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The Black Sea and European security

EVENT REPORT



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A report published on 26 January offers a way out of the crisis between Russia and the West over Ukraine's future as long as all sides are willing to settle for less than their maximum demands.

In "Murky waters: the Black Sea and European security", **Paul Taylor**, Senior Fellow at the Brussels-based think tank Friends of Europe, outlines a series of steps that Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, NATO, the European Union and the United States should take to reduce tension, build confidence and seek areas for cooperation, while setting aside the most contested issue of NATO membership.

On the same day as the report's publication, Friends of Europe hosted an interview with the support of the Russian International Affairs Council between Taylor and **Jamie Shea**, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for emerging security challenges at NATO.

Noting the "excruciatingly topical nature" of the study, Taylor said that there is now a situation where both sides – the West and Russia – have forced each other to take positions from which it is very difficult to climb down.

He also expressed surprise at the little "management attention" that the Black Sea region has received up to now from the EU. Whilst the latter has prepared new strategies for the Arctic, the Sahel and the Indo-Pacific regions, there is "no comprehensive strategy" for the Black Sea.

Taylor explained that there are reasons for this, notably that the countries bordering the Black Sea fall into four different policy boxes – two are EU member states, others have association agreements and are managed by DG NEAR and Turkey is also managed by the DG as it is a candidate country to join the EU, while Russia is a foreign and trade policy issue and is being monitored by the EU's External Action Service and DG TRADE. There is nowhere in the Commission which brings these all together, he said.

Taylor described how NATO "made a promise to Ukraine and Georgia [in Bucharest in 2008] which it couldn't keep", namely that one day both would be members. However, it did not specify when or how this might happen.

France and Germany did not think it wise to offer membership because this would not take into account Russia's security interest, but the US was determined to proceed, even though there were strong misgivings in the US defence department and intelligence community.

"This ended with a messy compromise that satisfied no one," Taylor said.

He stated that Turkey has long seen the Black Sea as the quietest of its borders, with a "frenemy" relationship between Ankara and Moscow based on "quite good" relations between the two presidents. Ankara wanted just enough NATO presence to show the flag but not too much to avoid disturbing a "Turkish-Russian condominium" in the Black Sea.

Taylor views Romania as being the most welcoming towards NATO and said it is the "cheerleader for more NATO activity and the most active supporter of Ukrainian and Georgian accession".

Bulgaria is less keen due to its reliance on Russian energy, although there are signs that Sofia is now trying to distance itself from Moscow. Moldova also has a frozen conflict on its soil, and the long-term presence of Russian troops is not welcomed by the national government.

Taylor noted that NATO has to strike a delicate balance between offering support to Ukraine, without raising illusions. He cited the invasion of Georgia by Russia in 2008 after the Georgians tried to recapture South Ossetia from Russian-backed rebels, saying that Tbilisi was banking on support from the US, which did not arrive.

“This is a lesson which is important for Ukraine now,” said Taylor. “Just as Georgia declared in 2010 that it wouldn’t seek to recover territory by force, it is important that Ukraine also refrains from doing that and pursues diplomacy whilst strengthening its own capacity to defend itself.”

He stressed that Russia must not be given a pretext to invade. NATO has been sending the right signal by saying that Ukraine is not a member nation and so it is not covered by the collective defence article. NATO is thereby not giving Ukraine the illusion that Western forces would intervene.

“What the West has done right is making the consequences clear for Russia, should it choose military action,” he said. “The more we are able to spell that out, the more Russia has some grounds to think again.”

He stressed the need for an “off-ramp” from confrontation involving diplomacy, negotiations, confidence-building measures, communications channels, dialogue on the deployment of nuclear and non-nuclear missiles, and the transparency of exercises.

“We must find a way to take Ukrainian and Georgian aspirations to NATO offline for an extended period,” he said. “This will require wisdom and restraint in Kyiv and Tbilisi, and willingness from NATO to admit that their membership is not realistic for the foreseeable future.”

This alone could enable Putin to say he has won something from the latest conflict, Taylor concluded.

Panel discussion

Discussions then widened to include a panel of speakers from the EU, Russia and Ukraine.

Alina Frolova, Deputy Chairman of the Centre for Defence Strategies in Ukraine, made clear that she did not agree with most of Taylor’s report.

“The only thing I can agree with is that the EU has not been concentrating on Black Sea issues,” she said. “For the last 21 days, we have had no non-Black Sea country ships present in the area. This is about the attention that is paid in reality and not on paper.”

She argued that NATO membership was critical, saying that although Russia often took aggressive steps towards the Baltic states, it never attacked them.

“The absence of the ability of Ukraine to go to NATO will provoke aggressive reactions from Russia and China, not just towards Ukraine but also to other countries,” she said.

She argued that tackling corruption will not stabilise the security situation, since this was not the pretext for Russia invading Ukraine. Frolova emphasised that the focus of discussion today is on the concept of neutrality and concluded by saying that this is a “dangerous situation because again we [Ukraine] have no right to protect ourselves”.

Igor Yurgens, Chairman of the Management Board of the Institute for Contemporary Development, said the report was very in-depth and objective, and emphasised that the nations around the Black Sea have a common vision of a democratic and flourishing region. However, as far as Russia was concerned, whilst the area was fairly stable politically, it was always a “hotspot” for the military.

Yurgens referred to the speech by President Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 where he wanted to make the point that he was not being taken seriously. “Either you listen to me and deliver, or I will show you what we can do,” as Yurgens paraphrased Putin’s words.

Given that Ukrainian troops currently outnumber Russian troops on the border, “any kind of military confrontation is out of the question,” he said.

He emphasised the positive aspects that the two sides – Russia and the West – were now talking to each other, which was not the case previously.

“If we start talking about a no-missile zone, conventional arms limitation, de-escalation, retreat of heavy armaments [and] peacekeepers, that would be a good agenda for progress and can diffuse some of the sabre-rattling which spoils the whole picture.”

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, MEP and Vice-Chair of the European Parliament’s Delegation to the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee, said that although Taylor’s study can contribute to the current debate, she is not sure whether the recommendations are “what we really need”.

“I’m a little bit sceptical that we are still thinking of this grand power play,” she said. “We must support these independent states, and if they decide they want to be part of the EU or NATO, this is to be respected. It’s not up to a third country to decide [what] this decision should look like.”

She said that Russia is trying to “reunite the old Soviet empire” with colonialism and imperialism, commenting that Tbilisi had been “backsliding” on democratic and judicial reforms ever since the war in Georgia in 2008.

“I agree with Paul Taylor that we need a strategy for the Black Sea because if we cannot make sure that Georgia stays on this (reform) path, we will lose it in the long term.”

She also said she was “concerned by Vladimir Putin’s attempts to undermine European and international order. That cannot be accepted. Putin can create at any time a pretext for an invasion [of Ukraine].”

Von Cramon-Taubadel referred to attempts by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock to “reach out to ordinary Russians to show we have an interest in cooperation”, saying she had done a “perfect job” on her visit to Moscow.

Q&A session

In response to interventions and questions from panellists, von Cramon-Taubadel emphasised that Ukraine and Georgia should be able to decide on the future path.

“If we let Russia occupy more territory than now, we would determine the future of the people in these independent countries who don’t want to live in an autocratic regime,” she said. “With any kind of support, we can make sure that these countries have a better life.”

“Let’s first de-escalate the crisis we have now,” Yurgens said. “Then let’s think about how autocracy will challenge democracy and vice versa. Let us decide what the future will be. Let’s live in a free and democratic society.”

“There is no legitimate interest in occupying Crimea and stopping the normal economic activities in the Black Sea,” said Frolova. “This cannot be accepted by other countries as legitimate.”

“There still seems to be some time and scope for diplomacy,” Shea said in summing up. “Both sides seem to want to talk, so let’s hope that those off-ramps can be identified. There is a common agenda. Russia wants military restraint from NATO and vice versa, and that can be a possible way out.”

Conclusion

Concluding the event, Taylor said he did not expect everyone to agree with his report, and he wanted to provoke a discussion.

“Putin may have had some nasty surprises,” he argued. “NATO is actually more united than he expected, and there is still determination in Washington to focus on European security issues.”

“It’s frustrating that the EU does not have more of a role in these negotiations on security,” he said, adding that this is because Europeans have not been able to overcome their own differences on EU and NATO enlargement and energy policy.

“If Russia wants to pursue this cooperation [in the Black Sea region], then massing troops around Ukraine and issuing ultimatums is not really the way to make progress,” he said, adding that the EU should appoint a special representative for the area.

He reminded participants that to join NATO, the country in question must contribute to the alliance’s security, and all allies must agree unanimously to issue an invitation. He said he was not sure that this criterion was met now by either Georgia or Ukraine, nor under what circumstances it could be.

He ended by saying that nothing is stopping Ukraine and Georgia from becoming functioning prosperous democracies, “and that’s what I would like to see”.

