



**United States Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional
Security Cooperation**

Hearing on “Black Sea Security: Reviving US Policy Toward the Region”

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Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member Johnson, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

It is an honor and privilege to address you today on this critical issue for United States national security. Thank you for inviting me to speak.

I am the President and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent foreign policy think-tank focused on the transatlantic alliance. My views are my own and do not represent those of the organization, which takes no institutional position. Since our founding, CEPA has worked to raise awareness on the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for the United States and our allies. My views as presented here are informed by my CEPA colleagues and experts, most notably Lieutenant General (retired) Ben Hodges, Admiral (retired) James Foggo, Lauren Speranza, and Carsten Schmiedl, who provided invaluable feedback and have written extensively on these issues.

Why the Black Sea region matters to the United States

“Security and stability of the Black Sea are in the U.S. national interest and are critical to the security of NATO’s Eastern Flank...Russia’s destabilizing activities in and around the Black Sea reflect its ambitions to regain a dominant position in the region and to prevent the realization of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace.” – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin¹

As Secretary of Defense Austin said on his recent trip to Romania, Georgia, and Ukraine, stability in the Black Sea region (BSR) is in the national security interest of the United States. The US cannot afford to neglect key regional security environments in Europe, such as the BSR, even as it pivots to the Indo-Pacific. The transatlantic alliance remains a bedrock of US global leadership – a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace is an asset to the United States. But the European continent is still riddled with contested security zones and is where the transatlantic alliance is continuously tested. The BSR is vital to US strategic interests of deterring Russian aggression against allies, ensuring European stability, and protecting freedom of navigation. Insufficient resources and attention have undermined the US and allies’ ability to effectively pursue these objectives at the same time as Russia has stepped up its aggression and China is increasing its foothold in the region.

The BSR is where Russia, Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus come together — and where the forces of democracy to the west, Russian military aggression to the north, Chinese economic influence to the east, and instability in the Middle East to the south converge. The US-friendly countries of the BSR (Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Turkey, Ukraine) also present a complex alliance structure with both NATO and European Union members and partners and a shared border — by way of the Black Sea — with Russia, the main competitive rival and military aggressor in the region.

The BSR is the locus of the Kremlin’s tests against alliance credibility and resolve, which have escalated over the last two decades in the conventional and nonconventional domain: from the invasion of Georgia in 2008, to the 2014 illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, to cyber attacks and information influence operations. Russian acts of aggression occur regularly in the land, maritime, and so-called hybrid domains. To do so, the Kremlin has militarized Ukraine’s Crimea, which is now a massive Russian military outpost that serves as an anchor for Moscow’s aggression against Ukraine by land and sea, intimidation of NATO allies, and testing ground of US commitment.

The Kremlin has de facto pulled a new Iron Curtain over Europe in the Black Sea. And it benefits from the complexity of alliances that has created a web of interconnected interests across states and institutions but without a single entity developing or taking ownership of a comprehensive regional strategy.

The Secretary of Defense’s visit earlier this month to the region is a welcome and positive sign that the BSR is gaining significance for the United States. While timely and important, the visit

¹ “Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s Remarks at Romanian Ministry of Defense Post-Bilat Joint Press Event,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2816800/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-remarks-at-romanian-ministry-of-defens/>.

should not stand alone as the sum of US engagement. Rather, the Biden Administration and the US Congress should use the visit as an opportunity to build momentum across the alliance for a comprehensive regional strategy. An effective strategy for regional security in the Black Sea should:

- View regional security through a broader lens of resilience, which goes beyond the military domain to encompass economic and democratic resilience;
- Emphasize and craft responses to nonconventional threats in the cyber and information domains, which are a core part of Russian influence operations in the region;
- Work with key regional allies to establish a cross-cutting regional dialogue around a shared understanding of Black Sea security.

Undoubtedly, limited US resources and bandwidth will mean a greater role for US allies in the region, particularly NATO and the EU. The US will also have to do more with less, but recent history has shown that when the US disengages, its adversaries step in to fill the power vacuums that are left behind. In the BSR, Russia has already established itself as the dominant power, but the Kremlin's capabilities are limited. Strategic US leadership and commitment is instrumental to ensuring that the Black Sea does not become a permanent security black hole. There is no substitute for US strategic presence in the Black Sea, operating in consort with Black Sea allies and partners.

Understanding regional security in terms of resilience

Stability in the BSR will not be achieved through military means alone. Therefore, US engagement in the region should occur through a broader lens of security as resilience rooted in three domains: military, economic, and democratic. US strategy should seek to balance across these domains based on available resources and priorities. A longer-term lens and strategy is particularly important as military signals – such as the US decision to send the USS Fort McHenry in response to Russian aggression in the Sea of Azov – tend to be ephemeral if they are not backed by a broader holistic approach.

The challenge of complex alliances

The BSR is shaped by a complex regional security environment comprised of a mix of NATO partners and allies. The BSR's NATO allies and partners unite around a common border with Russia, by way of the Black Sea itself, as well as the broadly shared view that Russia presents the most immediate and greatest regional threat. But, partly due to varying relationships with NATO and the EU, each regional partner has a unique view of the region as well as wide-ranging capabilities.

In terms of NATO, Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey are members, Georgia and Ukraine retain Enhanced Opportunity Partner (EOP) status in the alliance, while Moldova is constitutionally neutral with respect to NATO and the CTSO. In terms of the EU, Romania and Bulgaria are members, Moldova is part of its European Neighborhood Policy, Turkey is a candidate country, Georgia is preparing its application for membership by 2024, and Ukraine is a priority partner through the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).

Romania views the Black Sea as a strategic priority and is the alliance's regional center of gravity owing to its proximity to other allies, significant capability modernization efforts, and mobility infrastructure. It sets an example for alliance commitment on burden-sharing, exceeding two percent of GDP on defense spending and over 20 percent of that amount on defense modernization. As well as contributing forces to Afghanistan, Romania hosts around 1,000 US rotational forces at Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) Air Base, is at the terminus of the Danube, and has a key regional port at Constanța.² It has also undertaken several notable efforts to enhance regional resilience, including the new European Cybersecurity Competence Centre and the Euro-Atlantic Centre for Resilience. Diplomatically, Romania's good relationship with Turkey is an asset for cooperation in the region.

Bulgaria, the only other member besides Romania of both the EU and NATO as well as the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), has demonstrated commitment to enhancing capabilities and improving regional security through alliance exercises and multinational military cooperation. It has benefitted from an increasingly close security relationship with the US, led by the US-Bulgarian Defense Cooperation Agreement, which has provided more than \$160 million in security assistance over the last five years.³ However, Bulgaria needs more urgency to modernize outdated conventional capabilities, many of which are obsolete and vestiges of the Soviet era. A positive sign is Bulgaria's adoption of Program 2032, which outlines a capability development strategy and indicates that Bulgaria will reach 2% spending of GDP on defense by 2024.⁴ Bulgaria also developed a National Cyber Security Strategy in 2020 but needs a more comprehensive effort to enhance national and regional resilience against broader hybrid threats, perhaps by building on Romania's efforts.

Georgia maintains close relations with the alliance and is one of its closest partners. The alliance assists in modernizing Georgia's capabilities through the Joint Training and Evaluation Center and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package. Georgia's participation in multinational exercises has increased. Tbilisi will also benefit from a new security pact with the US following Secretary Austin's visit to the BSR.⁵

Ukraine faces the most urgent and direct threat in the region with the ongoing war that has witnessed over 14,000 casualties, more than 1.5 million displaced persons,⁶ the loss of over 75% of Ukraine's naval capabilities, access to naval ports, and associated freedom of navigation, and the loss of Ukrainian territory. For Ukraine, building cooperation with the

² "Defense Secretary Holds Talks in Romania," *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2816855/defense-secretary-holds-talks-in-romania/>.

³ "U.S. Security Cooperation with Bulgaria: Fact Sheet," *U.S. Department of State*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-bulgaria/>.

⁴ Dimirinka Metodieva, "Modernization of the Bulgarian Military: Recent Developments and New Opportunities," *CEE Legal Matters*, September 6, 2021, <https://ceelegalmatters.com/bulgaria/17781-modernization-of-the-bulgarian-military-recent-developments-and-new-opportunities>.

⁵ Karoun Demirjian, "U.S. extends security pact with Georgia as Russia tensions flare," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/lloyd-austin-georgia-russia-ukraine-nato/2021/10/18/9b5846de-3014-11ec-9241-aad8e48f01ff_story.html.

⁶ "Donbas war took 14,000 lives and forced relocation of 1.5 million people – Ukraine's MFA," *112 Ukraine*, December 17, 2019, <https://112.international/conflict-in-eastern-ukraine/donbas-war-claimed-14000-lives-and-forced-relocation-of-15-million-people-ukraines-mfa-46613.html>.

transatlantic alliance, particularly in the maritime domain, is critical to Ukraine's ability to defend itself against further Russian aggression and ensure economic stability.

While constitutionally neutral, Moldova is key to regional security dynamics. In Transnistria, Russia has backed around 1,500 separatist forces, as well as 500 so-called Russian peacekeepers, and conducts regular military exercises.⁷ Long viewed as aligned more with Russia than the West, there are signs — particularly after the election of pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu — that Moldova is shifting more towards the alliance. Moldova continues to cooperate with the alliance to modernize its defense and security structures and institutions and is a contributor to the NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, while NATO supported the establishment of a Cyber Incident Response Capability for the Moldovan Armed Forces in January 2021.⁸

Turkey is NATO's military heavyweight in the region and holds sovereignty over the Bosphorus Straits. But it can be a challenging and demanding Ally: Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense systems has been a sore spot in the US-Turkey relationship, leading to the US blocking the sale of F-35s to Turkey. At the end of the day, NATO needs Turkey and Turkey needs NATO, especially in the BSR. Moving past the S-400 debate and the cancelled F-35 deal with Turkey to build greater Alliance solidarity, while not abandoning the "carrot and stick" approach, will be key for broader regional stability.

Unlike other areas where Turkey and Russia see eye-to-eye, the BSR is an area of discord for the two. Turkey disapproves of the Russian occupation of Crimea, which has a Muslim Tatar minority population with ties to the Tatars in Turkey. Ankara sees Crimea as an unwelcome expansion of Russia's footprint in the region. But Ankara is reluctant to challenge Moscow or disrupt the regional status quo as it has a long history of losing wars provoked by Russia.⁹ Thus, Turkey plays a delicate balance with Russia — seeing other BSR countries as allies in helping it balance against Moscow. Indeed, the Kremlin holds leverage over and applies pressure to Turkey through its positions in Syria, where it can provoke a refugee influx to Turkey.¹⁰ Russia also wields economic leverage over Turkey through the tourist industry (Russian tourists make up the largest tourist group to Turkey, accounting for 20% of foreign visitors in April 2021 and 6 million tourists the year before the pandemic¹¹) and imports (Russia is Turkey's tenth largest export market with main products being citrus, vehicle parts, and pitted fruits¹²).

The complexity of alliances, divergent views of the region, and varying capabilities produce a challenge for regional cohesion. From a US perspective, working to ensure a shared vision of regional security among BSR partners that focuses on a complementary division of labor across

⁷ Madalin Necsutu, "Russian Exercises in Breakaway Transnistria Leave Moldova Unfazed," *Balkan Insight*, April 8, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/08/russian-exercises-in-breakaway-transnistria-leave-moldova-unfazed/>.

⁸ "Cyber Incident Response Capability established in the Republic of Moldova with NATO support," *NATO*, January 21, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180758.htm.

⁹ Soner Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

¹⁰ Soner Cagaptay, "A New Erdogan-Putin Deal in Idlib May Help—For Now," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-erdogan-putin-deal-idlib-may-help-now>.

¹¹ "Tourism injected late boost as Russia due to resume Turkey flights," *Daily Sabah*, June 20, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/tourism/tourism-injected-late-boost-as-russia-due-to-resume-turkey-flights>.

¹² "Russia/Turkey," *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, June 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/tur>.

key domains would bring greater cohesion to the region. Spreading liability and responsibility between BSR states would also undermine Russia's points of leverage in each, making the region more resilient to Russia's "divide and conquer" approach to foreign policy.

Economic investment is investment in security

The BSR has tremendous economic potential as the crossroads linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the connector of its littoral countries to the rest of the global economy, and with an emerging but latent supply of energy reserves which could shape current and future energy markets. However, owing to spillover effects from regional geopolitical competition and rivalry, as well as the relatively low level of foreign economic investment, much of this economic potential is unrealized.

Many of the regional formats designed to promote growth — including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDB), Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova (GUAM), and the Danube River Commission — have hitherto been unsuccessful.¹³ BSEC is particularly problematic as Russia is a member of the organization.

The region includes some success stories but also some of the poorest countries in Europe, which is reflected in several economic indicators. In a ranking of 206 countries by GDP, Turkey was ranked 17, Romania was 45, Ukraine was 54, Bulgaria was 73, Georgia was 119, and Moldova was 138.¹⁴ In terms of GDP per capita, Romania was 51, Bulgaria was 57, Turkey was 62, Moldova was 91, Georgia was 96, and Ukraine was 105.¹⁵ While real GDP growth is showing positive signs so far in 2021,¹⁶ the countries of the region are among those at highest risk of a long and complicated recovery from the economic impact of Covid-19.¹⁷

In addition to economic challenges, energy is a key issue for regional resilience. Here, Russia also wields significant influence and leverage. The Kremlin-backed Nord Stream 2 pipeline is not just a Ukraine-Germany-US issue, but a regional one indicative of broader dynamics of European energy price volatility, dependence on Russian supply, and regulatory resilience. The Kremlin has attempted to blackmail German and EU officials to grant final regulatory approvals to finish the pipeline, which threaten Europe's regulatory integrity.¹⁸ With the US and Germany reaching a deal earlier this year to allow the completion of Nord Stream 2, these regional dynamics will only continue. Russia's annexation of Crimea also provided the Kremlin an opportunity to illegally and illegitimately seize gas reserves off the Crimean coast which are potentially worth trillions of dollars.¹⁹

¹³ Ben Hodges, "The Black Sea... or a Black Hole?" *Center for European Policy Analysis*, January 21, 2021, <https://cepa.org/the-black-sea-or-a-black-hole/>.

¹⁴ "Gross domestic product 2020," *World Bank*, 2021, <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>.

¹⁵ "GDP per capita (current US\$)," *World Bank*, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

¹⁶ "Real GDP growth: Annual percent change," *International Monetary Fund*, 2021,

https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/TUR.

¹⁷ "COVID-19 Recovery Risks," *Gallup Poll*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/322061/covid19-recovery-risk-report.aspx>.

¹⁸ Aura Sabadus, "Why the Black Sea could emerge as the world's next great energy battleground," *Atlantic Council*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/europes-energy-crisis-highlights-dangers-of-reliance-on-russia/>.

¹⁹ William J. Broad, "In Taking Crimea, Putin Gains a Sea of Fuel Reserves," *New York Times*, May 17, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/world/europe/in-taking-crimea-putin-gains-a-sea-of-fuel-reserves.html>.

The Kremlin weaponizes BSR energy supplies to strangle Ukraine, to prevent east-west energy corridors which could weaken its grip on regional oil and gas exports, and to undermine the West more broadly. On October 22, 2021, Moldova's parliament declared an energy state of emergency after Moldova failed to reach a new contract with the Kremlin-backed Gazprom, which raised prices from \$550 per cubic meter to \$790.²⁰ The US change in policy from the hardline approach of the Trump administration to the more complacent and diplomatic approach of the Biden term has sowed confusion among BSR allies, who are looking for policy consistency from the US.

But across the BSR, untapped energy sources could eventually reduce the Kremlin's leverage. Offshore gas reserves are currently being explored in the BSR, including a gas field discovered last year by Turkey.²¹ The littoral Ukrainian shelf could have as much as two trillion cubic meters of gas under the Black Sea, Romania between 150-200 bcm of offshore reserves, and Bulgaria's Khan Asparuh as much as 100 bcm.²² In Georgia, the Namakhvani hydropower plant could reduce energy dependence on Russia if social and environmental concerns are resolved.²³ In this light, discussions on the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP), which has been dormant for years but could tap gas reserves in Turkmenistan for eventual delivery through Turkey to the EU, should be revived. The BSR countries also have a common interest and shared potential for adopting cleaner energy. This includes hydrogen and renewable forms of power generation; the BSR has some of the highest potential in Europe for offshore wind, and the region's abundant natural gas supply could enable significant hydrogen production capacity.²⁴

Greater US investment is needed to develop an integrated energy strategy with the necessary technical expertise and financial resources to help BSR allies take advantage of these energy reserves. The added benefit of increasing the economic value of the region is that its military significance also increases, encouraging the West to better protect its investments by committing more resources and by making the BSR more central in the minds of strategic planners.

Democratic governance – the long-term path for regional security

Good governance is the key to long-term regional stability and security. Black Sea states as a whole must do more to improve the resilience of institutions. Unstable democratic institutions and processes within BSR countries expose the region to the Kremlin's influence operations in the information and cyber domains. Stronger and more transparent institutions, particularly rule of law, also reduce uncertainty for foreign investors by producing an appealing business

²⁰ "Moldova Declares Energy Emergency Over Gas Shortage," *RFE/RL*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-gas-prices-energy-emergency/31524783.html>.

²¹ Richard Kraemer and Iulia-Sabina Joja, "Black Sea Gas Campaigning 2020," *Middle East Institute*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/black-sea-gas-campaigning-2020>.

²² Aura Sabadus, "Why the Black Sea could emerge as the world's next great energy battleground."

²³ Claudia Palazzo, "Namakhvani HPP: Georgian Hydropower Between Energy Security and Geopolitics," *The Jamestown Foundation*, June 16, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/namakhvani-hpp-georgian-hydropower-between-energy-security-and-geopolitics/>.

²⁴ Aura Sabadus, "Why the Black Sea could emerge as the world's next great energy battleground."

environment. Every Black Sea state can and should do more on democratic reforms, anti-corruption, and judicial independence.

Several indexes suggest that resilience in the BSR mirrors the military domain in its multiplicity and complexity. According to Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, which ranks countries according to perceived corruption in the public sector, Georgia is ranked 45 in the world, Romania and Bulgaria are 69, Turkey is 86, Moldova is 115, and Ukraine is 117.²⁵ The World Bank's 2021 Ease of Doing Business Index, an indicator of economic growth potential, ranks Georgia 7 in the world, Turkey at 33, Moldova at 48, Romania at 55, Bulgaria at 61, and Ukraine at 64.²⁶ The 2021 World Press Freedom Index, which is an indicator of media independence, ranks Romania at 48, Georgia at 60, Moldova at 89, Ukraine at 97, Bulgaria at 112, and Turkey at 153 out of 180 countries.²⁷ The figures contrast higher rankings, on average, for the other members of the transatlantic alliance, suggesting lower broader resilience in the BSR.

An independent and vibrant civil society sphere, including an independent media, is core to increasing societal resilience. An independent media sphere is still the best bulwark against disinformation. Civil society watchdog groups also hold governments accountable for incursions on judicial independence and corrupt practices. In Ukraine, the United States and international institutions have made financial loans conditional on progress on reforms. This model has put pressure on the Ukrainian government to deliver on the reform agenda regardless of which political leader is in power.

Within the region, several countries have taken steps to enhance resilience in the cyber domain. Bucharest was selected by EU members as the location for a new European Cybersecurity Competence Centre to improve the coordination of cybersecurity research and innovation.²⁸ Romania also hosts the Euro-Atlantic Centre for Resilience. Bulgaria developed a National Cyber Security Strategy in 2020 and updated its National Security Strategy in 2018 to include hybrid threats. NATO and Georgia intend to strengthen cooperation around improving resilience in military exercising, while the NATO-Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare has seen increased cooperation recently on responding to hybrid threats.²⁹

The West and the US are generally viewed positively in the BSR. Support is particularly high in Romania, where 81% of the population supports strong ties with Western political and military alliances as well as the US.³⁰ In Ukraine, support for joining NATO reached 53% in 2019, the highest level since 2014.³¹ In Georgia, support has continued to increase for both NATO (82%)

²⁵ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2020," *Transparency International*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/tur>.

²⁶ "Ease of Doing Business Rankings," *The World Bank*, 2020, <https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>.

²⁷ "2021 World Press Freedom Index," *Reporters Without Borders*, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

²⁸ "The new European Cybersecurity Competence Centre to be located in Bucharest, Romania," *European Council*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/10/the-new-european-cybersecurity-competence-centre-to-be-located-in-bucharest-romania/>.

²⁹ "NATO and Ukraine hold workshop on use of hybrid tactics in multilateral diplomacy," *NATO*, October 19, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_187559.htm.

³⁰ Simona Fodor, "Survey shows Romanians' preferences regarding political, military alliances," *Romania Insider*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.romania-insider.com/inscop-survey-ro-military-pol-alliances-march-2021>.

³¹ Oksana Grytsenko, "Poll: NATO support grows in Ukraine, reaches 53 percent," *Kyiv Post*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poll-nato-support-grows-in-ukraine-reaches-53-percent.html>.

and the EU (74%).³² Moldova has positive views of relations with Russia as well as the West, although Russia is viewed simultaneously as its most important economic partner – tied with the EU for the most important political partner – and also as the greatest threat. But the next generation of Moldovans overwhelmingly (64%) appears to prefer economic convergence with the West over Russia.³³ Bulgaria remains somewhat of an exception with roughly half or fewer of the population having a positive view of NATO.³⁴ Bulgaria is also one of the only countries in Europe which disagreed that Covid-19 showed a need for closer European cooperation.³⁵

In addition, ensuring that Euro-Atlantic integration is a reachable goal for the non-EU, non-NATO BSR countries is key to long-term regional stability and security. EU membership and the reforms that the accession process requires have also engendered incredible economic growth in Central Eastern Europe as well as in Romania and Bulgaria. EU integration should be a top priority for the non-EU BSR countries.

Russia's view of the Black Sea region

The Kremlin views the BSR as squarely within its perceived sphere of influence. Although Russia is a country in economic and demographic decline, it is nonetheless a military power with a proven ability and determination to undermine US and more broadly Western interests. It is of course the main military aggressor in the region and fears growing Western and particularly Turkish influence turning the BSR into a “NATO lake.” Using conventional capability buildup as well as a new generation of so-called hybrid means — which it refines in the BSR before weaponizing them against the broader West, including the US — to asymmetrically challenge the West where it is weaker, the Kremlin is attempting to draw an “Iron Curtain” across the BSR to exert influence and enable it to operate with impunity.

From the Kremlin's perspective, the BSR is part of a coherent western flank. It perceives NATO's more siloed approach to its eastern flank, where some regions are prioritized over others, as creating weaker defense and deterrence in regions such as the BSR that it can exploit.³⁶ Increasingly, Russia is signaling its lack of desire for dialogue and cooperation with NATO as evidenced by Russia's recent recall of its diplomats from the NATO Mission in Brussels and closure of the NATO information bureau in Moscow.

The Kremlin has demonstrated continued willingness to use force in the BSR, particularly against non-NATO members, in an attempt to keep sovereign states in its perceived sphere of influence. The region's “grey zones” or so-called frozen conflicts, which are not actually frozen,

³² “NDI poll: 82% of Georgians support EU, 74%-NATO membership,” *Agenda*, January 16, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/146>.

³³ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova,” *International Republican Institute*, 2019, p. 52-56, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_moldova_poll_december_2018-january_2019.pdf.

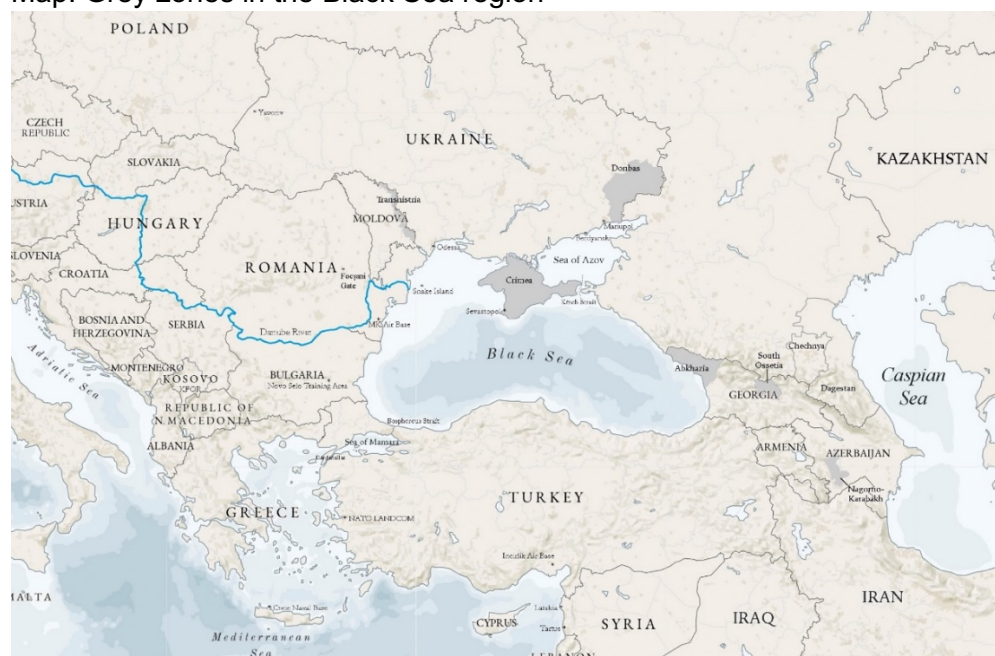
³⁴ Moira Fagan, “NATO seen in a positive light by many across 10 member states,” *Pew Research*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/30/nato-seen-in-a-positive-light-by-many-across-10-member-states/>.

³⁵ Susi Dennison and Jana Puglierin, “Crisis of confidence: How Europeans see their place in the world,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 9, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/crisis-of-confidence-how-europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world/>.

³⁶ LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, COL (Ret.) Ray Wojcik, and Carsten Schmiedl, “One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, May 2020, p. 11, https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2020-CEPA-report-one_flank_one_threat_one_presence.pdf.

are where the Kremlin turns up the heat on a regular basis to intimidate Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. They are also subject to a slow creep of Russian aggression. Since 1992, the Kremlin has backed and regularly exercises with separatists in Moldova's Transnistria region. Russia has occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia since invading Georgia in 2008 and continues to shift the physical borders of those regions to slowly annex more and more territory from Georgia.³⁷ The Kremlin illegally and illegitimately annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014, where it continues to wage a low-intensity war. Earlier this year, the mobilization of substantial Russian capabilities along the border with Ukraine and in Crimea caused US European Command to raise its awareness level to "potential imminent crisis."³⁸ These examples demonstrate that the threat environment continues to evolve.

Map: Grey zones in the Black Sea region



Adapted in 2020 from © Mapbox and © OpenStreetMap.

From the conventional military perspective, Russia uses the BSR to build capabilities and then project power into the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Middle East, and beyond — in particular, growing maritime capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean and into Syria and Libya. Russia's Black Sea Fleet retains numerical control in the BSR, and despite Turkey's sovereignty over Turkish Straits, the Kremlin is becoming increasingly bold with reports of repeated violations of the Montreux Convention by a Kilo-class submarine transiting to the Eastern Mediterranean.³⁹

³⁷ Paul Salopek, "Vladimir Putin's Mysterious Moving Border: A dispatch from one of the least secure, most arbitrary frontiers in the world," *Politico Magazine*, April 3, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/georgia-border-russia-vladimir-putin-213787/>.

³⁸ Heather A. Conley, Matthew P. Funaiole, and Joseph Bermudez, "Unpacking the Russian Troop Buildup along Ukraine's Border," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russian-troop-buildup-along-ukraines-border>.

³⁹ Caleb Larson, "Remember that Russian Submarine that Probably Violated the Montreux Convention? It's Back.," *The National Interest*, July 21, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/remember-russian-submarine-probably-violated-montreux-convention-it%E2%80%99s-back-165234>.

Russia also blockaded the Sea of Azov, seized three Ukrainian vessels,⁴⁰ reportedly falsified the location of two NATO warships near Odesa to a more provocative position off the coast of Sevastopol,⁴¹ and announced that it is closing the Kerch Straits, which divides the Black Sea from the Sea of Azov, to vessels from Ukraine and other countries until at least the end of October this year.⁴² This is part of Moscow's strategy to use the Black Sea to squeeze Ukraine economically by blocking access to key ports, such as Sevastopol, and by harassing ships.

Since 2014, the Kremlin has increasingly turned the peninsula into an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" by upgrading the peninsula's military infrastructure. This includes emplacing the Murmansk-BN long-range communications jamming system, anti-drone warfare capabilities, electronic warfare (EW), the Yakhroma early-warning missile-defense radar, and S-400 ground-based air defense complexes.⁴³ As of April 2021, Russia had moved between 15,000-25,000 troops to Crimea for a total of 31,500 soldiers and greater force posture along the internationally recognized border with Ukraine⁴⁴ as well as some 680 armored vehicles, 170 artillery pieces, 100 fighter planes, and 40 tanks.⁴⁵ Russia's militarization of Crimea also includes enhancing mobility and integration with Russia by constructing the Kerch Bridge and opening a railway station⁴⁶ and even promoting militarism among the Crimean youth.⁴⁷

The Kremlin's military provocations occur in concert with asymmetric tactics. In June 2021, two NATO warships operating legally in the Black Sea, the United Kingdom's HMS Defender and the Dutch HNLMS Evertsen, were harassed by Russian patrol boats or overflowed by Russian fighter jets on two separate occasions.⁴⁸ The Kremlin used this apparent military confrontation as an opportunity to promote broader false narratives and disinformation throughout the region, including the narrative that the HMS Defender incident was a "provocation" that would elicit a "tough response." The Russian Ministry of Defense also showed falsified video footage in order to claim that the vessel had been "chased out of Crimean waters" by Russian forces.⁴⁹ The HMS Defender incident demonstrates the need to respond to the Kremlin's full-spectrum threats in an equally holistic manner.

⁴⁰ Michael Petersen, "The Naval Power Shift in the Black Sea," *War on the Rocks*, January 9, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/>.

⁴¹ H I Sutton, "Positions of Two NATO Ships Were Falsified Near Russian Black Sea Naval Base," *USNI News*, June 21, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/21/positions-of-two-nato-ships-were-falsified-near-russian-black-sea-naval-base>.

⁴² Paul Goble, "Russia Effectively Seizes Control of Sea of Azov, Threatening Ukraine," *Jamestown Foundation*, April 20, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-effectively-seizes-control-of-sea-of-azov-threatening-ukraine/>.

⁴³ Sergey Sukhankin, "Crimea: The Expanding Military Capabilities of Russia's Area Denial Zone in the Black Sea," *Jamestown Foundation*, April 27, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/crimea-the-expanding-military-capabilities-of-russias-area-denial-zone-in-the-black-sea/>.

⁴⁴ Courtney Austrian, "On Russia's military activities near Ukraine's border and in Russia-occupied Crimea," *U.S. Mission to the OSCE*, April 14, 2021, <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-russias-military-activities-near-ukraines-border-and-in-russia-occupied-crimea/>.

⁴⁵ Manuel Herrera Almela, "Prospects of Nuclearization of the Crimean Peninsula," *Global Risk Insights*, July 25, 2019, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2019/07/nuclearization-crimea-peninsula/>.

⁴⁶ "EU Slams Russia for Militarization, Human Rights in Crimea, Six Years After Referendum," *RFE/RL*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-slams-russia-for-militarization-human-rights-in-crimea-six-years-after-referendum/30490712.html>.

⁴⁷ Ibrahim Suleimanov, "Cult of War: Russia Actively Promotes Militarism Among the Youth of Crimea," *ICDS*, March 26, 2021, <https://icds.ee/en/cult-of-war-russia-actively-promotes-militarism-among-the-youth-of-the-crimea/>.

⁴⁸ Sam LaGrone, "Warships HMS Defender, HNLMS Evertsen Leave Black Sea," *USNI News*, July 2, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/07/02/warships-hms-defender-hnlm-evertsen-leave-black-sea>.

⁴⁹ Tom Gillespie, "Russia says incident like HMS Defender 'provocation' will elicit a 'tough response,'" *Sky News*, July 4, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-says-hms-defender-provocation-will-elicite-a-tough-response-12348602>.

The Kremlin's hybrid tactics also include information operations and cyberattacks to project power, influence public opinions, and undermine democratic institutions. Ukraine has been the primary target and victim of Russia's full spectrum of warfare tactics. It has been called "Putin's petri dish"⁵⁰ for the almost daily and high-profile cyberattacks waged against it, including the NotPetya malware attack in 2017 and two separate occasions where Russian cyber saboteurs turned off the electricity in Ukraine to hundreds of thousands of people.⁵¹ Cyberattacks have also occurred elsewhere in the BSR, including a GRU-backed takedown of more than 2,000 websites in Georgia.⁵² Russian information operations in Bulgaria have targeted leftwing political pages and nationalistic accounts advancing pro-Russian versions of Bulgarian history. In Romania, disinformation narratives are less pervasive and have mainly been distributed by overtly pro-Russian websites.⁵³ Russia's hybrid tactics also include more overt forms of influence: in March 2021, six Bulgarians, five of whom were senior or former defense officials, were arrested on suspicion of spying for Russia.⁵⁴

China has also increased its influence in the BSR although its involvement has remained limited to investments in ports and infrastructure.⁵⁵ Through the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has attempted to secure new markets for its exports and invest in new infrastructure projects, with a closer economic relationship in particular with Georgia and the early stages of closer Turkish-Chinese cooperation on port development.⁵⁶ Sino-Russian cooperation in the region has been limited, with no joint military exercises and both countries avoiding mention of the region in joint communications.⁵⁷ The BSR's EU members should work collectively to ensure that Chinese investments do not undermine regional cohesion or unfairly advantage or disadvantage any single member. The West more broadly should build on the 3SI to incentivize greater investment in the region and spur economic development; offering alternatives is the key to countering Chinese economic influence, which should be a global effort and not relegating to the Indo-Pacific region exclusively.

The West's response

The West views the BSR as part of the broader eastern flank, but since Crimea, has prioritized bolstering defense and deterrence in the Baltic Sea region rather than the BSR. The 2014

⁵⁰ David Sanger, *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age* (New York: Crown, 2018).

⁵¹ Andy Greenberg, "How an Entire Nation Became Russia's Test Lab for Cyberwar," *Wired*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/russian-hackers-attack-ukraine/>.

⁵² "UK says Russia's GRU behind massive Georgia cyber-attack," *BBC News*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51576445>.

⁵³ Martin Vladimirov, Dr. Alexander Gerganov, Ruslan Stefanov, and Rufin Zamfir, "Influence of Pro-Kremlin Public Pages in Bulgaria's and Romania's Facebook Ecosystem," *GLOBSEC/Center for the Study of Democracy/Global Focus*, May 13, 2021, <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/influence-of-pro-kremlin-public-pages-in-bulgarias-and-romanias-facebook-ecosystem/>.

⁵⁴ Mihail Naydenov, "Bulgaria in the Black Sea: Defending against Russian hybrid warfare," *Middle East Institute*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bulgaria-black-sea-defending-against-russian-hybrid-warfare>.

⁵⁵ Deborah Sanders, "Can China Promote Stability in the Black Sea Region?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683857.2021.1935771>.

⁵⁶ Gönül Tol et al, "A Sea Change? China's Role in the Black Sea," *Frontier Europe Initiative*, November 2020, <https://mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-11/A%20Sea%20Change%3F-China%27s%20Role%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea.pdf>.

⁵⁷ "China in the Broader Black Sea Region," *GLOBSEC/Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies/The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation*, March 2021, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/China-in-the-Broader-Black-Sea-Region.pdf>.

Wales Summit Communiqué, issued seven months after the invasion of Crimea, aimed to support regional allies and partners rather than develop a comprehensive regional strategy: NATO would “support, as appropriate, regional efforts by the Black Sea littoral states aimed at ensuring security and stability. We will also strengthen our dialogue and cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine in this regard.”⁵⁸ In 2016, the alliance established enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia but settled for tailored Forward Presence (tFP) in the Black Sea region, a smaller and less capable force.⁵⁹ But as of the 2021 Brussels Summit, even tFP had not been fully implemented: alliance leaders noted NATO’s contributions in the land, sea, and air domains and recommitted NATO to tFP’s full implementation.⁶⁰ NATO members have also enhanced cooperation with Ukraine, providing guidance as it rebuilt its maritime capabilities following Russia’s seizure of Sevastopol and 75% of Ukraine’s fleet.⁶¹ These are positive developments, but in sum, suggest that the West’s military commitment and capabilities are not commensurate with the threat environment and that a cohesive regional approach does not yet exist.

Meanwhile, exercises in the BSR have continued — and in some cases, also increased. Sea Breeze, an annual maritime exercise co-hosted by the US and Ukraine, was the largest in its 20-year history in 2021 with 30 participating countries, more than 5,000 sailors, soldiers, and airmen, over 40 aircraft, and 32 ships.⁶² The US-led annual Defender 2021 exercise tested military mobility to the BSR this year. Situational awareness and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) are improving as a result of recent NATO air-maritime exercises.⁶³ The West can create a more robust exercise regime that includes partners and allies by increasing the scale of Sea Breeze to match Defender and by integrating it with Georgia’s Noble Partner and Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria’s Saber Junction exercises. Regular exercises could also be supplemented with direct strategic responses to Russian actions in the region. Having a regular presence in the BSR would enable faster response times while developing a toolkit of symmetric actions.

The West’s response to non-conventional threats in the BSR has also seen some progress. When the Kremlin used falsified maritime positioning to claim that the HMS Defender and HNLMS Evertsen provoked Russia’s response,⁶⁴ Western governments publicly refuted the claim with evidence from live broadcast webcams. NATO officers should also be commended for acting in accordance with internationally recognized boundaries. There is growing evidence

⁵⁸ “Wales Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales,” *NATO*, September 5, 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

⁵⁹ “Warsaw Summit Communiqué: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw,” *NATO*, July 9, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

⁶⁰ Brussels Summit Communiqué: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels,” *NATO*, July 14, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en.

⁶¹ Megan Eckstein, “After 2014 decimation, Ukrainian Navy rebuilds to fend off Russia,” *DefenseNews*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2021/08/09/after-2014-decimation-ukrainian-navy-rebuilds-to-fend-off-russia/>.

⁶² Edward Lundquist, “Exercise Sea Breeze 2021 Comes to a Close in Black Sea,” *Sea Power Magazine*, July 13, 2021, <https://seapowermagazine.org/exercise-sea-breeze-2021-comes-to-a-close-in-black-sea/>.

⁶³ <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2021/airmaritime-cooperation-enhances-shared-situational-awareness-in-the-black-sea>

⁶⁴ H I Sutton, “Positions of Two NATO Ships Were Falsified Near Russian Black Sea Naval Base,” *USNI News*, June 21, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/21/positions-of-two-nato-ships-were-falsified-near-russian-black-sea-naval-base>.

that NATO is also taking hybrid threats more seriously,⁶⁵ including with the development of NATO's counter-hybrid support teams, but these need to be enhanced, and addressing hybrid threats also needs to be integrated into a comprehensive regional strategy.

What the United States should do

1. Work with BSR countries to establish a shared understanding of regional security.

- **Establish a 6+1 dialogue on Black Sea security.** Stand up a dialogue with BSR allies — Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Turkey, Ukraine — together with the US to align on a shared vision for the region. The dialogues should:
 - Occur at the working level with counterparts from the Department of Defense, Department of State, and relevant agencies such as CISA, and have high level buy in. The US DoD, building on Secretary Austin's visit to the region, should lead the dialogues at the Deputy Secretary level.
 - Aim to establish a complementary division of labor based on an assessment of capabilities and resources that distributes responsibility and liability across BSR states.
 - Rotate the hosting country for a high-level meeting annually between counterparts at the Deputy Minister/Deputy Secretary level, with the first meeting hosted by the United States.
 - Reengage Turkey to ensure Ankara's perspective is included in negotiations and to that end consider Turkey to host the second annual meeting following the United States.
- **Establish an operational hub in the region.** The United States should continue to see Turkey as the key NATO ally while also developing an operational hub to further build up military and nonconventional capabilities in the region. The operational hub should:
 - Focus on conventional and nonconventional capabilities working with NATO and the EU to align in priorities.
 - Not be a solely bilateral effort between the US and the hub host nation but rather serve as the regional coordination point for all BSR allies. The hub should become the location of a joint, multinational headquarters responsible for coordinating all BSR military activity, enhanced intelligence sharing and cyber capabilities, and a common operating picture for the region.
 - Focus on developing and expanding response to nonconventional threats in the cyber and information domains. This should include better intelligence-sharing among allies and partners around Russian and Chinese hybrid activities, joint efforts to improve attribution, and longer-term analyses of broader Kremlin influence campaigns in the BSR.
 - Be established in a NATO, EU, 3SI member state to increase cooperation across these institutions and initiatives. As such, Romania would be the natural partner to host the hub.

⁶⁵ "NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19," *NATO*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>.

- Romania already hosts around 1,000 rotational US troops at MK Air Base.
 - Romania has good diplomatic relations with Turkey, which, with appropriate engagement, would likely welcome Romania's greater involvement while allowing Ankara to continue to balance against Russian incursions in the BSR (i.e. Romania could engage in ways that Turkey may be reluctant to do).
 - Romania's recently established Euro-Atlantic Centre for Resilience, a public institution under its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also offers an opportunity for the US to promote whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to enhance resilience across the BSR.
 - The US should work with Romania on improving capabilities to enhance regional deterrence. The most cost-effective means to achieve this objective is through long-range (600 mile) missiles, and the most effective means is through manned or unmanned survivable missiles carrying submarines to challenge the Black Sea Fleet, which are permissible for Romania to acquire under the Montreux Convention. The US and Romania can also consider building or buying small, diesel-electric missiles carrying submarines to give NATO a new and effective deterrent tool.
- **Engage the EU, NATO and capable non-BSR allies, such as the United Kingdom, to align strategic priorities and enhance capabilities by:**
 - Actively engaging to align strategic priorities with the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept, which are currently in early drafting stages.
 - Leading the development of a Graduated Response Plan for the BSR, similar to what has already been created for the Baltic Sea region, as well as a comprehensive maritime strategy which has been slow to materialize but would enable commanders across domains to better anticipate force requirements to counter Russian aggression in support of NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA).

2. Actively encourage economic investment in the region as a tool for broader regional cooperation and cohesion.

- **Deliver on the US commitment to the Three Seas Initiative (3SI).** Consistency and reliability of US policy is key for regional allies. In 2020, the US pledged one billion dollars of financing to support 3SI primarily through the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC). The US should deliver on this promise. Failure to make good on this commitment will sew additional seeds of uncertainty on America's commitment to the region.
- **Provide alternatives to Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure.** The US Congress should work to pass the 2021 Transatlantic Telecommunications Security Act (TTSA), which aims to provide resources to Central East European countries, including

several BSR states, to build out telecom infrastructure that is not dependent on Chinese technologies.

- **Open DFC funding to the BSR states.** The United States already possesses a key mechanism to increase economic investment in the BSR – the DFC. Stability in the BSR depends on economic cohesion and growth and the DFC is the appropriate entity to channel US support.

3. Invest in long-term democratic resilience in the BSR region.

- **Support independent media, investigative journalist groups, and media literacy education.** Across the BSR, civil society is under development. An independent media and a well-educated population that is able to detect Russian propaganda are the best bulwarks for building societal resilience. The US could also build on media support programs and expand programs and agencies to support a sustained, top-level commitment to back free media, including mobilizing individual agencies already active in support of Russian-language free media.⁶⁶
- **Prioritize Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.** When it comes to prioritizing resources, the US can have the greatest impact in the non-EU, non-NATO states of the BSR. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are the primary targets of Russia aggression. As non-EU and non-NATO states, the three countries are most vulnerable to cyber and information influence operations, and as was the case with the 2017 NotPetya attack, the Kremlin’s operations against these countries tend to affect the broader region.
 - **Do more outside of discussions on the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP).** The MoU on Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative (GDDEI), signed during Secretary Austin’s visit to Tbilisi, is an important step in increasing US presence in Georgia. In Ukraine, joint exercises such as Rapid Trident and Sea Breeze are key for continued demonstration of US support.
 - Establish joint EU-NATO Centers of Excellence to focus on hybrid threats across the region to serve as an early warning system for identifying, attributing, and responding to cyber and information threats.
 - Continue US support for Ukraine and establish BSR support through the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The US can demonstrate commitment to enhancing regional capabilities by expanding on the NDAA’s security assistance earmarked for Ukraine and designating funds for BSR capability development in the next budget year.
 - **Encourage private-public partnerships to establish a “tech innovation belt.”** Despite lagging economic performance, the three countries boast a well-educated population, particularly in the tech and IT sectors. Rather than perpetuating the narratives of grey zones, the US should encourage US venture capital firms to see the region as a tech innovation belt, where relatively small investments in R&D could yield high results.

⁶⁶ Alina Polyakova and Daniel Fried, “Democratic Offense Against Disinformation,” *Center for European Policy Analysis/Atlantic Council*, December 2, 2020, <https://cepa.org/democratic-offense-against-disinformation/>.

- **Work with the EU to broaden and deepen EU cooperation and eventual integration.** EU membership has proven to be the most effective tool for economic and institutional reform. The US, as part of a broader strategic partnership with the EU, should elevate the strategic importance of eventual EU integration for Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, while encouraging deeper economic ties.