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Maidan of Foreign Affairs

News  
*BlackSea*



The Institute  
of Strategic  
Black Sea  
Studies



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With contributions by O. Korbut and T. Puchkova. 2018, Kyiv. Commissioned by the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine.

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## The NATO Black Sea Dilemma

On July 8-9, 2016, the Warsaw summit of the heads of state and heads of government of the NATO member states was expected to make decisions on strengthening NATO's naval capabilities in the Black Sea. The initiative belonged to the Romanian government that proposed to establish a regular NATO flotilla in the Black Sea. For Romania the issue was a top priority. In view of the occupation of Crimea and Russian aggression in Donbas that also endangered the Azov Sea, Ukraine certainly supported it.

However, the refusal of Bulgaria whose prime minister said he wanted to see cruise liners and not military frigates near the Bulgarian coast, halted the idea. Moreover, a month earlier, the Bulgarian prime minister stated that «the Black Sea should be declared a demilitarized zone, without warships or submarines».

The Romanian naval initiative was launched immediately after the installation of the SM-3 AEGIS Ashore missile-defense interceptors at the US Air Force base in Deveselu, 35 km from the border with Bulgaria, at the end of 2015.

Romania understood that given the formation of a Russian assault grouping in the occupied Crimea equipped with missiles capable of reaching any goal in Romania, the whole country was now a potential target for missile attacks not only from the air, but also from the sea, i.e., from the new missile ships and submarines of the Black Sea Fleet, as well as from the territory of the Crimean peninsula.

In August 2016, the European online portal EurActiv citing its sources reported that the United States began to transfer the nuclear weapons stationed in Turkey to Romania, the fact the Romanian government denied. According to the Simson Center report, about 50 units of the US tactical nuclear weapons had been deployed at the Incirlik Airbase in Turkey since the Cold War time.

During the July 16, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the Turkish government banned the flights of American planes to and from the base. The day after the failed coup, the Turkish security forces blocked the Incirlik (Incirlik) airbase and cut the power supply to it. The Turkish general in charge of the base and several officers accused of involvement in the coup attempt, were arrested.

After such turn of events, the United States began doubting it could continue to trust Turkey with storing its nuclear weapons.

The doubts only intensified when in July-August 2016 presidents Erdogan and Putin surprisingly quickly resolved the Turkey-Russia crisis that had begun on November 24, 2015 when the Turkish F-16 fighters shot down a Russian bomber Su-24 on the border with Syria.

During the relations normalization, some reports suggested that while the Turkish authorities were obstructing Germany's construction of an airfield and a command post for German reconnaissance aircraft Tornado on the Incirlik base, the latter could possibly be used by the Russian aircrafts for attacks on targets in Syria.

In view of the rapid rapprochement between Russia and Turkey, the acute crisis unfolding in the EU-Turkey relations could not but raise questions about Turkey's reliability as a NATO member.



*Guided missile destroyer US Navy USS Truxtun (DDG 103) – the first warship in Black Sea after occupation of the Crimea. March 7th, 2014.  
Photo: Niki Zlatev, Варна, specially for BlackSeaNews*



## The Occupied Crimea in the Syrian War

Since late 2015, along with Novorossiysk, the occupied Crimea has become one of Russia's major launchpads in the Syrian war. The Russian troop grouping in Crimea, specifically, surface ships, submarines, and marines, have been taking an active part in the RF military actions in Syria.

In 2015-2017 the following ships of the RF BSF carried out Caliber cruise missile attacks on the ground targets in Syria from the eastern Mediterranean:

- Rostov-on-Don submarine on December 8, 2015
- Zelenyi Dol corvette on August 19, 2016
- Serpukhov corvette on August 19, 2016
- Admiral Grygorovich frigate on November 15, 2016
- Admiral Essen frigate on May 31, 2017
- Krasnodar submarine on May 31, 2017
- Admiral Grigorovich missile frigate on June 23, 2017
- Krasnodar submarine on June 23, 2017
- Admiral Essen frigate on June 23, 2017
- Admiral Essen frigate on September 5, 2017
- Velikiy Novgorod submarine on September 14, 2017
- Kolpino submarine on September 14, 2017
- Velikiy Novgorod submarine on September 22, 2017
- Velikiy Novgorod submarine on October 5, 2017
- Kolpino submarine on October 5, 2017
- Velikiy Novgorod submarine on October 31, 2017
- Kolpino submarine on November 3, 2017.

Overall, as of January 1, 2019, 56 of the 100 seabased Caliber cruise missiles shot by the Russian Navy in Syria, belonged to ships and submarines of the RF BSF, while 44 other missiles have been launched by the corvettes of the Russian Caspian Flotilla.

That is, as of now, 2 frigates and 4 submarines of the Russian BSF now have combat experience of launching long-range missiles, since as mentioned earlier, the Serpukhov and Zelenyi Dol corvettes have been transferred to Russia's Baltic Fleet.

It should be kept in mind that after arriving from the shipyards to the places of permanent deployment in the Black Sea, unlike the surface ships, the new Russian submarines will now be able to leave the area via the Bosphorus Strait only for repairs, so they will not be able to participate in the Syrian combat.

That is due to the submarine restriction formulated in Article 12 of the Straits Convention from July 20, 1936 (the Montreux Convention):

*"Black Sea Powers shall have the right to send through the Straits, for the purpose of rejoining their base, submarines constructed or purchased outside the Black Sea, provided that adequate notice of the laying down or purchase of such submarines shall have been given to Turkey.*

*Submarines belonging to the said Powers shall also be entitled to pass through the Straits to be repaired in dockyards outside the Black Sea on condition that detailed information on the matter is given to Turkey.*

*In either case, the said submarines must travel by day and on the surface, and must pass through the Straits singly".*

That gives an exhaustive answer to why the St. Petersburg-built Velikiy Novgorod and Kolpino missile submarines that on August 28, 2017 arrived in the Mediterranean Sea, as of March 1, 2018 have not entered the Black Sea. The answer is that they are part of the Tartus-based Mediterranean squadron and therefore, need to be able to participate in the Syrian war.

In addition to carrying out the cruise missile strikes, Russia supplies the Assad regime with equipment and ammunition carried from Sevastopol and Novorossiysk by the large landing ships of the Black Sea Fleet and other Russian fleets, as well as by the BSF auxiliary vessels based in the occupied Sevastopol – the so-called "Syrian Express".

Since late 2015, the occupied Crimea has become and remains to this day one of the main Russia springboards in the Syrian war. The Black Sea Fleet ships and submarines, as well as Crimean marines are actively engaged in the Syria military operations.



In October 2016, RF BSF ships delivered a squadron of the Bastion coastal missile systems from Crimea to Syria. In November 2016, its replacement arrived to Crimea. In 2017, missile systems S-300, S-400 and Buk-3 were deployed to Syria in the same way.

In 2016, the large landing ships of the RF BSF conducted 67 return trips from Sevastopol and Novorossiysk to the naval base of the Russian Federation in Tartus, Syria. The ships carried missile launchers, armored vehicles, military vehicles, etc.

Of the 67 trips, half (34) were made by the large landing ships of the RF Black Sea Fleet, 17 – by the Baltic Fleet and 16 – by the Northern Fleet. It should be noted that in 2015, the large landing ships of the Russian Navy completed 69 such trips with the same distribution ratio between the fleets, while in 2014 and 2013 – 46 and 30 trips, respectively.

Thus, after the occupation of Crimea, the number of the Russian Black Sea Fleet trips to Syria in 2015-2016 has doubled.

In 2017, the "Syrian Express" made 41 landing ship round trips. Over 2016, auxiliary vessels — dry cargo ships under the naval flag of the Russian Federation — of the 205th unit of the BSF provision forces completed at least 17 round trips, while in 2017 — only 9 between Sevastopol and the Syrian port of Tartus.

In 2018, the «Syrian Express» has made 34 round-trip journeys, including 30 by large landing ships. That is, compared to 2014-2016, over 2017-2018, the RF has largely relieved combat landing ships from the Tartus voyages.

That happened due to the use of up to 10 large ferries leased through the specialized firm Oboron-logistics. That allowed the auxiliary fleet warships and cargo ships that were not subject to inspections, to carry only weapons, munitions and troops, while transporting the rest of the cargo on the civil ships.

In 2017, the Russian Federation decided to establish a full-fledged Russian naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. From the military point of view, the Crimean peninsula is a key element in ensuring its operation.

Earlier, in Tartus, the Russian Navy had only a small logistic support post that large ships could not enter and had to be provided for on the roadsteads. The

Of the 100 Caliber cruise missiles used by the RF in Syria, 56 were fired from the ships and submarines of the Black Sea Fleet and 44 — from the Caspian Flotilla corvettes.

new Tartus base will allow regular maintenance and repairs of the different class ships – from minesweepers to frigates.

The Sevastopol-based 810th Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation provides on-board security of the Russian naval vessels carrying cargo to Syria and also guards the naval base of the Russian Federation in Tartus.

It was precisely the occupation of Crimea and the further accelerated development of the Crimean military base, that made possible Russia's active military engagement in Syria. The drastically changed composition of the Black Sea Fleet became the basis of Russia's naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

But the links of the occupied Crimea with the Syrian regime that are being purposefully strengthened by Moscow, go well beyond the military sphere.

As part of the Fourth Yalta International Economic Forum held in April 2018, a cooperation memorandum between Crimea and the Syrian province of Latakia, as well as between the twin cities of Yalta and Latakia, was signed.

The forum included the first Yalta conference titled The Economic Development of Syrian Republic with the Syrian delegation being the most numerous. The forum's press service reported the adoption of several Russian-Syrian agreements, some of which had been signed behind the closed doors.

Considering the above situation and the accelerated militarization of Crimea, the report analyzed the dynamics of the NATO naval presence in the Black Sea region, excluding the Black Sea member countries Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria in 1991 and especially, in 2013-2018.

## The Black Sea History of the NATO Naval Forces

The peak of the NATO naval command's interest to the Black Sea fell on the years between 1992 and 1998.

That was the period right after the collapse of the USSR, when six newly independent states (Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) instantly appeared on the Black Sea map, while the communist regimes came to an end in Romania and Bulgaria.

In 1995-1998, the annual number of the NATO naval vessel entries in the Black Sea ranged from 30 to 40 (1997 – 40, 1998 – 36 and 1995 – 35). The highest number of the NATO naval operations in the Black Sea took place until the second half of the 1990s – early 2000s due to the regular large-scale international naval exercises there.

From 2000 to 2007, the number of entries fluctuated between 29 and 17, so the 29 entries in 2008, the year of the Russian-Georgian war, already seemed high.

But actually, in the year of the Russian aggression against Georgia (started August 8, 2008), the number of the NATO Navy ships entries in the Black Sea didn't reach the mid-1990s figures, but only those of the 2000. And even then 13 of the 29 entries occurred following August 2008, that is, after the beginning of the war, subsequently, sharply falling again.

Following the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit that de-facto denied Ukraine and Georgia a realistic Euro-Atlantic perspective, the 2009-2013 can be considered the period of NATO's demonstrable loss of interest to the Black Sea. Twice – in 2011 and 2013 – the number of warship arrivals to the area has dropped to the historical low since 1991 – 8 occurrences, while the 2010 and 2012 maximum of 14 incidents each was lower than in any year of the preceding two decades.

In 2013, the last year before the occupation of the Crimea and the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, the 8 NATO warship entries in the Black Sea was not only lower than in all the previous years except for 2011, but was the lowest since the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

In 5 out of 8 Black Sea entries in 2013, the ships from the non-Black Sea countries visited the Ukrainian ports of Sevastopol and Odesa.

Following the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit that had rejected Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, the years between 2009-2013 can be considered a period of NATO's complete loss of interest in the Black Sea.

But in 2014-2016, during the occupation of Crimea and the aggression of the RF in the east of Ukraine that also opened access to the Azov Sea, in view of Ukraine's loss of its Navy, the naval presence of NATO in the Black Sea became a real factor in deterring further Russian aggression against Ukraine.

That was especially important in 2014 and 2015, when the risks of Russia's Black Sea Fleet landing operations in the coastal regions of Ukraine were at alltime high. Over those years, the NATO warships were present in the Black Sea almost continuously.

At the same time, in 2014, the first year of Russian aggression against Ukraine, NATO naval presence in the Black Sea was comparable to the 2008 figures during the «five-day war» between Russia and Georgia, despite the totally incomparable scale. But in the next 2 years, it has significantly dropped again.

It should be noted that between February 20 and March 7, 2014, during the decisive initial phase of the Russian special military operation on the occupation of Crimea that involved Russian warships, there were no combat-capable navy vessels of the non-Black Sea NATO states in the area.

A command ship and a damaged frigate of the US 6th Fleet that happened to be in the Black Sea at the time, could only conduct radio-electronic intelligence and did not have any strike capability.

By March 7, 2014, the day when the NATO Navy ships started patrolling the Black Sea, in Crimea, all the administrative buildings had been already seized by the Russian troops, all access routes to the peninsula – cut off and all ports and sites of the Naval Forces of Ukraine deployment and other Ukrainian military garrisons – blocked, while the Russian military ships had already deployed to the peninsula several thousand troops and equipment, including mobile coastal anti-ship missile systems.





The analysis of the Russian Federation sources makes it clear that at the time, the Russian military command viewed the absence of the NATO naval warships in the Black Sea as a factor that made the operation to seize Crimea feasible.

After all, the presence of a foreign non-allied warship in any area at the time of crisis forces any power to consider it a potential opponent, which automatically entails planning the actions of the Navy, Air Force, etc., accordingly.

That proves that not only the Ukrainian, but also the US and NATO military and intelligence structures did not expect or consider a Russian occupation of Crimea scenario.

That has also been recently confirmed by the then NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who led the Alliance's headquarters until October 1, 2014:

«I do not think that Europe could stop the annexation. It became a surprise to all of us. We considered Russian partners we could work with. But suddenly it turned out that they did not share such view. Russia has begun a «hybrid war», combining conventional military actions with the actions of the «green men» and an intricate information and disinformation campaign. We were really caught off-guard and I do not think we could have done more or anything differently. So, we had to adapt to the new security situation».

Obviously, however, besides the lack of analytical forecasts and possible scenarios of Russia's actions in the Black Sea, the NATO states and their naval forces simply lacked recent military intelligence data on the Black Sea region.

During the occupation of Crimea and the aggression of the Russian Federation in the east of Ukraine its access to the Azov Sea, the NATO naval presence in the Black Sea became an important factor in deterring the Russian aggression.

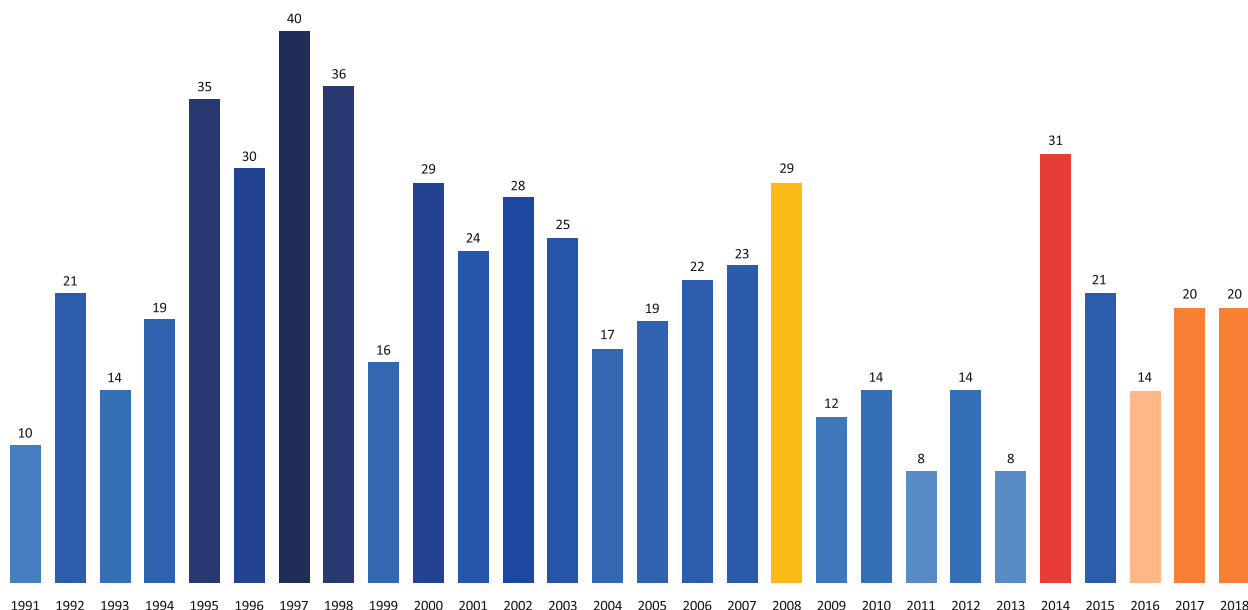
Therefore, the NATO Naval Command of NATO had to devote nearly all of 2014 to the Black Sea not only to demonstrate its moral support of Ukraine, but also to study that war theater and collect the intelligence information. All in all, in 2014, NATO naval reconnaissance ships spent 150 days in the Black Sea.

## The NATO Naval Presence in the Black Sea in 2014-2018

In 2014, NATO's warships entered the Black Sea 31 times, the maximum number since 2000.

Since February 5, 2014, two US Navy ships of the 6th Fleet – the Mount Whitney (LCC 20) command ship and the Taylor (FFG 50) frigate – were deployed in the Black Sea.

Their deployment in the Black Sea was directly related to the Sochi Olympics – the ships patrolled the Sochi coast in case of any unforeseen events during the Sochi Olympics, i.e., a terrorist attack that would require evacuation of the American athletes.



Entries of NATO ships to the Black Sea since the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991 - 2018)

On March 7, 2014, the US missile destroyer Truxtun de-facto launched a Black Sea operation to deter Russia in support of Ukraine. For the next eight months, the NATO ships were present in the Black Sea almost continuously.

February 20, 2014 became a turning point for the Black Sea region. Three days before the end of the Winter Olympics in Sochi that lasted from February 7 to 23, 2014, Russia began the military aggression against Ukraine that started with the occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea in February- March and was followed by an attempt to create a «Novorossia» in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, the beginning of the war in Donbas in March-May and then an open invasion of eastern Ukraine by the Russian regular troops in August 2014.

On February 23, 2014, the Sochi Winter Olympics ended and the ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet that had provided the Olympics security headed for Novorossiysk. On February 24, Russian troops blocked the entrance to Sevastopol. On the same day, in Novorossiysk, the «Olympic» squadron of the Russian BSF has taken aboard special forces troops and munitions for the occupation of Crimea and took a course on Sevastopol. On very that day, February 24, 2014, in accordance with the Montreux Convention,

the flagship of the 6th US Navy Fleet Mount Whitney (LCC 20) left the Black Sea.

And the only reason the Taylor frigate (FFG 50) remained in the Black Sea for more than 21 days despite the Montreux Convention, was that on February 12, 2014, when refueling at the Turkish Black Sea naval base Samsun, the ship had damaged its propeller.

It should be noted that as most frigates of the Oliver Hazard Perry class, in 2004 USS Taylor (FFG 50), had been stripped of the guided missiles and remained equipped with only artillery and torpedo munitions.

On March 7, 2014, the arrival of the Arleigh Burkeclass Truxtun missile destroyer (DDG 103) marked the beginning of the NATO regular naval presence in the Black Sea in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. From that day until mid-November 2014, NATO warships took turns patrolling the Black Sea almost continuously.

But even though on that day, the active transfer of troops from the Russian Federation through the Kerch ferry crossing continued, overall, by March 7, the Russian troops in Crimea had already captured all the administrative buildings and blocked all roadways to the peninsula, as well as all the bases of the Ukrainian Navy and other military garrisons, while the Russian warships had delivered to the peninsula thousands of troops and munitions, including the mobile coastal anti-ship missile complexes Bastion-P and Bal.



May 23, 2014. Istanbul. The US Navy guided missile cruisers USS Vella Gulf (72).  
Photo by Cem Devrim Yaylali, turkishnavy.net., specially for BlackSeaNews.



So, at the time of the crucial initial phase of the special operation on the occupation of Crimea by the Russian troops with the aid of the Russian naval ships, there were no combat-capable NATO naval vessels of the non-Black Sea countries in the Black Sea.

Overall, since February 20, 2014 – the day of the start of the Russian occupation of Crimea – until the end of the year, of the 315 days, the NATO naval forces were present in the Black Sea for 247 or 78.4% of the total number.

The main burden of deterring Russia in the Black Sea that year fell on the 6th US Fleet Navy whose ships were deployed in the region for 156 out of 315 days or 49.5% of the time.

The 2014 in the Black Sea was especially notable for the high activity of the NATO naval reconnaissance ships that spent the total of 150 days in the Black Sea, specifically:

- A diving support ship of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (French Foreign Intelligence Service) FS ALIZE A 645 spent 16 days.
- An Italian intelligence ship ITS Elettra A 5340 spent 20 days.

A large French reconnaissance ship Dupuy de Lome A759 entered the Black Sea six times and in four of these instances fully used the 21 days of stay set by the Montreux Convention.

Being based in Varna, Constanta and Batumi, all in all, it spent 114 days in the Black Sea.

The latter ship was designed and built specifically for the DRM (Direction du Renseignement Militaire) – the Office of Military Intelligence in France. It is able to intercept the most advanced types of communications, including e-mail and mobile phones conversations.

Altogether, in 2014, the total of 19 NATO warships entered the Black Sea, with seven of them entering it on numerous occasions, namely:

- French large naval reconnaissance ship Dupuy de Lome A759 entered the Black Sea six times
- American missile cruiser Vella Gulf CG 72 – three times

The 2014 was marked by the high activity of the NATO states naval reconnaissance ships in the Black Sea where they spent the total of 150 days.

- American Sixth Fleet command ship Mount Whitney LCC 20, frigate USS Taylor FFG 50, missile destroyers Donald Cook DDG-75 and Ross DDG 71 and French missile frigate Surcouf F 711 – twice each.

Of the 19 warships that entered the Black Sea in 2014, 14 belonged to the United States, France and Italy:

- USA – 7 (a missile cruiser, four rocket destroyers, a frigate and a command ship)
- France – 4 (a missile frigate, a corvette, a large reconnaissance ship and a reconnaissance landing ship);
- Italy – 3 (a frigate, a reconnaissance ship and a minesweeper)
- Spain – 1 (a missile frigate)
- Canada – 1 (a frigate)
- United Kingdom – 1 (a minesweeper)
- Greece – 1 (a patrol boat)
- Poland – 1 (a training ship).

The core of the «NATO's 2014 Black Sea fleet» fighting capability comprised the seven ships armed with the guided missiles – the US missile cruiser and four missile destroyers together with the French and Spanish cruise missile frigates equipped with the Aegis Combat System.

After February 20, 2014, before the year end, the NATO naval ships called at the following Black Sea ports:

- Romanian Naval Base Constanta – 18 calls
- Bulgarian naval bases of Varna (7) and Bourgas (5) – 12 calls
- Georgian ports of Batumi (8) and Poti (1) – only 9 calls
- Turkish naval bases Samsun (1) and Trabzon (1) – 2 calls.

Of the 41 NATO naval ship calls at the Black Sea ports in 2014, 32 of them, or 78%, were made to the ports of the NATO member states. With that, until March 2015, not one ship of a non-Black Sea NATO state had made a call at a Ukrainian port.



Over the 8 months of 2015, the missile ships of the US Navy 6th Fleet remained on duty in the Black Sea without the support of the non-Black Sea NATO allies.

## 2015

In 2015 the naval ships of the non-Black Sea NATO states entered the Black sea fewer times than in 2014 – 21 times compared to 29 in 2014 after February 20 – and, consequently, spent less total time there. If, in 2014 they spent in the Black Sea 78.4% of the year, in 2015 – only 51.2% of the year.

The number of warships that entered the Black Sea in 2015 remained almost the same – 18, compared to 19 in the previous year. Three of them – US missile destroyers Donald Cook (DDG-75), Ross (DDG 71) and Porter (DDG-78) – entered the area twice each.

And again, the main burden of ensuring naval presence in the Black Sea in 2015 fell on the 6th US Fleet – its ships spent the total of 148 days (156 in 2014) or 40.5% of the year there. Together, in 2015, the NATO ships spent the total of 187 days in the Black Sea.

In January, February, April, May, June, September, October and December, that is, over eight months in 2015, the US 6th Fleet missile ships served in the Black Sea alone, with no participation of the non-Black Sea NATO allies. For comparison, in 2014, that was the case only in March, November and December.

In 2015, seven of the 18 ships deployed to the Black Sea belonged to the US 6th Fleet, as illustrated below:

- USA – 7 (1 missile cruiser and 6 missile destroyers)
- Greece – 3 (1 patrol boat, 1 rocket launcher and 1 landing ship)
- France – 2 (1 missile frigate and 1 large reconnaissance ship)
- Italy – 1 (minesweeper)
- Portugal – 1 (missile frigate)
- Canada – 1 (frigate)

- United Kingdom – 1 (missile destroyer)
- Netherlands – 1 (missile frigate)
- Germany – 1 (support vessel).

Compared with 2014, the number of the missile boats had grown from 7 to 11 that included one US missile cruiser and six US missile destroyers, as well as missile frigates of the French, Portuguese and the Netherlands Navies equipped with the Aegis Combat System.

In 2015, the main ports of calls of the NATO naval vessels were:

- the Romanian Naval Base of Constanta – 13 calls
- the Bulgarian naval bases in Varna (13) and Burgas (1) – 14 calls
- the Georgian port of Batumi – 3 calls
- the Ukrainian Naval Base in Odesa – 3 calls

Of the 33 NATO naval ship calls at the Black Sea ports in 2015, 27 of them, or 78%, were made to the ports of the NATO member states.

However, in 2015, for the first time since the beginning of the Crimea occupation and hostilities in the East of Ukraine, a French frigate and two US missile destroyers called at the Ukrainian naval base of Odesa.

It didn't go unnoticed, though, that at the same time, in May 2015, two newest Chinese missile frigates of the same type – LINYI (547) and WEI FANG (550) – arrived to the Russian naval base of Novorossiysk for the joint exercises with the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

## 2016

In 2016, the number of the Black Sea calls by the ships of the non-Black Sea NATO states continued to drop. The Maidan of Foreign Affairs monitoring group recorded only 14, compared to 31 in 2014 and 21 in 2015.

While in 2014 NATO ships were present in the Black Sea for 247 days, or 78.4%, of the year and in 2015 – for 187 days, or 51.2% of the year, in 2016 they were there for only 32.8%, or 120 days, of the year.

In January, March, September, November and December 2016, naval vessels of the non-Black Sea states did not go to the Black Sea at all, while in 2014 and 2015 they were there every month.



The 6th US Fleet again provided most of patrolling in the region, specifically, 46 days, or 12.6% of the time, which, however, was still 3.2 times less than in 2015 and 3.4 times less than in 2014.

In 2016, 5 of the 14 ships that went to the Black Sea belonged to the US 6th Fleet, as shown below:

- USA – 5 (3 rocket destroyers, a command ship and a landing ship dock)
- Greece – 2 (a corvette and a support ship)
- France – 2 (a missile frigate and a corvette)
- Spain – 2 (minehunters)
- Canada – 2 (frigates)
- Poland – 1 (frigate).

The main ports of call for the NATO naval ships in 2016 were:

- the Romanian Naval Base of Constanta – 11 calls
- the Bulgarian naval bases in Varna (3) and Burgas (3) – 6 calls
- the Georgian port of Batumi – 3 calls
- the Ukrainian Naval Base Odesa – 2 calls.

In 20 of the total of 22 calls by NATO Black Sea shipping vessels in 2016, or in 90.9%, the ports of call were those of the NATO states. Only the ships of the 6th US Fleet – a missile destroyer and a large landing ship – made calls at the Ukrainian Naval Base of Odesa that year.

**In 2017, the number of the Black Sea entries by the Naval Forces of NATO states increased by almost 1.5 times compared with 2016.**

In 2016, there had been no US 6th Fleet ships in the Black Sea until June 6, 2016 when the USS Porter missile destroyer (DDG-78) arrived there.

Two days later, on June 8, 2016, a new frigate of the Russian BSF Admiral Grygorovich (745), the main frigate of the new series with the Caliber cruise missiles, entered the Black Sea bound for Sevastopol. The frigate arrived in occupied Sevastopol on June 9, 2016. On June 29, 2016, the third of the new missile submarines – B-262 Stary Oskol – entered the Black Sea.

## 2017

In 2017, the number of Black Sea naval operations of the non-Black Sea countries has increased by almost 1.5 times. The monitoring mission of the Maidan of Foreign Affairs has identified 20 such visits compared to 31 in 2014, 21 in 2015 and 14 in 2016.

Notably, if in 2014, NATO ships were in the Black Sea for 247 days, or 78.4% of the year, in 2015 they were there for only 187 days, or 51.2%, and in 2016 – for only 120 days, or 32.8%, or of the year. In 2017, it was 149 days, or 41%.



Istanbul, January 31, 2018. The UK Royal Navy destroyer HMS Duncan (D37) is crossing the Bosphorus en route to the Black Sea.  
Photo: Cem Devrim Yayali, [turkishnavy.net](http://turkishnavy.net), specially for Blackseanews.

In 2014, NATO ships remained in the Black Sea for 247 calendar days or 78.4% of the time since the Crimean occupation, in 2015 - for 51.2% and in 2016 - for 32.8%. In 2017 that number was 149 days or 41% and in 2018 - 164 days or 45% of the time.

While in 2014 and 2015, the naval ships of the non-Black Sea countries were present in the Black Sea every month, in January, March, September, November and December of 2016 and in January, June and October of 2017, they did not enter the Black Sea at all.

In 2017, it was once again the 6th US Navy fleet that provided most of patrolling in the Black Sea.

As for 2017, 5 of the 20 naval ship entries into the Black Sea have been carried out by the US 6th Fleet, specifically:

- USA – 7 (1 missile cruiser, 5 rocket destroyers and 1 dock landing ship)
- France – 3 missile frigates
- Britain – 2 rocket destroyers
- Spain – 2 (1 missile frigate and 1 minesweeper)
- Greece – 2 (1 missile boat and 1 minesweeper)
- Canada – 1 missile frigate
- Italy – 1 missile destroyer

- Poland – 1 service ship
- Germany – 1 minesweeper.

In 2017, of the 20 naval ships entering the Black Sea, 14 have been the modern rocket cruisers, destroyers and frigates, compared to 2016, when the ratio was 14 to 4, respectively.

The main ports of call of the NATO naval boats in 2017 were:

- Constanta Romanian Naval Base – 13 calls
- Odesa Ukrainian Naval Base – 11 calls
- Varna Bulgarian Naval Base – 9 calls
- Georgian port of Batumi – 1 call.

It should be mentioned here that in 2017, the number of the NATO ships calls at Odesa has increased sharply, compared to none in 2014, 2 – in 2015, 3 – 2016 and 11 – 2017.

## 2018

In 2018, the number of the Black Sea entries by the Naval Forces of the non-Black Sea NATO states remained at the 2017 level. The Maidan of Foreign Affairs Monitoring group has documented 20 such entries: 31 in 2014, 21 in 2015, 14 in 2016 and 20 in 2017.

While in 2014 the NATO ships remained in the Black Sea for 247 days or 78.4% of the time, in 2015 - the duration was 187 days or 51.2%, in 2016 - 120 days or 32.8%, in 2017 - 149 days or 41% and in 2018 - 164 days or 45%.



*Istanbul, September 6, 2014. Spanish missile frigate ESPS Almirante Juan De Borbon (F 102) and Canadian frigate HMCS Toronto (F333) are crossing the Bosphorus en route to the Black Sea. In the middle -- the American cruise ship Seabourn Odyssey. Photo by Cem Devrim Yaylali, turkishnavy.net, specially for BlackSeaNews.*





Starting in 2015, Russia has been applying the tactics of "stretching" the ships of the US 6th Fleet and the permanent NATO naval groups, using the fact that their area of responsibility included not only the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, but also the entire European coast, including that of Norway and the Baltic states.

In 2014 and 2015, the navy ships of the non-Black Sea countries were present in the Black Sea every month. However, in January, March, September, November and December 2016, they did not enter the Black Sea at all, while in 2017 they did not enter it in January, June and October, and in 2018 -- in April, June, September, and most of October.

In 2018, the main burden of the Black Sea naval presence again fell on the 6th US Fleet that over that year, has made 8 of the 20 Black Sea entries:

- USA - 8 (5 missile destroyers, 2 landing ships and a high-speed auxiliary ship)
- Britain - 4 (2 missile destroyers and 2 reconnaissance ships)
- Spain - 2 (1 missile frigate and 1 minesweeper)
- Greece - 2 (1 missile boat and 1 minesweeper)
- Germany - 2 (auxiliary ship)
- Netherlands - 1 (missile frigate)
- France - 1 (auxiliary ship).

It should be noted that in 2018, in 9 of the 20 cases, these were modern missile destroyers and frigates, compared to 14 in 2017.

In 2018 the main Black Sea ports of calls for the NATO naval forces were:

- Romanian Naval Base in Constanta - 11 (13) calls
- Ukrainian Naval Base in Odessa - 6 (11) calls
- Bulgarian Naval Bases in Varna and Bourgas - 11 (9) calls
- Georgian ports of Batumi and Poti - 6 (1) calls.

In 2018, the number of the NATO ships calls at Odessa has decreased again. The dynamics is as follows: 2014 - 0, 2015 - 2, 2016 - 3, 2017 - 11, 2018 - 6).

## The Current Naval Trends and Forecasts

The downward trend of the Black Sea deployments by the naval ships of the non- Black Sea NATO states that clearly transpired in 2016, cannot but raise questions.

Especially, since as shown above, the militarization of Crimea, including its saturation with the land- and sea based medium range cruise missiles, had considerably increased the military risks in the region.

Moreover, the actions of the NATO ships in the Black Sea in 2014-2016, demonstrated obvious caution and the desire not to exacerbate relations with the Russian Federation. Thus, in 2014 and until March 2015, not a single naval vessel of a non-Black Sea NATO state entered the Ukrainian naval base in Odesa.

In 2015 and 2016, 80-90% of the port calls were made to the naval bases of the Black Sea NATO states of Romania (Constanta) and Bulgaria (Varna and Burgas). In 2015-2016, the NATO ships visited Odesa only six times (1 French missile frigate, 4 missile destroyers and a large US landing ship), even though prior to the war, it happened regularly. Therefore, the 11 Odesa calls in 2017 can be considered a turning point in the previous «policy of caution».

We believe, the obvious reason behind the trend is the considerable expansion of the geography of the US Naval Forces operations in Europe and Africa in 2015-2016 (US Naval Forces Europe-Africa and US 6th Fleet's), namely in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea – North Africa, Syria and migrants to the EU – and the Baltic Sea.

In response to the concerns of the Baltic NATO member states with the possible aggression of the Russian Federation, NATO has significantly increased the scale of its summer naval exercises in the Baltics BALTOPS-2015 and BALTOPS-2016. On top of that, Russia's direct intervention in the war in Syria on the side of B. Assad's regime that began with air strikes on September 30, 2015, required an increased presence of the NATO's ships in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Today, NATO has yet to find a permanent solution to the issue of maintaining the necessary level of containing Russia in the Black Sea region.

Finally, since 2015, the Russian Federation successfully applied the tactics of «stretching» the ships of the US 6th Fleet and the permanent naval groups of the NATO Naval Command between the various theaters, given that their area of responsibility includes not only the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, but also, all of the European coast, including the Baltic.

On October 4, 2016, after visiting Sevastopol on June 9 and 29, 2016, respectively, frigate Admiral Grygorovich and submarine Stary Oskol, armed with Caliber missiles, small rocket ships Green Dole and Serpukhov, equipped with the same cruise missiles began an unexpected trip from Sevastopol through the Mediterranean Sea around Europe and in late October arrived in the Baltic Sea, where they were included into the Baltic Fleet.

Interestingly, that transition was urgent, since the ships built for the Black and Caspian Seas did not have the ice class required in the Baltic Sea, nor were they adapted for action in the far offshore zone.

But the normal for the ships of this class river route to the Baltic Sea via the Azov Sea – Don – Volga-Don Canal – Volga – Volga-Baltic Channel – Ladoga and Onega Lakes – St. Petersburg – the Gulf of Finland was impossible at the time due to water level drop in the Don River.

Naturally, the appearance in the Kaliningrad region of ships with the Caliber cruise missiles, coastal missile complexes and the demonstrative relocation of the Iskander rocket complex there in October 2016 will further increase the dispersal of the limited forces of the NATO Naval Command in Europe and the US Sixth Fleet between the Black, Mediterranean and Baltic seas.

The existing structure of the NATO naval forces in the Mediterranean region includes two permanent frigate naval groups and two permanent naval groups of minesweepers subordinated to the NATO Naval Command, as well as and the regular composition of the 6th US Fleet. That structure was formed before the occupation of the Crimea and the aggression of the RF against Ukraine.

We believe that the pre-war structure and composition of that naval group now faces the fact that these forces are not sufficient to balance the Russian military threats from the Baltic to the Black Sea and Syria.

A significant reduction in the Black Sea containment operations that we observed in 2016, was likely a result of an «off-season» when the US Navy and the relevant NATO command structure in Europe were trying to find adequate response to Russia's activity in these naval theaters, while lacking the corresponding budget increase.

On December 7, 2016, the commander of the US Navy's Sixth Fleet, Vice-Admiral James Foggo, said that the duration of the American warships patrol in the Black Sea could be extended to four months, that is, approximately to 2015: «It depends on whether the challenges in the region are more or less urgent. Obviously, when things become more intense you see the presence of additional ships».

The 2017 statistics has clearly attested to that. Moreover, incredibly, in early 2018, six US and British warships, including four missile destroyers, remained almost continuously in the Black Sea between January 5 and March 22, with two US missile destroyers performing their mission simultaneously.

To date, NATO has not found the ultimate solution to the problem of maintaining the necessary level of containment of Russia in the Black Sea region.

A few relatively small US Army units have been placed in Romania and Bulgaria as a palliative measure. In addition, in 2017 we've seen a sharp increase in the number of reconnaissance flights by US aircrafts and strategic UAVs over the Black Sea near the Crimean coast, as well as over the war zone in the East of Ukraine. Perhaps, that what accounts for the considerable growth of the NATO awareness regarding the military situation in the occupied Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and the corresponding rhetoric of high-ranking US and NATO officials' on the Russian activity there.

Clearly, the NATO Allied Flotilla in the Black Sea can only be created on a rotational basis with no more than 21 day presence pursuant to the Montreux Convention. But as already mentioned, there are not enough warships for that option.



The second option is the transfer, sale and leasing of modern warships available in the NATO reserves and suitable for integration into the bloc's command-and staff system of the bloc, to the naval forces of Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine.

Both options entail the necessity of establishing at least the permanent command of such a naval group and the appropriate coastal logistics infrastructure in Constanta.

In addition, the construction of such a base and an increase in the number of NATO ships that provide the necessary level of containing the RF in the Black Sea region will certainly require further decisions on redistribution and/or increase of the respective budget expenditures of NATO states for such programs. However, without solving the organizational and structural issues of the NATO Allied Flotilla of NATO in the Black Sea comprehensively, those may remain separate occurrences, rather than the manifestation of a new trend.

At the end of December 2017, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the Financial Times and the Washington Post, acknowledged that the NATO fleet had lost the adequate combat skills. «Russia has invested heavily in its fleet, especially in submarines...Russian submarine activity is now at the highest level since the Cold War», – he said. At the same time, Stoltenberg noted that the Alliance's readiness for challenges at sea had declined. «After

the end of the Cold War, NATO reduced its capabilities at sea, especially in the fight against submarines. We practiced less and lost our skills», – added the NATO Secretary General.

On January 17, 2018, British Commander of the Joint Naval Command, Commander of the NATO Maritime Command, Clive Johnstone, speaking at the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., made several important points: «...We are in a period of competition, like we have never seen before...Russia is preparing itself for a period of intense challenge ahead... It only emphasizes the importance of maintaining naval power in NATO's strategy. ...Russia is doing very well as using opportunity, Syria is a classic case in point... In the field of intelligence, we see that Russians act more purposefully, aggressively, openly and closer to our home than ever before, and it's a little nervous to us. ... And we need to also adapt to how they are starting to lay down a chessboard of intelligence ships, maritime ships, warships, submarines and whatever. ...If we look at the studies conducted by the Russian Federation in the last couple of months, one cannot but note their ability to use significant forces at large distances over long distances».

He noted that he was worried about the situation in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. «There are countries that believe that the Baltic Sea is the most important area and if something happens there, we will face a real problem with which I agree: it will be impossible to enter this sea and it is impossible to leave».



*Istanbul, May 23, 2018. The United States Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Ross (DDG 71) is crossing the Bosphorus en route to the Black Sea.  
Photo: Cem Devrim Yaylali, turkishnavy.net, specially for Blackseanews.*



The actual «hot» war on the Black and Azov Seas against the coastal regions of Ukraine, as well as Georgia and Moldova, based on Crimea's military power, are completely realistic scenarios for 2019 that should be on the diplomat and military commandment desks.

As far as the Black Sea is concerned, in this area, according to Johnston, «...the greatest changes are taking place now. We were impressed by the huge investments required to hunt even one submarine Kiloclass (new submarines of the Black Sea Fleet of Russia with the cruise missiles Caliber – MFA)... We have begun to build up our military capabilities in the Black Sea. We are starting to better understand the situation there».

So, four years after the peninsula's occupation, the NATO leadership and its naval command have finally understood the international security threats that stem from the militarization of Crimea and have begun to adjust their plans accordingly.

Clearly, no one can reliably predict the scenarios Russia will pursue using the military capabilities it has created on the occupied peninsula. We can only be certain that Putin has not stopped and will not stop, and that both blackmail by war and the actual «hot» war on the Black and Azov Seas against the coastal regions of Ukraine, as well as Georgia and Moldova, based on Crimea's military power, are completely realistic scenarios for 2019 that should be on the diplomat and military commandment desks.

What will become increasingly important in 2019, is not only the developments in Crimea itself, but how exactly Russia will use the military and strategic capabilities it has created on the peninsula over the last five years. We hope that in 2019 the decision makers will fully comprehend that important change — that the occupied Crimea has turned from a mere problem into a real military threat not only to Ukraine, but also, to all of Europe, and into an operation base for Russia's expansion into the Middle East and North Africa.

If that finally happens — and Ukraine's expert community will continue doing all they can to that end — then hopefully, in 2019, we will see practical steps by Ukraine and its allies towards countering that threat, or at least concrete intentions and plans thereof. At the very minimum, those should include sanctions, the increased NATO naval presence in the Black Sea that in 2018, unfortunately, has been insufficient due to Putin's primitive trick of staged military threat to Northern Europe, and of course, the accelerated development of Ukraine's military potential.

If, however, the understanding of the need for an immediate blockade of the Crimean threat remains at its current level, then the subject of the forecast will shift from whether or not the new Crimea-based aggression will happen, since that will be inevitable, to when, where and under what circumstances it will happen. There is no doubt that no one in Ukraine or in the West wants the hostilities to expand. However, the analytics, journalists and politicians will be well advised to stop falling for their own wishful thinking that in turn, leads to the lack of adequate action. We can repeat the mantra that larger war will not happen all we want, but if we do not act, it will, since the 2019 election year in Ukraine opens up multiple opportunities and casus belli for launching it.

In terms of international politics, Russia will likely use Crimea as the core of its «International» of unrecognized territories and proto-state formations. The peninsula will further develop as the joint platform, foreign economic affairs hub and showcase for the new «sanctions International» consisting of Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, DPR and LNR, in cooperation with Syria, Libya and others who are under international sanctions or have problems with maintaining state integrity.

If the international policy trend that is beginning to emerge as a result of the Russian aggression in the Sea of Azov continues, in 2019, the sanctions policy of the civilized world may form the basis of a system of measures to block the Russian global threat.

However, without the naval restraint of the RF, the sanctions policy of the civilized world alone will not have the desirable effect.



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