



Don't forget the Black Sea and the Balkans

January 20, 2019 **Stephen Blank** *The Hill*

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In February, NATO's Defense Ministers will convene a ministerial conference and in April they will do so for Foreign Ministers. These meetings should reassess the importance of the Black Sea and the Balkans' strategic importance, especially in light of recent events.

These events comprise the recent Kerch Strait incident, the revelations of Russian-backed coups in Macedonia, Greece and Montenegro, to prevent the governments in Podgorica and Skopje from joining NATO and making peace with their neighbors. Simultaneously, Moscow regularly poses ongoing Russian threats to the littoral states of the Black Sea, all of whom are NATO members. These threats underscore the urgency of strengthening deterrence in the Balkans and Black Sea and of helping Ukraine to defend itself.

Many recent reports have highlighted the Russian threat to the Baltic States and Poland and the necessity for strengthening U.S. and NATO forces there. It is pointless to deny those threats. However, emphasizing threats in the Baltic without mentioning the Black Sea sends exactly the wrong impression, namely that the Balkans and Black Sea littoral are of lesser importance to NATO and thus their defense against Russian threats is less urgent.

But these threats to the Black Sea littoral states and the Balkans are not only real they are perhaps more urgent because of the Russian buildup in the Black Sea and efforts to undermine Balkan governments. Indeed, Russian threats here are broader and deeper than in the Balkans. As Elizabeth Braw has just observed, most recent Russian military threats emanate from the sea — not the land.

Likewise, Moscow is using every non-military instrument in its arsenal to incite tension among Serbs and Muslims in both Serbia and Bosnia. Its forces conduct overflights of Romania, and threaten Romanian energy platforms in the Black Sea while also trying to subvert political parties in Bulgaria and throughout the Balkans.

Indeed, Moscow, as part of its unceasing military buildup in the Black Sea zone, has dispatched nuclear-capable weapons there in a palpable effort to intimidate European governments. At the same time Hungary, Moscow's ally, if not client state, incites Hungarian nationalism against Ukraine and Romania in a vain attempt to do for Putin what it did for Hitler in the 1930s, i.e. destabilize the region while pursuing a long-lost nationalist fantasy.

This litany of threats does not even mention the overflights and threats against NATO and Ukrainian shipping in the Black Sea and in Ukrainian waters like the illegal blockades and acts of outright piracy we have just seen in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov.

While NATO has proclaimed its commitment to preventing the Black Sea from becoming a Russian lake, its efforts and deployments in this area have been too little too late. Russia's unceasing probes and threats should mandate both NATO and the EU to join forces to strengthen the forces of democracy throughout the Balkans and Black Sea littoral. There is no doubt that both NATO and the EU have the residual economic and military capabilities to deploy robust forces and invest political resources as needed in these countries to uphold and invigorate their stability and security. What has been lacking to date is political will and the upcoming ministerials furnish an excellent venue for displaying a renewed political will to challenge Russia here and take its threats seriously.

Both NATO and the EU must recognize that it is actually in these territories that we have seen the largest Russian military buildup, not the Baltic. While the threat there is real and has acquired an added dimension by the visible Russian threats to undermine Belarusian sovereignty and incorporate it into a Russian "union-state"; NATO and the EU are big enough and sufficiently resourced to support a more robust deterrence involving land, sea, and air forces throughout this area.

Such deployments in both the political-economic and military spheres will add resilience to these societies and display the cohesion of NATO thereby giving these governments added capability to fend off Russia's multi-dimensional coercive policies.

Building upon previous commitments NATO and the EU have the opportunity to demonstrate their cohesion, add vigor and resilience to local governments, and raise the costs to Moscow of its imperial quest in the Balkan and Black Sea areas. Conversely, failure to take the Russian threat seriously enough will send Moscow the message that it can redouble its efforts with impunity. For these reasons, this is an opportunity that neither NATO, nor the EU, nor the U.S. should squander. Investing in the security of Balkan and Black Sea governments not only is morally right, it also will pay strategic dividends long into the future.

Stephen Blank, Ph.D., is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, focused on the geopolitics and geostrategy of the former Soviet Union, Russia and Eurasia. He is a former professor of Russian National Security Studies and National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. He is also a former MacArthur fellow at the U.S. Army War College.