

## OLD SHADOWS, NEW THREATS

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Speaking at the Wroclaw Global Forum on June 3, NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow (who was US ambassador to Russia, 2001-2005) said that the July Warsaw Summit must work on making NATO “a full-spectrum alliance more than ever before.” “Full spectrum” could mean a lot of things, from overt intervention to defeat “threats,” to political initiatives to rally the allies, to “gray zone” strategies aimed at undermining political forces that oppose NATO’s declared objectives. That being said, the Warsaw Summit comes when NATO has decided on the **key core task** already: *oppose Russia’s expansionism and its perceived threat to Europe.*

Old timers won’t have difficulty recognizing the stated aim and the language cushioning it, the exhortations to rally the allies, and the not-too-veiled counter-threat of meeting Russia toe-to-toe. Yet, 2016 is not 1965 or 1985.

Today, NATO faces cohesion challenges that would have been theoretical discussion points in the 70s and 80s. The Warsaw Pact is no more. The European Union has fostered complicated and often contradictory “pan-European” policies. EU and NATO members in the former Soviet bloc are agitated and demanding “more defense” propelled by their memories of Moscow’s hammer. The United States, fatigued by permanent wars in tinpot crisis spots, is seeking a 21<sup>st</sup>-century strategic doctrine which is still elusive. It all amounts to unprecedented stresses for the Alliance that [spur uncertainty and confusion](#), with many members even falling short of their NATO financial commitments.

Aside from the old land frontier with the Soviet Union, the Black Sea has also emerged as a potential collision front between NATO and Moscow. Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the separatist war in the Ukraine frustrated NATO planners. They had expected that the overthrow of a pro-Russian Ukrainian president paved the way for direct “utilization” of Ukraine’s strategic geography (Sevastopol, the historic Russian fortress base, figured high on the list of NATO priorities; it is now a naval base of ‘neo-Bolshevik’ Putin).

Depending on one’s historical perspective, the Black Sea in modern times has been a Russian lake or a body of water controlled by Turkey thanks to Turkish possession of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Turkey has long manipulated the 1936 Montreux Convention

viewed by the Russians as a stranglehold on Russian sea power. Russian attitudes on this issue have not changed.

The Black Sea could not possibly escape the worsening rift between the West and Russia. In lockstep with the Baltics and Poland demanding NATO ground troops on their borders to deter Russia, Romania has tabled an “initiative” to create an “allied naval force” for permanent deployment in the Black Sea. Romanian president Klaus Iohannis wants NATO land forces too, but the “allied naval force” appears higher on his list of “defensive and deterrent” measures against Russia.

Enter Turkey. Historical precedent dictates that any standard maritime force would be unthinkable without Ankara’s participation. The Erdogan Islamic regime is in desperate search of new anchor political points following its catastrophic Syria strategy. An NATO-linked “strategic” initiative would be a godsend. Thanks to Turkey’s open support of Islamic terrorists, to mention just one major hazard, the long NATO-Turkey honeymoon is on the wane but it has not expired yet. Turkey is thus gearing up to assume a commanding role in checking Russian power in the Black Sea. NATO officials, meanwhile, approve in principle the maritime force scheme, with the condition that the Black Sea countries [provide](#) the initial force. Turkey’s ambitions are not subject to any discussion. That is not expected to cool “sultan” Erdogan’s propensity for grandiose statements announcing Turkish grand neo-Ottoman plans.

The plot thickens also because Russia has Ankara in its sights. Russian-Turkish relations disintegrated after Turkey, in an act of unbalanced brinkmanship, shot down a Russian warplane over Syria in November 2015. Mr. Putin has been outspoken about what Turkey stands to suffer if it continues to challenge Moscow in such manner. Turkey’s presence will make any move for a permanent naval force scheme bumpy from the start – with tension having opportunities aplenty to escalate further.

The “allied fleet” proposal coincides with NATO [activating](#) a missile defense station in Deveselu, southern Romania. NATO claims that this is a system aimed at defeating missile threats from the Middle East. Moscow thinks otherwise. Public statements by NATO officials “re-assuring” Russia have fallen on deaf ears.

Romania, public discussion in Russia has [suggested](#), by inviting and accepting to host the NATO-US anti-missile system, could be reduced to “smoking ruins” in a potential confrontation in Europe. [Earlier](#) this year, speaking along similar lines, Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev reiterated an oft-quoted Russian message: “... in a speech at the Munich Security Conference [he] urged Western countries to end confrontation with Russia and instead collaborate with the country to prevent a new ‘cold war.’ ”

Critics in the West have been outspoken on the “wisdom” of challenging post-Soviet Russia every step of the way. John J. Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, [minced no words](#) in suggesting that Western “liberal delusions” triggered the Ukraine crisis. Critics also remind us that NATO, during its 2008 Bucharest Summit, [vowed](#) to make Ukraine part of its military

alliance (article 23 of the summit declaration). They further suggest that such a provocative agenda goes against what Western leaders proclaimed and pledged after the fall of the USSR – although the question of what these pledges meant is still [a subject](#) of historical dispute.

In light of past and present tensions, the question of a Black Sea permanent NATO naval presence needs careful analysis. This analysis should not be influenced by the neoconservative push for NATO expansion (which has its roots in the Bill Clinton administration and later actions by the George W. Bush administration). It should address the question against the “option” of nuclear warfare. Does NATO hark back to the days of Colin Gray’s [“Victory is Possible”](#) and Herman Kahn’s [“Thinking About the Unthinkable”](#)? If it does, the future may be much more challenging, complicated, and dangerous than we think at present. If it does not, there are plenty of other serious and nagging questions to ask; for example:

- What is Turkey’s potential role in this initiative when Ankara morphs into a key destabilizing influence in the Middle East?
- In view of Russian naval plans and deployments, what would be the “optimum” composition of such a maritime force? What basic capabilities should be expected to have? And would these basic capabilities be enough to meet the deterrent mission as planned?
- Would it be an “acceptable risk” for the United States to contemplate something it has not done even at the height of US-Soviet rivalry, sending a strong permanent naval component to plow Black Sea waters?
- And what would be the chances of an “allied fleet,” comprising contributions of regional states *only*, vis-a-vis Russian deterrent *and* offensive power?

The [decision](#) of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to meet with President Putin in Russia this month comes to demonstrate how complex Euro-Atlantic relations can be. Juncker’s decision has not pleased the EU’s “forward” former Eastern bloc nations, not to mention many policymakers in the United States. At the same time, since EU sanctions would be at the center of the Juncker-Putin talks, countries like Hungary, Italy, and Greece should be expected to raise their voices again in favor of dropping these sanctions—further escalating the rancor over whether an aggressive “neo-Bolshevik threat” exists as the NATO leadership continues to claim.

Old shadows die hard. The whole game thus pivots on whether these shadows can lead to resurrecting “assessment” methods which in the past led to failed, and dangerous, strategies. Therefore, true leadership and political cool heads are wanted.