focused on reinforcing perceived vulnerabilities in the BSR.
4. The reasons for this imbalance of lay in a lack of Allied consensus, particularly among NATO's Black Sea Allies, on what is the best posture for NATO in the BSR, particularly on the troubled waters of the Black Sea. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine shocked Allies sufficiently to reconsider their position in the Black Sea Region, resulting in several new initiatives to reassure regional Allies and strengthen the Alliance's regional defence and deterrence posture – the most visible being the multinational battalions stood up in Bulgaria and Romania.
5. As this preliminary draft report makes clear, however, much more needs to be done to shore up Allied defence and security across the BSR. It also encourages Allies to surge the types of capabilities to Ukrainian forces to block Russia's ability to secure more robust bastion defence capabilities in the Black Sea, which would permit it to continue to hold Ukrainian critical infrastructure at risk, block Ukrainian consolidation of its recaptured territory, and threaten the southern regions with a renewed invasion down the line with a reconstituted force.
6. Among other recommendations, this report also advocates for: a focused strategy for the BSR, supported by a robust regional defence plan; increased forward positioned assets, including modern integrated air and missile defence systems; increased forward force presence in the air, at sea, and on land; and significantly more support to the region's vulnerable partners.

1 The Black Sea littoral states are Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Türkiye and Ukraine.

2 The ten conflicts are: the Transnistria conflict in Moldova; the Georgian-Abkhaz war; the Georgian civil war; the 2008 Russia-Georgia war; the two Chechen Wars; the two Armenian-Azerbaijani wars over Nagorno-Karabakh; and Russia's two invasions of Ukraine.

II- THE EVOLVING SECURITY FRAMEWORK OF THE BLACK SEA

A. THE MONTREUX CONVENTION, A CONSISTENT FRAMING MECHANISM SINCE 1936

7. The security environment of the Black Sea changed significantly over the past century. The Montreux Convention, however, has remained a consistent framing device since 1936. The 1936 Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits (known more commonly as the Montreux Convention) is an international agreement governing the transit of all vessels (merchant and warships and aircraft) through the Turkish Straits, a strategic chokepoint linking the Mediterranean and Black Seas. The treaty was negotiated in the era of growing great power strategic competition in the 1930s to de-escalate potential tensions and mitigate the impact of conflicts in the Black Sea region (Aliano, 2022; Montreux Convention, 1936). There are ten treaty signatories³.

8. The Montreux Convention allows all states' merchant vessels to pass through the straits, but imposes varying degrees of restrictions on all warships passing through, the type and kind of restriction depending on whether or not the ship belongs to a Black Sea riparian state (Türkiye MFA, 2022). During peace time, non-riparian state war vessels are limited in size (maximum aggregate tonnage) and duration of stay (no longer than 21 days) – they must also notify Turkish authorities 15 days prior to passage (Aliano, 2022; Türkiye MFA, 2022). In wartime, when Türkiye is not a party to the conflict, the warships of the warring parties may not pass through the straits, except when returning to their home base (Nevitt, 2022). While there are more specific measures in the convention, these limitations have been a key factor to a rules-based international order governing the Black Sea and Turkish Straits for more than 85 years.

9. Over the years of the Cold War, the Black Sea was relatively calm, in large part due to the ordering principal of the Montreux Convention. In 1952, when Türkiye joined NATO, the southern littoral of the Black Sea and passage through the straits came under the control of a NATO Ally. The Northern littoral expanses from Bulgaria over to modern-day Georgia remained firmly under the yoke of the Warsaw Pact or the Soviet Union directly.

10. As a result of its strategic geographic position, Türkiye's role in the Alliance was quite significant during the Cold War, as it acted as the Alliance's southeastern bulwark, controlling the passage of Soviet ships between the Black and Mediterranean Seas.

B. BLACK SEA AS A POST-CW STRATEGIC FAULT LINE

11. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union changed the political and security landscape across the Black Sea dramatically. The wider region experienced a relatively violent birth into the post-Cold War era, a series of violent conflicts⁴ broke out across the wider region as Soviet-suppressed identities fought for self-determination – almost all have remained frozen or seen periodic flare-ups over the decades since, largely due to Russian interference. Russia's growing revisionist aggressive foreign policy drove further Black Sea wars in the decades following – from its war in Georgia in 2008, as a result of which 20 percent of Georgian territory remains under Russian occupation, to the two invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Russia's invasions of Ukraine have had the most significant, and potentially long-lasting, impact on Black Sea security.

3 Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union.

4 These include the Armenian-Azerbaijan wars over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Transnistria conflict in Moldova, the series of Georgian civil conflicts and the Chechen wars.

12. All the region's littoral states under Soviet control in the Cold War made their Euro-Atlantic ambitions clear very early after the Cold War, joining NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994. Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO by 2004, and then the EU by 2007. Allies agreed at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that both Georgia and Ukraine would become NATO Allies, provided each met all necessary requirements – the *Bucharest Declaration*⁵ has been reconfirmed at successive NATO summits since (NATO, 2023). In parallel, after Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000, Russia's regional policies became increasingly revisionist and were soon followed by the use of force to try to consolidate not only a regional sphere of influence, but also to establish a direct position of dominance over most of the Black Sea.

13. Despite a clear growing divergence among regional states about their strategic futures, the BSR states developed several platforms to drive closer economic and security cooperation over the 1990s and 2000s. Of the many multilateral platforms⁶, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)⁷ emerged as the leading platform for regional cooperation on a range of economic and, incrementally, security issues, such as counter-organised crime and terrorism (Çolakoglu, 2007). Still on larger security issues, the BSR remained divided between NATO states, NATO aspirants, and, after 2008, a declining level of partnership with Russia.

14. NATO's long-standing BSR Ally, Türkiye, sought to drive closer economic and security cooperation in the region in the post-Cold War era. Ankara demonstrated early and consistent commitment to Black Sea organisations like BSEC and drove Black Sea security operations such as the Black Sea Force and Black Sea Harmony (BSH); BSH was inspired by NATO's Standing Naval Operations and launched in 2004 by the Turkish Navy, providing Black Sea maritime security through presence operations along the sea lanes of communication including shadowing, trailing as well as interdiction. The BSH conducted regular patrols, transferred its missions to BLACKSEAFOR and complemented NATO's Operation Active Endeavour⁸.

15. Although relatively successful in their first years, the Black Sea cooperation platforms became strained as Russia's regional policies became increasingly aggressive. Russia's use of force in the region from 2008 followed by its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then subsequent financial and military support for armed formations in eastern Ukraine drove them to start to break down. After its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 they became unworkable.

5 For the full text of the Bucharest Summit Declaration, please see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm

6 Other BSR regional cooperation organisations or initiatives include; the Royaumont Process, the Southeast Cooperation Initiative (SECI), the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Stability Pact, the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development and the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG).

7 The BSEC region comprises approximately 20 million square kilometers and includes the territories of the Black Sea littoral states and extends out to areas of the Western Balkans and the Caucasus, thereby incorporating approximately 350 million people and an annual trade capacity of approximately USD 400bn. The region is replete with large oil, gas, mineral, and metal reserves and is developing into a major energy transfer corridor (Dragos Aligica, 2023).

8 Operation Active Endeavour (2001-2016) was NATO's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States and was succeeded by Operation Sea Guardian. During Active Endeavour, Allied ships patrolled the Mediterranean and monitored shipping vis-à-vis the deterrence, defence, disruption and protection against terrorist activities (NATO, 2022).

III- THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S INVASIONS OF UKRAINE ON BLACK SEA SECURITY: 2014 TO PRESENT

16. Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea spurred Allied action to adapt its defence and deterrence posture. Allies agreed to halt all partnership efforts with Russia, paring down diplomatic contacts significantly, with the NATO-Russia Council remaining as one of few remaining mechanisms for the exchange of views⁹. A key focus of the 2014 Wales Summit was a move to increase Allied force readiness and adapt command and control structures.

17. The Readiness Action Plan (RAP) incorporated a series of reassurance measures for Central and Eastern European Allies. The RAP's most visible announcement was the tripling of the NATO Response Force (NRF) to 40,000; to this was added the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) – an NRF force of approximately 20,000, including a multinational land brigade of 5,000. The VJTF became the Alliance's on-call rapid deployment capability¹⁰. To underwrite these initiatives, Allies also agreed to the Defence Spending Pledge to move towards investing 2 percent of GDP on national defence, of which at least 20 percent would be spent on new equipment purchases.

18. The new initiatives, however, did little to address specific areas along NATO's eastern flank with Russia. After 2014, Russia's hardening policies toward Allies, along with rapid military modernisation, particularly visible along its western flank with NATO, prompted additional steps to strengthen Allied defence and deterrence. The 2016 Warsaw Summit set about what would become a series of initiatives in the form of rotating multinational combat formations east, increased high-readiness reinforcements and more repositioned equipment for combat enablement.

19. In 2016, however, NATO planners' focus of these initiatives was anchored toward perceived significant geographic vulnerabilities¹¹ in the Baltic Sea region, particularly across the Baltic States – to the relative neglect of the Black Sea: Allies agreed to an Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) underwriting four multinational battlegroups stationed in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the Baltic region, while only signing on to the Tailored Forward Presence (tFP) in Romania and, to a far lesser extent, Bulgaria. The tFP was based on a Romanian proposal to strengthen NATO's regional presence across the land, air and maritime domains, to be anchored by the Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE) in Bucharest. The MND-SE was tasked with facilitating regional contingency reinforcement, as well as the provision of enhanced training and exercises. The tFP also included an enhanced Air Policing (eAP) initiative to have Allied air forces patrolling Romanian and Bulgarian airspaces.

20. Allies took additional steps to bolster readiness and reinforcement capacities at the 2018 Brussels Summit. The *Readiness Initiative* committed Allies to the deployment of 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels on 30 days' notice for reinforcement, high intensity fighting, or crisis intervention. Allies also stood up two new commands: an Atlantic Command in

9 After Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea, the NRC has met 11 times – three in 2016, three in 2017, two in 2018, and two in 2019. The last meeting took place in January 2022.

10 The VJTF was assigned lead nations – France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the UK – on an annual rotating basis.

11 The narrow strip of land connecting Poland to Lithuania, known as the Suwalki Gap, is flanked by Russia's Kaliningrad exclave on the Baltic Sea and Russian ally Belarus to the east. In addition, there was the growing perception that the balance of forces on the Russian side of the Baltics opened the region up to the possibility of a rapid Russian incursion, which would force Allies into a very challenging military operation to push Russian forces back and would almost certainly lead to unacceptable levels of escalation.

Norfolk, Virginia to assist with transatlantic reinforcement and a support and logistics hub in Ulm, Germany to facilitate Allied reinforcements moving east.

21. On 25 November 2018, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) used force to curtail Ukraine's maritime freedom of operation: the FSB coast guard fired upon and captured three Ukrainian Navy vessels as they attempted to traverse the Kerch straight from the Black Sea into the Sea of Azov (Ferris-Rotman and Stern, 2018). In response, NATO Allies moved to increase their presence in the region to sharpen situational awareness – Allies also strengthened capacity building initiatives with increasingly vulnerable partners Ukraine and Georgia, including training and exercising with their maritime forces and coast guards. Allies also moved to increase their port visits (NATO, 2022a).

A. DIVERGENT STRATEGIC PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK SEA SECURITY PRIOR TO 24 FEBRUARY 2022

22. As noted above, Türkiye has long held a dominant strategic position in the Alliance due to its geographic position along NATO's southeast flank, and due to its control of the Turkish Straits guaranteed by the Montreux Convention, which allows it to govern not only the flow of ships through the straits, but also to determine a relative balance of power in the Black Sea at any time. As a result, over the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, Türkiye has generally viewed Black Sea security as a Black Sea state issue, largely seeking to limit the role outside powers play in the region – including the NATO Alliance (Hodges et al., 2022). Türkiye therefore remained strongly committed to past Black Sea security organisations, including the Black Sea Force, Black Sea Harmony, and the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), to ensure the security and economic vitality of the Black Sea in the decades after the Cold War (Hodges et al., 2022).

23. In contrast, Romania has been actively engaged, particularly since 2014, in having NATO play a larger role in the BSR. Romania's advocacy of greater Alliance efforts was key to the Allied decisions on the tFP, and Bucharest's desire to host NATO's MND-SE signalled a desire to play a larger leadership role in regional security (United States Army NATO, 2018; Hodges et al., 2022). However, Romania currently lacks the military – and especially naval – capacity to play a larger leadership role alongside Türkiye in the region (Hodges et al., 2022). Despite pledging to increase its defence spending to over 2 percent of gross domestic product, such investments will not translate into increased capacity immediately (Popescu, 2022). In 2016, Romania's President, Klaus Iohannis, proposed creating a joint NATO Black Sea fleet led by Black Sea littoral states (Chiriac and Cheresheva, 2016). However, Bulgaria and Türkiye publicly refused to join, making the proposed venture stillborn (Chiriac and Cheresheva, 2016).

24. Bulgaria remains broadly committed to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the BSR, however the country conducted three parliamentary elections in 2021 alone. As such, the Bulgarian government was limited in its ability to formulate an effective response to the rapidly evolving Russian threat (Hodges et al., 2022). While Bulgarian defence spending has increased in recent years, it remains below 2 percent of GDP and most new investments contribute to modernising Soviet-era military equipment rather than increasing capabilities (World Bank 2023, Hodges et al., 2022). Despite these limitations, Bulgaria remains a central ally in the Black Sea region and has held a growing number of joint military exercises to increase NATO involvement in the BSR (Wezeman and Kuimova, 2018).

25. These diverging perspectives led to a lack of focused strategic direction in the BSR by NATO. This was exemplified by the lack of sufficient strategic presence on land, in the air, and, particularly, at sea from 2014 to 2022 by Allies – this was despite the growing rhetoric of Allied statements noting a will to increase their presence in the Black Sea region (NATO, 2016). Irregular Allied presence in the Black Sea is a result of Allies' caution to not provoke Moscow, a lack of resources, budget constraints and competing Allied priorities. Several Allies had hitherto been reluctant to increase

Allied maritime patrols let alone agree to a NATO Black Sea strategy (Bath, 2022; Irish et al., 2022). The last NATO warship¹² in the Black Sea prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was the French frigate *Auvergne*, which patrolled from 14 December 2021 to 2 January 2022 (Bosphorus Naval News, 2021 & 2022).

B. ENDURING INTERESTS: RUSSIA AND BLACK SEA SECURITY

26. In contrast to the Alliance's lack of strategic focus on the Black Sea prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian strategy has long placed a primacy on the BSR, viewing it as essential to maintaining a Eurasian "sphere of influence" and access to other geographic areas of importance like the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa (Howard and Czekaj, 2019; Hodges et al., 2022). Russia has also long considered its position in the BSR as central to maintaining great-power status. The sea is, therefore, a central node in Russian strategic thinking, anchoring its leadership of Eurasia as a global pillar alongside China and the Euro-Atlantic space (Hodges, et al., 2022). Russia's long-term BSR interests ensure the region will maintain a position of primacy within Russian grand strategy moving forward, no matter the outcome of its war of aggression in Ukraine. As such, the BSR represents a focal point of Russian political and military policies, and from 2011–2020 received increased attention as Russia modernised the Black Sea Fleet and the Southern Military District through the State Armaments Program (Hodges et al., 2022).

27. While the modernisation effort included improvements to the Russian Black Sea Fleet (to both surface and subsurface vessels), major investments were also made to the anti-access, area denial systems (A2AD) Russia maintains in the region, especially after Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014 (Chin, 2018). The increased presence of A2AD systems – which, according to reports, includes four S400 surface-to-air missile battalions and the Bastion system with supersonic Onix anti-ship missiles and subsonic Bal missiles – on the Crimean Peninsula ensured Russian systems could target all the Black Sea (Sukhankin, 2021).

C. RUSSIA'S GREY-ZONE TACTICS

28. Russia's BSR presence, however, is not limited to its military forces and infrastructure, it also relies on broad grey-zone tactics – including disinformation, energy resources manipulation and strategic corruption – to further its interests without directly provoking other states or the NATO Alliance. Such tactics are designed to pull states further into Russia's orbit without taking public or provocative steps necessitating a retaliation. By employing grey-zone tactics Russia seeks to create a veneer of plausible deniability, meddle in foreign politics, and degrade a state's willingness to confront growing Russian aggression.

29. Russian disinformation campaigns are targeted to undermine support for NATO, often describing it as a US-puppet organisation driving the region towards conflict, to downplay Russia's responsibility for its invasion of Ukraine by painting itself as a victim and to undermine popular civil movements by depicting them as US-backed uprisings (Atlantic Council, 2023; US State Department, 2022; European Union 2023). While these narratives are injected into the information environments of countries within the Black Sea Region, they are not designed to be wholly accepted. Instead, they are designed to chip away at a shared understanding of facts, thereby making consensus difficult, if not impossible. For example, in Romania, there are fears Russia has exacerbated a bilateral issue between Ukraine and Romania concerning the Danube Delta – a world protected natural reserve – to try to undermine Romanian support for Ukraine (McGrath, 2023).

12 Black Sea riparian NATO members Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye are not included.

30. Similarly, Russia relies on strategic, or weaponised, corruption to capture elites in the Black Sea Region to further limit Black Sea countries' ability to combat Russian action (Owen, 2021). Strategic corruption is the use of corruption as a tool of statecraft to interfere, weaken, or co-opt elites (Owen, 2021). It often relies on globalised economies and Russia's state-owned enterprises to advance Russian interests without direct state involvement (Massaro and Rausing, 2017). Such grey-zone tactics will remain central to any Russian Black Sea Strategy moving forward, especially if it emerges militarily weaker following its invasion of Ukraine.

D. RUSSIA'S EXPANSIONISM IN SOUTHERN UKRAINE

31. Russian expansion in southern Ukraine began when it illegally annexed Crimea in 2014. The seizure of the Ukrainian naval base at Sevastopol effectively eliminated Ukraine's Black Sea maritime capabilities. Russian Forces were able to seize over 75 percent of Ukraine's Navy, the majority of its military helicopter fleet, and the bulk of its ship repair capacity, as well as dismiss (or absorb) the majority of Ukraine's sailors (Eckstein, 2021). Only one Ukrainian frigate remained, the *Hetman Sahaidachny*, as it was out of port at the time of Russia's illegal annexation, taking part in NATO's counter-piracy operation off the Horn of Africa (Axe, 2021).

32. Afterwards, Russia began relying on construction projects to force Crimea's integration into Russia and expand its Black Sea sphere of influence. Russia's first step was to build the Kerch Strait Bridge, connecting the Crimean Peninsula to mainland Russia. The project cost roughly 3,7 billion USD and was completed in May 2018 (Roth, 2018). Further infrastructure projects, including both the first and second Kerch Strait undersea internet cables – used to force Crimean residents onto Russia's controlled internet networks – and the 10 billion USD worth of direct subsidies Russia has poured into the region, have tightened Russia's grip on the Peninsula (Schroeder and Dack, 2023; Pifer, 2020). Greater control over the Peninsula's infrastructure, coupled with investments made by the Russian military ensured Crimea was a backbone of Russia's control over the majority of the Black Sea, and, in the instance it would seek to re-invade Ukraine, the Kerch Strait Bridge could become a primary supply route for Russian forces.

IV- THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S INVASION ON BLACK SEA SECURITY

33. Russia's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022 unleashed the most violent and consequential war since the Second World War. Of the original four axes upon which Russia's invading forces relied, the southern axis was launched from Russia's positions on the Crimean Peninsula, backed by the formidable Black Sea Fleet. By February 27, Türkiye invoked its legal powers under the Montreux Convention (article 19) upon its official declaration that the situation in Ukraine was a war (Malsin, 2022). The move blocked Russia's ability to reinforce this fleet with additional warships from its other fleets, as they are not officially anchored in the Black Sea. It also restricted the access of non-Black Sea riparian state NATO Allies' access to the sea, depending upon Türkiye's interpretation of the agreement's limitations.

34. From the beginning, the Black Sea has been the setting for some of the more dramatic scenes of the war. The small contingent of Ukrainian Forces' stubborn refusal to cede the strategically located Snake Island to invading Russian forces became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance against overwhelming odds. In the first two and a half months of the war, Ukrainian Forces sank five Russian vessels off its Black Sea coast, including the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, the *Moskva*, on 13 April (Sutton, 2022).

35. In parallel, rather than cede their remaining frigate to Russia, Ukrainian Forces scuttled the ship on March 2 (Navy Recognition, 2022). Ukrainian Forces, despite lacking more than a "mosquito

fleet” for a navy, managed to find the ways and means to inflict significant damage on Russia’s Black Sea fleet and its supporting infrastructure in Crimea – this use of non-traditional, non-capital ships signals an efficient way forward in the short-to-medium term for handling the relative imbalance of maritime power in the Black Sea. Among the more spectacular events was the October bombing of the Kerch Bridge, which rendered a major section inoperable. Using missile and drone strikes, Ukrainian Forces have also been able to inflict significant damage on Russia’s Black Sea Fleet and naval aviation Headquarters in Crimea; unmanned surface vessels have hit Russian frigates and mine countermeasure ships, forcing Russia to pull back some of its key naval assets, most significantly its kilo class submarines, to its port Novorossiysk in southern Russia (Sutton, 2022a).

36. Ukraine’s efforts to degrade Russia’s naval assets and defend strategic positions along its southern coast (such as Snake Island) has effectively denied Russia one of its key goals of capturing all of Ukraine’s Black Sea coast. Despite clear setbacks and the inability to achieve their original objectives, Russian Forces were still able to establish a land bridge linking mainland Russia to the Crimean Peninsula due to their advances in eastern and southern Ukraine. These advances dramatically reduced Ukraine’s access to the Black Sea, and the parallel expansion and reinforcement of Russian control threatens Ukraine’s economic livelihood.

37. Russian advances in southern Ukraine also threaten Moldova with its Russian-backed separatist region of Transnistria (Murphy, 2022). While the threat Russia poses to Moldova has lessened given Ukraine’s success in stopping Russia’s campaign to take Odesa early in the war, a continued Russian focus on southern Ukraine emphasises Moscow’s desire to control access to the Black Sea and thereby exert greater pressure on BSR states.

A. THE RUSSIAN BLOCKADE AND GRAIN EXPORTS: THE BLACK SEA AND WORLD FOOD SUPPLIES

38. Ukraine is one among the globe’s major agricultural exporters, ranking within the top two in the export of wheat, barley, maize, rapeseed, rapeseed oil, sunflower seeds and oil (Tobin, 2022). Most of these exports flow through Ukrainian ports along the Black Sea. However, at the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion, Russia moved quickly to blockade these ports to limit Ukraine’s ability to export goods and strangle its economy. Such actions had a global impact, as world food prices skyrocketed by as much as 41 percent by the summer of 2022, before levelling off (IRC, 2022b). Today, the inflation adjusted global food price index is roughly 24 percent above the average from 2014–2016, however this is comparable to the levels before Russia’s invasion (Tobin, 2022; Kearns, 2023). The issues caused by increased food shortages were most acute in the Middle East and Africa (IRC, 2022). Countries like Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia depend on Russia and Ukraine for approximately 90 percent of their wheat (IRC, 2022b). Continually, Yemen imports half of its grain from Russia and Ukraine and Lebanon imports roughly 80 percent (IRC, 2022b). The world’s most vulnerable populations, already suffering from other shocks like famines and financial crises, were the ones most affected by Russia’s invasion and its blockade of Ukrainian ports (IRC, 2022).

39. In response to international pressure and Turkish leadership through the United Nations, Russia negotiated an agreement to allow Ukraine to export limited amounts of grain from three ports – Odesa, Chornomosrk and Yuzhny/Pivdennyi – to help ease the growing food crisis (Goncharenko, 2023; United Nations, 2022). The deal has largely operated as designed since coming into effect and has been repeatedly renegotiated and renewed with the initial deal lasting 120 days and future additions limited to sixty (Goncharenko, 2023; United Nations 2022).

40. The Black Sea Grain initiative was extended on 18 March for an additional 60 days. Not long after extending, however, Moscow began indicating that ship registrations would expire on 18 May,

and that it would terminate the deal if the G7 bans further exports¹³ to Russia. Russia is threatening to abandon the agreement unless conditions for its own exports are met, which threatens another Russian blockade of Ukrainian grain exports (Zimmermann, 2023). At their 23 April meeting in Japan, G7 leaders called for the “extension, full implementation and expansion” of the Initiative. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to the Ukrainian, Turkish and Russian leaders proposing a way forward, noting his concern about global food insecurity should they not come to an agreement about extension (Nichols, 2023).¹⁴

41. Given its preponderance of naval power and long-range strike capacity within the Black Sea, Russia can largely operate with impunity and limit Ukrainian actions as it sees fit. While Türkiye has limited Russia’s capability to move more military ships into the Black Sea due to Montreux Convention restrictions, Russia can maintain its ability to dictate Ukrainian shipping for the foreseeable future. Russia has also worked actively in other ways to complicate Ukrainian shipping in the Black Sea via a focused mining campaign since the beginning of the war.

B. RUSSIA’S MINING OF BLACK SEA SLOC’S

42. Part of Russia’s effort to control all the Ukrainian Black Sea coastline included the planting of an estimated 400 to 600 explosive mines along Ukraine’s Black Sea coastline (Tondo, 2022). The exact location of these mines is also unknown as storms have churned the Black Sea, causing the mines to shift in the tides and, in extreme cases, Russian mines have washed ashore throughout the Black Sea (Polityuk, 2023).

43. As the mines shift, they pose a threat to all littoral states of the Black Sea and any shipping that transits the area. Türkiye has been forced to defuse several mines that have drifted into its territorial waters, including briefly closing the Bosphorus channel to international traffic to neutralise a sea mine (Walter, 2022). Romania has similarly been forced to respond to sea mines identified by fishermen (Walter, 2022). Finally, the NATO Shipping Centre (NSC) has issued warnings to vessels transiting the Black Sea and stated that NATO states had been forced to defuse mines that had drifted into commercial shipping lanes (Thomas, 2022).

44. The Russian mining strategy is clear: block or hinder Ukrainian access to the Black Sea to limit Ukraine’s ability to leverage the Black Sea for economic and/or military support. The mining operations are one part of Russia’s larger naval blockade against Ukraine and a clear violation of international law.

45. Unlike landmines, sea mines are not banned by international agreements (Tondo, 2022). However, international law does prescribe how and why they can be used. Specifically, sea mines can only be placed in a state’s territorial waters to defend their coastline for external attacks (Tondo, 2022). In June 2022, Ukraine stated that it had mined its Black Sea coastline “in the exercise of our right to self-defence as stipulated under article 51 of the UN convention” (Tondo, 2022). The Ukrainian mines are designed to limit Russian freedom of movement within the Black Sea and hinder

13 The G7 have already banned numerous exports to Russia, including of luxury goods and products that can be used for military purposes. Now, G7 countries are also considering banning exports of clothing, cosmetic products, used cars and tyres (Ridgwell, 2023).

14 Other impediments to the agreement’s renewal include the Kremlin’s calls for the Russian Agricultural Bank’s return to the SWIFT banking system, a resumption of agricultural machinery and spare parts supply to Russia and the lifting of insurance restrictions. In addition, Russia demands access to ports for its ships and cargo, the restart of a pipeline delivering Russian ammonia to one of Ukraine’s Black Sea ports, as well as an unblocking of Russian fertiliser companies’ financial activities and accounts. In response, Türkiye has offered to help process Russian payments if it will not be sanctioned (Nichols, 2023; Ridgwell, 2023).

any sea operations by Russia against Ukraine (Mizokami, 2023). Such actions and strategy clearly conform with international law aligning with Ukraine's inherent right of self-defence. However, as the mines – both Ukrainian and Russian – become unmoored due to salt-water corrosion and seasonal storms, they will increasingly pose a threat to anyone transiting the Black Sea.

V- DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE: NATO AND BLACK SEA SECURITY AFTER RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION

A. NATO'S INTERESTS AND PRESENCE

46. Russia's full-scale brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine cracked wide open the Black Sea Region as a strategic fault line of its evolving challenge to NATO Allies and partners. The war has focused Allied strategic attention on the region, and, to a large extent, aligned NATO's BSR Allies' previously divergent perspectives on the Alliance's role in the region. The 2022 Strategic Concept emphasises the importance of the BSR and commits NATO to enhancing the capabilities and resilience of Black Sea States to malign influence and supporting their continued integration in the Euro-Atlantic space (NATO, 2022c).

47. As such, NATO is expanding its own capabilities in the region. The shift in NATO resources towards the Black Sea includes establishing four more multinational battle groups – two of these in Black Sea littoral states Bulgaria and Romania – and agreeing to enhance the battlegroups from battalion to brigade size, when required (NATO, 2022a). Such actions effectively doubled the amount of NATO forces stationed in Eastern Europe (NATO, 2022a). NATO member states have also increased their air defence systems within the BSR including increased fighter jets, ground-based air defence systems and surveillance flights. (NATO, 2022; Hubbard and Harman, 2023).

48. On one surveillance flight – designed to increase allied awareness within the BSR – a US drone was harassed by, and collided with, a Russian plane forcing the drone to crash into the Black Sea (Hubbard and Harman, 2023). While the destruction of the drone was unique, NATO assets have faced increased harassment in the region since Russia's invasion (Hubbard and Harman, 2023).

49. Finally, prior to Russia's renewed invasion, Allies sailed warships through the Black Sea, however such displays have been impossible since Türkiye closed the Black Sea to all non-Black Sea riparian state warships in line with the Montreux Convention (Hubbard and Harman, 2023). Overall, NATO has worked to increase its intelligence collection capabilities and its military mobility in the BSR to ensure that it is prepared for any contingency. In parallel, there is growing pressure from Allied capitals to push the Black Sea up on NATO's agenda as well as on their own national ones. The most recent example of this being bipartisan and bicameral legislation¹⁵ put forward by in the United States Congress in March 2023 encouraging the Biden Administration to develop a Black Sea strategy. The legislation supports increased US and Allied military presence in the region, as well as encouraging further economic engagement. The legislation underscores the value of the United States' strategic Allies and partners in the region – Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, and

15 The bill submitted to the US House of Representatives, the Black Sea Security Act of 2023, was introduced by Representative Mike Turner, Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and Head of the US Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, as well as Vice-Chairman of the NATO PA Defence and Security Committee.

Türkiye – and highlights the region’s vital nature to US security interests. Other such proposals have been put forward by NATO Allies through their domestic parliaments.

B. THE BLACK SEA AS A MAJOR ENERGY TRANSIT CORRIDOR AND THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA’S WAR IN UKRAINE ON ITS FUTURE

50. NATO’s BSR interests are not limited to security but extend to energy as well. The BSR is a central transit hub in the flow of oil and gas exports to Europe, the Mediterranean and beyond, having great potential to further linking Europe and Central Asia (GMF, 2023). Currently, it accounts for 34 percent of natural gas and oil imports into the European Union (EU) from a number of Black Sea littoral states (European MSP Platform, 2023). Yet, its importance to Europe will grow further.

51. The Black Sea also contains an unknown quantity of natural gas reserves which littoral states are exploring (Sabadus, 2021). Rough projections predict the Ukrainian shelf alone may contain more than two trillion cubic meters of gas. Türkiye has stated the reserves in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) may be as high as 710 billion cubic meters, while Romania is believed to possess between 150–200 billion cubic meters of gas (Kucukgocmen and Erkoyun, 2022; Sabadus, 2021; Aligica, 2023). Such reserves have the potential to form the basis of a strong regional economy if they can be exploited. Yet, a Russian-dominated BSR would limit such potential. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea defines EEZs as extending 200 nautical miles from a country’s coastline, a lack of shared understanding within the Black Sea and a Russian pre-eminence will likely ensure whoever drills first benefits from these reserves (Sabadus, 2021). NATO Allies and partners within the BSR, including the European Union, are increasingly relying on the region to meet their energy needs as they shift away from Russian supplies. Yet, Russian dominance of the region – a long-term Kremlin goal – threatens European energy interests.

52. In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, European NATO countries and EU Member States are determined to diversify their energy supply and infrastructure and routes to eliminate their consumption of Russian fossil fuels completely. A key element of doing so is via enhanced partnerships and interconnectivity, mostly within the Energy Community¹⁶ but also with private companies. For example, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania signed a Memorandum of Understanding to build a 1,195-kilometre long undersea/ submarine power cable – linking Bucharest and Azerbaijan – to help transition Europe away from Russian energy sources (Tsereteli, 2023; Euractiv, 2022; Banila, 2022). Throughout the European energy crisis in 2022, Azerbaijan – with its vast energy potential – proved to be a reliable energy supplier to Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor (GMF, 2023). Projects like the planned subsea cable could be expanded in the future, with Georgia exploring the potential for a similar undersea power cable connecting it with Romania (Tsereteli, 2023).

53. Moldova and Ukraine are integrated into several EU projects to advance the energy partnership between the bloc and the two countries. With the assistance of Allies like Romania and the United States, as well as regional institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Moldova has been able to make progress in diversifying its gas supplies and reducing its dependence on Russia. Ukraine bears immense potential to play a key role regarding Europe’s future energy security due to its natural gas production and storage capacity.

16 “The Energy Community is an international organisation which brings together the European Union and its neighbours to create an integrated pan-European energy market.” It consists of the EU, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia (Energy Community, 2023).

54. Ranking only behind Norway within Europe, Ukraine's untapped energy resources – including natural gas, biofuels and other renewables – can serve as an energy bank for Europe in the future. Ukraine has already shown to be a reliable energy partner to Europe. To make the best use of Ukraine's full energy potential, groundwork must start now to attract private investments by implementing reforms, ensuring transparency and good governance (GMF, 2023). Energy security in the BSR is more important than ever, given Russia's weaponisation of energy, expanded since the beginning of its brutal, unjustified and illegal war in Ukraine.

55. Russia's unreliability as an energy supplier has also led European countries to accelerate the process of fostering clean and renewable energy sources. Besides a focus on renewables, another possibility for a "clean" energy cooperation is provided by Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). For instance, the US company NuScale and the Romanian government have sought to develop this new technology by having concluded a preliminary agreement to build an SMR. The US government committed 14 million USD to the project, and the reactor is supposed to go fully online in 2029. Other countries in the BSR have also shown interest in similar projects (GMF, 2023).

VI- INTERIM CONCLUSIONS FOR NATO PARLIAMENTARIANS, NATO MEMBER GOVERNMENTS, AND THE GOVERNMENTS OF UKRAINE, GEORGIA, AND MOLDOVA

56. Russia's brutal, illegal and unjustified war in Ukraine is now the most disruptive war since WWII – its outcome has the potential to impact international security for decades to come. As the war continues to rage, it retains significant escalatory potential, with reverberations extending across the Euro-Atlantic and beyond. Russia's threat to Allied security is, therefore, acute and significant. This threat is most salient along the Alliance's eastern flank particularly in its strategic seas from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

57. The Black Sea is an active staging ground for Russia's war efforts in Ukraine – making it an increasingly dangerous strategic fault line between NATO and Russia. Whatever the outcome of the war in Ukraine, Russia will try to maintain a significant power position in the Black Sea – even in the case of a Russian defeat, Moscow will use its position of strength in the Black Sea to either disrupt Ukrainian attempts at post-war consolidation and reconstruction to even, in the worst case, using it as a staging ground for a renewed invasion.

58. As this report makes clear, NATO's core mission of deterrence and defence in the BSR is both a balancing act among its Allies and partners' competing visions for future Black Sea security, and also against Russia's interests in maintaining sea dominance no matter the outcome of its war of aggression in Ukraine. The importance of the Black Sea to European security is only likely to grow in the years to come as the region becomes a central energy and food supplier.

59. This reality necessitates greater NATO involvement in the region to both bolster NATO Allies like Türkiye, Bulgaria and Romania, and also key NATO partners like Georgia and Ukraine. Unless Russia's position in the Black Sea is significantly weakened, it will use this capability to continue to disrupt Ukraine or, worse, launch a renewed future offensive. Therefore, NATO must adapt to better position the Alliance to contain regional aggression.

60. The approaching summit of Allied Heads of State and Government in Vilnius this July offers an excellent opportunity for leaders to pledge a range of initiatives to support their Black Sea Allies and vulnerable partners, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Critical support to Georgia and Moldova

must not be neglected as Allies continue to support Ukraine's legitimate self-defence against Russia's brutal aggression. This report recommends the following key measures:

- **Develop a NATO Black Sea Strategy and Support National Black Sea Strategies.** NATO identified the Black Sea Region as an area of strategic importance in the 2022 Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022c). Now, it must develop a strategy outlining its approach regional security – this entails the development of a *tailored and structured* approach, including an **Action Plan**, to address threats and challenges emanating from the Black Sea region; it should also include a comprehensive approach to broader challenges such as food and energy security and should align with the European Union for maximum effect. Furthermore, NATO Allies should draft their own, national Black Sea Strategies highlighting their interests in the region and detailing how they will support the broader NATO Strategy. The United States is moving in this direction, with strong bipartisan legislation seeking to drive the development of an American Black Sea Strategy moving through Congress. Other Allies should follow suit. Such actions would demonstrate the commitment of NATO Allies to ensuring the security of the BSR while also highlighting the region's importance to their own security and economy.
- **Improve Military Mobility in and Among Black Sea Littoral Allies.** NATO must be prepared to conduct military missions throughout the BSR on limited notice. Such operations require the ability to move and deploy military equipment rapidly. To ensure NATO possesses this ability, it should undertake a comprehensive audit of Romania's and Bulgaria's major infrastructure – including their rail lines and major highway networks – to ensure they are suitable for military purposes in the event of a contingency. Where required, funds from NATO's Three Seas Initiative can be used to modernise land-based infrastructure, improve regional connectivity and accommodate military needs.
- **Increase NATO's Naval Presence within the Black Sea.** Even with the limits placed on non-littoral states' naval vessels by the Montreux Convention, NATO can, and should maintain a continuous 365-day presence within the Black Sea to deter Russian aggression. Continually, NATO should increase the frequency of their joint Black Sea naval exercises. Such actions ensure that NATO is both present and engaged in the region. Incorporating NATO partners, like Georgia, in such exercises will further extend the geographic reach of these actions.
 - **NATO Allies** must work closer with littoral Allies and partners toward inclusive maritime security frameworks for the region and with a view of reinforcing adherence to international legal norms and norms.
 - **Develop a NATO Naval Flotilla – with contributions from Black Sea Littoral States – that can operate indefinitely within the Black Sea.** As noted above, the initial idea for a joint NATO flotilla was first promoted in 2016. While it did not come to fruition, the idea should be revived. The stipulations of the Montreux Convention make it difficult for NATO to maintain a constant naval presence in the region. A joint flotilla operated by NATO's Black Sea littoral states, supported by other NATO nations, but in a planned and coordinated way not yet seen to date, however, would ensure compliance with the Convention, while also maintaining a constant NATO presence. Given the current realities of littoral Allies' maritime capabilities, Türkiye will have to provide most of the initial naval assets required. Still, as indicated on the most recent NATO PA visit to Romania, investing in modern naval capabilities, fit for purpose, is a defence imperative in Bucharest. While this recommendation clearly faces strong political headwinds, in the long run it both ensures a strong NATO presence in

the region and allows the Black Sea littoral states to play a leading role in regional security.

- **Improve and strengthen regional intelligence gathering assets** (both manned and unmanned ISR aerial systems, as well as cyber, signals intelligence platforms, and satellite capabilities) in the region by both BSR states and Allies. Such actions will augment early warning capabilities and permit permanently updated target acquisition to enable standoff strikes against logistical hubs and force concentrations in the event of a future conflict.
- Continue to **invest in long-range precision strike capabilities**. These weapon systems have proven their vital nature in Ukraine's current valiant self-defence efforts, as they have been able to disrupt Russian command and control by disrupting supply lines and force concentrations, forcing Russia to pull farther back from the front lines, and thereby weakening its offensive potential.
- Improved **coastal defence systems; new, layered air defences; increased air policing, and surface and subsurface vessels** (manned and unmanned) **to increase situational awareness and protect the region's skies, lands, and sea.**
 - Given the reality of Russia's declared threats to Allied critical seabed infrastructure, Allies must underwrite the nascent Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell at NATO.
 - **Allied underwriting of the *European Sky Shield Initiative* is the right step toward more robust, layered, and integrated air and missile defences across NATO**, such initiatives are sorely needed across Allied territories in the BSR. Further, confronted with the reality of Russia's reckless nuclear rhetoric and sabre rattling: **Allies must consider renewed investment and expansion of its existing ballistic missile defence architecture to demonstrate the Alliance's uncompromising deterrence posture and unwillingness to accept any form of nuclear threat.**
- Allies must continue to work with and encourage Black Sea Allies to continue taking the steps necessary to accelerate their force modernisation as a means of strengthening their ability to defend their own territories.
- Continue **robust support for Ukraine's self-defence efforts** via a combination of strong military, financial, and humanitarian aid.
- **Develop Ukraine's coastal defences** following its war with Russia. Whether or not Ukraine joins NATO following Russia's invasion, improving its ability to defend its coastline and project power within the Black Sea will be a boon to regional security. The reconstruction of Ukraine following the war will be a prime opportunity to make the necessary investments and allow Ukraine to ensure the Black Sea remains secure moving forward. Such infrastructure and military hardware should serve as a complement to future NATO forces in the region, but also support Ukraine's security needs independently. Ensuring freedom of navigation in the region, and prevention of port blockades in Ukraine specifically, should be priorities.
- **Work closely with other regional vulnerable partners Georgia and Moldova** with essential capacity building initiatives to strengthen their resilience to potential future Russian aggression against them, and to help them continue to progress on their path toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

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