Did BLACKSEAFOR Ever Have a Chance?

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The Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) may go down in history as a failed post-Cold War security experiment. It was designed to serve as a regional security organization, but ultimately collapsed after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. While founded with noble and important goals (which included, ideally serving as a naval confidence building mechanism for its members), historical Black Sea geopolitics gave BLACKSEAFOR little to no chance of ever being successful.

The initiative was created in 2001 to promote confidence in the Black Sea by creating a naval force with contributions, and a rotating command, from all six Black Sea littoral states: the Russian Federation, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Georgia (Abkhazia is arguably the newest littoral country). Experts will note that these six nations include members of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and the Russian Federation (which, in the form of the USSR, was NATO's foundational enemy, the defeat or containment of which was its raison d'etre). This is precisely what made this initiative so intriguing and, arguably, so promising.

For the past couple of years, the United States has been attempting to "reset" relations with Russia,[1] with arguable little success, while NATO suffers an identity crisis as its members discuss the future of the military alliance and debate the substance and extent of its new objectives.[2] In this global reality, BLACKSEAFOR emerged as an attempt to bring one-time foes and players of the Black Sea geopolitical and geo-security great game into a regional security organization, albeit a loose one. In reality, this naval initiative lacked clear objectives and goals, and it could be argued that it was little more than a basic confidence building exercise aimed at improving relations between regional states, particularly Russia and Turkey, which have historically fought for control and influence over the Black Sea (particularly during the era of the Russian and Ottoman empires). In any case, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 quickly erased any notion that confidence among BLACKSEAFOR's members had improved, and revealed that inter-state rivalries between the Black Sea littoral states and national interests remained intact in spite of the BLACKSEAFOR initiative.

BLACKSEAFOR: A Brief History up to Summer 2008

Alongside the six previously mentioned Black Sea littoral states, there are other regional players such as Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which, while not having a coast line on the Black Sea, have "a shared Soviet history."[3] In addition, there is arguably the new littoral state of Abkhazia, which, as a result of the 2008 war, broke away from Georgia and declared its independence, along with South Ossetia.

The BLACKSEAFOR cooperation group was first established at Turkey's behest, on the occasion of a meeting of the Navy Commanders of the Black Sea countries, in Varna, a Bulgarian Black Sea resort, in 1998. A formal agreement was signed in Istanbul on 2 April 2001, and, by 2002, was ratified by all of BLACKSEAFOR's eventual member states. It was conceived as a force that mobilizes at least once a year for multinational naval military exercises. BLACKSEAFOR has a rotating leadership, with each member country taking turns to command the force for one year before handing the leadership to another state, usually in August when the group carries out its military exercises. In October 2002, the spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Aleksandr Yakovenko, stated that "for the first time in history, the littoral countries of one region agreed to create a multinational unit of vessels under a single command in order to involve it in emergency operations."[4] Over the years, government officials and military

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officers from other Black Sea nations' armed forces made similarly positive statements about the task group. For example, in December 2002, then-Ukrainian navy commander Admiral Mykhaylo Yezhel commented to a Russian military newspaper,

Take the BLACKSEAFOR programme. It envisages long-term cooperation in the Black Sea at large. Its preparation requires diligence and involves a number of interaction issues among our fleets: search and rescue operations, minesweeping missions, humanitarian actions… Without such cooperation, no other relations can be built.[5]

In August 2003, all six member states carried out multilateral naval exercises in the Bulgarian port of Atiya. According to reports, the warships present were the *Smeli* frigate (Bulgaria), the *Tbilisi* missile boat (Georgia), a Tetal-class corvette (Romania), the *Pytlivy* frigate (Russia), the *Fatih* frigate (Turkey) and the *Vinnitsa* corvette (Ukraine); in addition, Bulgaria and Turkey deployed two submarines for logistical support.[6] The ships paid friendly visits to Gyuldzhuk (Turkey), Constanta (Romania), Sevastopol (Ukraine), Novorossiysk (Russia) and Poti (Georgia); covering a distance of approximately 1,100 miles.[7] Upon reaching Georgian waters, Joni Rukhadze, a senior official with the Georgian navy told reporters that four additional Georgian vessels participated in the multinational exercises, which included a welcoming ceremony for the participants.[8] Other Georgian government officials explained that "[…] this morning we once again managed to carry out joint maneuvers in quite deep waters. This is what the past three years of cooperation have brought. Now we understand each other very well and are able to work together."[9] Such statements would prove ironically hollow as just five years later conflict erupted between Georgia and Russia over separatist South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In 2008, shortly before the start of the war, BLACKSEAFOR carried out exercises off the Ukrainian port city of Sevastopol. According to reports, the vessels that took part included the frigate *Smeli* (Bulgaria), the large landing craft *Azov* (Russia), a Romanian corvette, the frigate *Orucreis* (Turkey) and the large landing craft *Konstantin Olshansky* (Ukraine).[10] As late as August 6, just days before the hostilities started, Sevastopol hosted the handover ceremony of the BLACKSEAFOR command from Turkey to Ukraine.

The Aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War 2008

In the aftermath of the 2008 war, in which Moscow emerged victorious, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were recognized by Russia as independent states.[11] More recently, countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua in Latin America, and the Pacific islands of Nauru and Vanuatu, have also recognized the sovereignty of these new states.

Regarding Russia's foreign policy, on 15 September 2008, just a month after the end of war, the Chief of the Operations Directorate of the Russian Black Sea Fleet staff, Rear Admiral Andrey Baranov explained that cooperation between the Russian navy and NATO would continue. "Looking forward, I can see no reasons to scale down relations between ourselves and NATO because of last month's events [the armed conflict in Georgia]," the officer stated.[12] The Russian naval officer also declared, in an interview with the Russian news agency *RIA Novosti* that "the Black Sea Fleet command is successfully cooperating with the Turkish Navy" within the framework of the BLACKSEAFOR naval cooperation group.

Furthermore, in a diplomatic initiative designed to ensure that other nations would not contest developments in Georgia, Russian Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov visited his Turkish counterpart in mid-November 2008. The Russian official highlighted the good relations between Ankara and Moscow that brought order to the Black Sea basin, and declared that:

[W]e join in Turkey's views on the territorial integrity of Georgia. However, Georgia's efforts to boost its military potential create concern. We are also concerned with Georgia's efforts to get closer to NATO. We think that such efforts may result in bigger consequences than what took place last August. Russia is trying to develop cooperation with NATO. We expect dialogue to be resumed in this field. We want to promote dialogue in all fields.[13]

Indeed, a major issue at the time of the August war was Tbilisi's belief that NATO, or at least Washington, would come to its aid against Russia. This belief arose in part because of growing relations at the time between Georgia

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and the U.S., as well as the possibility that Georgia was to be invited to join NATO in the near future. In any case, it became clear that neither the U.S. nor NATO were going to enter into an armed conflict with Russia over Georgia, hence Tbilisi had to deal with the Russian military on its own. It is, however, interesting to note Serdyukov's statement about Georgia potentially becoming a NATO member, considering that three other BLACKSEAFOR members (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) already are members of the alliance. To be fair, this is not the first time that Russia has shown concern about NATO expansion, particularly as it continues to creep closer towards its borders. Before the 2004 enlargement, Moscow had similar security-related concerns with NATO's expansion into northern Europe, namely Poland and the Baltic states.

After the 2008 war, it was unclear what would become of BLACKSEAFOR; the naval group's mission to promote regional integration and security in the Black Sea basin was compromised by the fact that two of its members had just fought a war, even after the group successfully executed a round of maritime exercises. In the end, BLACKSEAFOR's members chose to continue as if the war had not occurred, albeit one nation short. In April 2009, BLACKSEAFOR's members, minus Georgia, carried out their annual military exercises, including port calls in the Turkish Black Sea port of Eregli, at Varna and at Constanta, Romania. In April 2010, the group once again carried out naval exercises with all members present except Georgia. The ships that participated were listed as the frigate *Verni* (Bulgaria), the large landing ship *Tsezar Kunikov* (Russia), the corvette *Macelariu* (Romania), the frigate *Yildirim* (Turkey) and the command and control ship *Slavutych* (Ukraine).[14] More recently, in April 2011, as part of the 10th anniversary of BLACKSEAFOR, a naval parade was held in Turkey along the Bosporus. All group members sent at least one vessel. Interestingly, even the Georgians were present in this event as Tbilisi deployed the Coast Guard vessel P-24 Sukhumi.[15]

In August 2011, warships from five BLACKSEAFOR states carried out international naval drills and made port calls to Novorossiysk in Russia, Trabzon in Turkey, and Varna in Bulgaria; the large Russian landing ship, the*Tsezar Kunikov* participated. A Russian Navy official, Captain 1st Rank Vyacheslav Trukhachev, spokesman for the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, explained that the exercises were designed to practice a number of humanitarian tasks, as well as improving their skills in joint maneuvering, repelling attacks from small targets and coordinating communications. Following their completion, the Russian vessel returned to Sevastopol. At the time of the exercises, a report by the Bulgarian national news agency *BTA* explained that "the sixth Black Sea country, Georgia, is staying out of the current activation for a reason which is unknown to the BLACKSEAFOR command."[16]

BLACKSEAFOR: Has it Failed?

Given the war, is it fair to ask if BLACKSEAFOR has failed? The task force's mission upon its inception was to serve as an integration tool, a confidence-building mechanism, and a regional multinational naval task force. To again quote former Ukrainian navy commander Admiral Mykhaylo Yezhel in 2002, "take the BLACKSEAFOR programme. It envisages long-term cooperation in the Black Sea at large […] Without such cooperation, no other relations can be built."[17]Throughout the years following the Summer War, positive declarations by BLACKSEAFOR members on the importance of the group have continued. For example, in late July 2011, the Chief of Staff of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's, Vice-Admiral Aleksandr Troyan, stated that naval interaction between the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Ukrainian Navy has improved.[18] He also praised the joint Russo-Ukrainian military exercise "Fairway of Peace" that were held in June 2011.[19]

Similar statements mentioned earlier in this analysis from other military officers and government officials demonstrate that, at least publicly, there was hope that BLACKSEAFOR would act as a catalyst for defense integration among Black Sea littoral states. The Summer War, however, demonstrated that in spite of whatever successful confidence building occurred thanks to BLACKSEAFOR between 2001 and 2008, inter-state disputes and national interests ultimately still took precedence over pro-integration statements and task force initiatives.

In any case, it is not that surprising the ease with which other BLACKSEAFOR members remained silent as two of its constituent states went to war with one other. If the U.S. would not go to war with Russia to protect Georgia, then why would states like Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania (all of them are militarily weak when compared to Russia) do so? To put it another way, Oksana Antonenko, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, argues that

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Turkey and Russia, the Black Sea's historical great powers, have been unable to overcome their "mutual skepticism towards the role of the U.S. in the Black Sea [and this] has made it difficult to accommodate the interests of smaller states that view the U.S. role as an indispensable instrument for overcoming the strategic asymmetry in the region and balancing their power in relation to the two regional great powers."[20] In other words, smaller states like Romania, Bulgaria and even Georgia itself saw the U.S. as a crucial non-regional ally to balance the ambitions from both Ankara (a fellow NATO ally of Bucharest and Sofia) and Moscow. When it quickly became clear that neither the mighty American military nor a NATO mission would come to Georgia's aid, it was understandable that fellow BLACKSEAFOR members remained quiet about the developing situation. A crucial issue for some of the newest NATO members (i.e. Bulgaria, Poland and the Baltic states), is the extent of the commitment of Washington and Brussels to protect them in the case of aggression by another state. Hence, given this reality, it was highly unlikely that Bucharest or Sofia would confront Moscow (diplomatically or, even more remotely, militarily) over Georgia.

It would seem that, at the operational level, the actual naval maneuvers that have taken place in the Black Sea over the past decade have been relatively successful. Regional navies appear to be more integrated and communicate more effectively with one another, and consequently, should some kind of emergency occur, such as a maritime terrorist attack or a civilian vessel sinking, Black Sea navies can cooperate with each other to efficiently deal with such incidents. Nevertheless, the second goal of BLACKSEAFOR, to serve as a security confidence building mechanism, has failed, or, arguably, never had a chance to succeed in the first place given the nature of the region's geopolitics.

As a caveat to this analysis, we should highlight that, in recent developments, reports appeared in mid-December 2011 that NATO had named Georgia as an "aspirant" country for membership in the Atlantic Alliance, "a category that had previously been limited to three Balkan nations: Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro."[21] It was generally believed that, after the 2008 War, NATO-Tbilisi relations had cooled and it was unlikely that the country would be an aspirant in the near future. Moscow, unsurprisingly, condemned NATO's move. After the announcement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared to the media that "I openly warned our colleagues that they may unwittingly push Georgia's current regime toward a repetition of its August 2008 adventure, which occurred shortly after the NATO summit in Bucharest, where it was written down categorically that Georgia would be a NATO member."[22] It is too early to tell if Georgia's new NATO membership bid will succeed and what will be the effects on Black Sea geopolitics and Russia-West relations. As previously mentioned, Russia voiced similar concerns when Poland and the Baltic states applied for NATO membership, but these nations were ultimately accepted into the Alliance. Nevertheless, it's important to add that, while no major military incident has occurred between Moscow and the NATO-Baltic states, there have been several incidents.[23] While Georgia would make an interesting NATO member as it would create a NATO foothold in the energy-rich Caucasus, it is debatable to what extent Brussels would want a new member that is militarily weak, facing unstable domestic politics and which fought a war against Russia as early as four years ago.

Regarding BLACKSEAFOR's future, it is unclear if Tbilisi will once again deploy its vessels to naval exercises, either because the Georgian navy was severely weakened after the war or as a sign of protest against Russia. In addition, there is no indication that Abkhazia, with whatever shadow of a navy and limited international recognition it may possess, may be invited to join this naval task force. Then again, strange things tend to happen in the Black Sea.

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[1] Many analysts have questioned whether the "reset" of Washington – Moscow relations have

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been successful. For example see: Bovt, Georgy. "Whether Obama or Romney, the Reset is Dead." The Moscow Times. Issue 4969. September 12, 2012. Available: http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/whether-obama-or-romney-the-reset-is-dead/467947.html Also see: Trein, Dmiri. "The. U.S.-Russia Reset in Recess." New York Times. The Opinion Pages. November 28, 2011. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/30/opinion/the-us-russian-reset-in-recess.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[2] Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates famously warned of a "dim if not dismal future" for NATO unless more of its members, besides the U.S. participated in the alliance's activities. Shanker. Tom. "Defense Secretary warns NATO of 'Dim' Future." The New York Times. Europe. June 10, 2011. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/europe/11gates.html . A good and extensive analysis of the future of NATO is discussed in: Ducasse, Mark D. (Editor). "The Transatlantic Bargain." NDC Paper Forum 20. NATO Defense College. Rome, Italy. January 2012. Available: http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/current_news.php?icode=353

[3] Herd, Graeme P. and Moustakis, Fotios, 'Black Sea Geopolitics: A Litmus Test for the European Security Order,' *Mediterranean Politics*, V. 5/ No. 3 (Autumn 2000), P. 117.

[4] Russia praises agreement on Black Sea Fleet rapid reaction group, *ITAR-TASS* news agency, Moscow, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (31 October 2002).

[5] Ukrainian navy chief hails burgeoning partnership with NATO, Russia, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 23 November, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, (12 December 2002).

[6] Ukraine passes command of Black Sea joint naval force to Bulgaria, *Interfax-AVN* military news agency web site, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, in English, (6 August 2003).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Five Black Sea countries' ships visit Georgian port after drill, *Interfax* news agency, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, (29 August 2003).

[9] Ships participating in international naval drill call at Georgian port, *Rustavi-2 TV*, Tbilisi, in *BBC Sumary of World Broadcasts*, (29 August 2003).

[10] Foreign warships arrive in Ukraine's Sevastopol for international exercise, Text of report in English by corporate-owned Russian military news agency *Interfax-AVN* website, in *BBC Monitoring Kiev Unit Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, (4 August 2008).

[11] Some examples of literature on the 2008 Russia-Georgian conflict include: Cheterian, Vicken, 'The August 2008 war in Georgia: from ethnic conflict to border wars,' *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28/No. 2, (June 2009), P. 155–170. Also see: Trenin, Dmitri, 'The Post-August World,' *Russian Politics and Law*, Vol. 47/No. 3, (May–June 2009), P. 36–44, English translation

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from Russian text. Also see: Matsuzato, Kimitaka, 'The Five-Day War and Transnational Politics: A Semiospace Spanning the Borders between Georgia, Russia, and Ossetia,' *Demokratizatsiya*, (Summer 2009), P. 228-250.

[12] Russian Black Sea Fleet to continue cooperation with NATO – spokesman, *RIA Novosti* news agency, in *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union – Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, (15 September 2008).

[13] Russia concerned over Georgia's efforts to boost military potential – minister, Text of report in English by Turkish semi-official news agency *Anatolia*, in *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, (18 November 2008).

[14] Russian missile cruiser Moskva passes through Suez Canal; Blackseafor activities, *Interfax-AVN* military news agency website, (16 April 2010), in *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union – Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, (18 April 2010).

[15] Turkishnavy.net, Blackseafor Celebrates its 10th Anniversary, *Seanews.com*, (9 April 2011). Available <http://www.seanews.com.tr/article/TURSHIP/NAVY/58875/Blackseafor-Istanbul-U510-F-111-ROM-Marasesti-42-BNS-Verni–156-RFS-Yamal–U-510-Slavutich-P-24-Sukhumi/>

[16] Some 600 Bulgarian, Russian, Turkish military take part in naval exercise, *BTA*, August 26, in *BBC Monitoring Europe – Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring,* (27 August 2011).

[17] Ukrainian navy chief hails burgeoning partnership with NATO, Russia, in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, in November 23, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, (12 December 2002).

[18] Russian admiral pleased with naval cooperation with Ukraine, *Interfax-Ukraine* news agency, in *BBC Monitoring Kiev Unit Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, (21 July 2011).

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[20] Antonenko, Oksana, 'Towards a comprehensive regional security framework in the Black Sea region after the Russia–Georgia war,' *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 9/No. 3, (September 2009), P. 261

[21] Kucera, Joshua, 'Is NATO Changing its Policy on Georgia?,' *Eurasianet.org*, (12 December 2011). Available <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64682?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter >

[22] Lavrov, Sergey, Opening Remarks and Answers by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at Press Conference after the Meeting of the Russia-NATO Council at Foreign Affairs Ministers Level, Brussels, December 8, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – website, (8

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