

Romania's Evolving Military Security Landscape:

The Rise from Outlier to Essential Member

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Abstract

In March of 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea, Romania headlines screamed of imminent war on Romania's borders. Romania felt incredibly threatened and saw the need to better secure its border and increase military security. The region was suddenly thrust into focus as NATO, the United States, and the EU saw the importance of strengthening Romania to create a fortified Eastern flank. Thus, Romania has risen in NATO from outlying member to essential player because of its commitment to NATO, increasing military security, and geostrategic location to Russia. This paper argues the importance of each of these areas by examining evidence including Romania's contribution to NATO missions, Romanian defense spending practices, recent military acquisitions, and the implications of Romania's geostrategic location on the Black Sea. I contend that Romania is important in its own right as an individual nation and not only when it is grouped with other Eastern states.

Keywords: Romania, NATO, military security, Russia

Introduction

When Romania and other Eastern states joined NATO in 2004, many were concerned about this enlargement of the organization. It seemed unnecessary since the Cold War was over, and it did not appear at the time that these countries had much to offer NATO. Yet despite initial, and even ongoing, doubts about NATO enlargement, Romania has become an essential member. This may seem a hefty claim, particularly to those who know little about Romania beyond stories of a horrific communist regime or myths of castles and Dracula. Since its accession and even before, Romania has been a stalwart NATO partner, contributing to various missions in Europe and the Middle East. But Romania was an outlier until 2014 after Russia’s annexation of Crimea.



(<https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea>)

Looking at a map of the Black Sea, Romania’s geostrategic position becomes clear. Yet this is a double-edged sword because its proximity to Crimea increases Romanian fear of Russian aggression moving swiftly West. Constanta, Romania’s main port on the Black Sea, is merely 244 miles from Sevastopol – shorter than the distance between Madrid and Barcelona (DistanceFromTo, n.d.). Therefore, it is not surprising that while after Russia’s annexation of the peninsula, Romania headlines screamed of war on Romania’s borders. Romania felt significantly threatened and saw the need to better secure its border and increase military security. At the

same time, NATO, the United States, and the EU saw the importance of strengthening Romania to create a fortified Eastern flank.

Said one scholar, “If in the 18th century the game changer in the Black Sea area was the annexation of Crimea by Catherine the Great, in 2014 Russia's seizure and annexation of Crimea was a game changer not only for the larger Black Sea region, but for the entire global security system” (Gosu, 2015). Since that time, NATO has “started an extensive process of adapting its defence posture, in response to the security situation in its immediate neighbourhood” (Romania NATO, 2010). A 2015 study showed that Russia would beat NATO forces in three days, so an immediate increase in NATO’s Eastern deterrence posture was clearly necessary (De Luce, 2016). Additionally, NATO remains concerned about other threats outside the Euro-Atlantic area, such as Iran and beyond. More and more, other nations are realizing that as “a crucial NATO member state along the southeastern flank of the Alliance, Romania has emerged as a regional leader, seeking ways to bolster collective defense in and around the Black Sea” (20 Years After, 2018). Romania is now essential to the future of NATO because of its commitment to NATO, evolving military security, and its geostrategic importance with Russia.

Background

Critics contend that NATO has run its course, but “a strong NATO alliance is the backbone of European security” (Bagajski, 2016). Let us be clear – much of NATO’s focus right now is on Russian aggression, as scholar Bugajski explains: “Two core challenges emanate from Russia: expansion and implosion” (Bagajski, 2016). A director from the Atlantic Council explained, “I think there’s been a real swing back to high-end defense. If you go back a couple years, when it came to security around the Black Sea, there was a lot of talk about...sort of soft

security issues. But in 2014, there was a hard swing back to a focus on hard security issues and the potential for war fighting” (Nordenman, 2017).

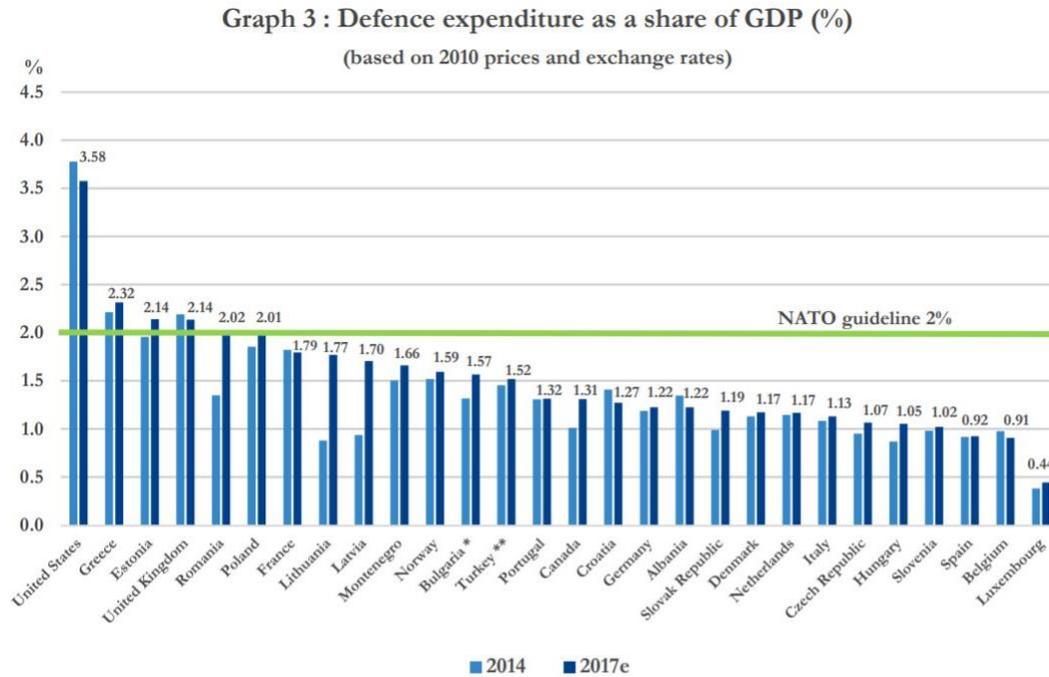
Since Romania has only been a NATO member since 2004, this is still an area of fairly-new scholarship. Many scholars analyze its importance by grouping it with similar states such as Poland or Bulgaria, yet there is little research on Romania’s individual importance to NATO. Romania is a bit like the scrappy kid on the ball field who must get creative to make up for his lack of natural talent or size. Says one scholar, “As recently as [the 2016] NATO Warsaw summit, less attention was paid to the Black Sea...the only concrete outcomes were those which Romania created alone, for lack of better options and with no clear commitment from other NATO members” (Popescu, 2017). It is true; the Black Sea has really only come to the forefront of NATO’s focus since the annexation of Crimea. Now, Romania has not only the geostrategic location but also the grit to push for action in the region and truly make improvements in Eastern European security.

Commitment to NATO

Romania is essential to NATO because of its strong commitment to the organization. Said one scholar, “Bucharest has been, for the last decade, the most fervent supporter of the North-Atlantic Alliance in South East Europe as well as in the Black Sea region” (Naumescu, 2017). And, unlike its other Eastern NATO allies, while “Romania remained steady in its pro-Atlanticist foreign policy and a very close ally of the United States, Bulgaria and Turkey suffered smaller or bigger changes in their political discourses on NATO” (Naumescu, 2017). Since establishing a Strategic Partnership with the U.S. nine years before joining NATO, Romania has been focused on improving its military security and strengthening regional security. Romania’s commitment is clear because it truly takes action.

For example, after the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, Romania hosted the Bucharest Nine, a meeting comprised of the Eastern flank states of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary. Said Romania, “The fact that Romania hosts this meeting represents a reconfirmation of our country’s role on a regional level and within the NATO” (Foreign Minister, 2016). Additionally, this year Romania will add special operations and cyber warfare commands to its defense system. Notes one scholar, “In Romania’s case, these are commonsense developments, given the experience of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine, where these two defense assets have played an important part” (Visan, 2017)

One of the most obvious signs of commitment to NATO is how much money a nation contributes. All members have pledged to spend 2% of their GDP towards defense spending, but only the U.S., Greece, Estonia, the U.K., and Poland have been meeting this obligation. In 2017 Romania became the sixth to reach its 2% spending commitment and promises to do so again for the next 10 years, recognizing its contribution as an integral way to show its support for NATO. This has helped Romania gain credibility within NATO and given it leverage to push for more regional security support. Many have praised the nation for joining in this goal, such as the NATO Secretary General who said, “Romania is “leading by example, helping to give the Alliance the capabilities we need, and ensuring fairer-burden-sharing” (Secretary General, 2017). U.S. President Trump has repeatedly emphasized the need for every NATO member to contribute its fair share, and he praised Romania for stepping up on the issue (Remarks by President Trump, 2017).



https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_06/20170629_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf

This graph shows the variation in NATO member defense spending, highlighting that Romania is a member of the elite few who meet their spending commitment.

Romania’s most important NATO role is as a stronghold on the Eastern flank, but the country has made significant contributions to other NATO missions as well. Romania has been a part of NATO’s Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan since its beginning, deploying over 600 troops. Romania wants to encourage stability in nations such as Afghanistan and realizes that “the Euro-Atlantic and international security is related to the stability of Central and South Asia”(Romania NATO, 2010). It participated in the arms embargo against Libya, sending close to 200 troops (Chiriac, 2011). Further, Romania has contributed to operations such as presences in Georgia, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the EU mission in Bosnia, missions in Iraq, and more (Romania’s Contributions, 2009). This record of dynamic participation shows that Romania is a

reliable, active NATO member eager to assist in various missions and offer what it can, even when the missions are not related to Romania's regional security.

Increased Domestic Military Security

Romania hosts a variety of significant military sites including a ballistic missile defense site, a Multinational Brigade, NATO Multinational Division Southeast Headquarters, a NATO Force Integration Unit (NFIU), various land and naval exercises, and more, making it one of the most well-defended states in Europe. Romania's determination to improve its military security in conjunction with, and in addition to, NATO projects makes it a valuable, self-motivated partner. These recent developments are significant because "in addition to increased funding, the European allies must also pursue military modernisation and become capable of defending all of NATO's borders" (Bugajski, 2016). Romania's military modernization strengthens not only itself but also NATO's Eastern flank. In 2015, they completed a \$800 billion ballistic missile defense at Deveselu, an Aegis Ashore site which is integral to NATO security. Although Russia has criticized it as an offensive measure, NATO officials continue to insist that "the defense system is not aimed at Russia. They alluded to the Iranian missile programme" (Upadhyay, 2016). Another previously Romanian military site, the MK Air Base, has become a staging area for efforts in Iraq (Mikail Kogalniceanu, 2018).

Implemented in 2015, the Headquarters of Multinational Division South – East (HQ MND-SE) now housed in Bucharest controls NATO operations in the region and enhances NATO's tailored forward presence (Headquarters, 2017). This works in conjunction with the NATO Force Integration Unit, also established in Romania in 2015, and improves NATO's ability for rapid defense deployment in the Black Sea region (NFIU, n.d.). Romania also hosts various joint military exercises designed to train forces and increase deterrence throughout the

region. For example, in 2017 Romania was a host of the Saber Guardian exercises, a U.S. Army Europe-led multi-day training with over 25,000 soldiers.

Romania's recommitment to meet NATO's 2% spending goal has led to major increases in military acquisition. Says one scholar, "Romania is following up the establishment of new commands or the operationalization of new military units with defense acquisitions designed to give teeth to these policy decisions" (Visan, 2017). Additionally, Romania's status as the fastest-growing economy in the EU makes it increasingly attractive to foreign investment (Bayer, 2018). Recently the Romanian government made a high-profile purchase from a U.S. company of seven Patriot air and missile defense systems valued at over \$3.9 billion (Visan, 2017). Romania is one of the first NATO members to pursue this equipment, and this massive procurement shows how serious the Romanian government is about updating its military technologies.

In early 2018, the Romanian Army contracted \$1 billion to procure over 200 Piranha 5 vehicles, huge, wheeled armored vehicles which will significantly modernize Romania's fleet (General Dynamics, 2018). These were recently ranked as the #3 top armored personnel carrier, and only several other countries have acquired them (Top Ten, 2017). The Romania government will also start to obtain the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). It is currently operated almost solely by the U.S., (Visan, 2017) and now the Romanian government has requested over 50 of these rocket-launching systems. (Romania Approves Purchase, 2018). All of these military procurements help set Romania apart as a nation serious about its defense posture and capable of strengthening NATO Eastern flank deterrence.

Motivated by Russia

Much of this military build-up is driven by fears of Russian aggression. Back in 2004, Putin "claimed that Russia had "no concerns about the expansion of NATO", adding: "Today's

threats are such that the expansion of NATO will not remove them” (La Guardia, 2004). He has since changed his tune, claiming that his country’s aggression is solely defensive in response to NATO expansion. Yet Putin previously stated that he had no concerns about NATO expansion, so it seems that he is just trying to change the narrative to fit his desires for Russian expansion on a premise of defense that contradicts his earlier statements.

Russia’s recent Black Sea build-up is undisputedly a threat to Romanian, and thus European, security. Said the Romanian Minister of Defense, “We notice an intense Russian military build-up in the Black Sea area, with the modernization of its Black Sea Fleet and reinforcing the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in Crimea” (Les, 2017). A senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council explained, that “Russia has lately demonstrated both new missile capabilities and the willingness to use them” (Robbins, 2015). Specifically, “In October 2015, Moscow made first operational use of the SSN-30-A “Kalibr” supersonic sea-based cruise missile....The new missile has an estimated range of 620 to 923 miles, and can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. ...the INF Treaty does not restrict sea-based weapons, and an SSN-30-A launched from the northwestern Black Sea could reach the German border” (Robbins, 2015). Russian Black Sea military modernization is growing at an alarming rate, making Romania essential to Russian deterrence.

Its geographic location means Romania is in a vulnerable but strategic position. While it was once overlooked, “the shocking annexation of Crimea in March 2014 brought back into international attention the strategic and geopolitical value of this once considered peripheral region” (Naumescu, 2017). NATO Lieutenant General Broeks emphasized, “the Region has become the central focus of Russia’s larger strategic ambitions and revisionist agenda, making it a potential flashpoint for future conflict on NATO’s border” (Director General, 2017). Another

commentator stressed, “Romania is on the Black Sea, right across from Crimea, where there's a big Russian naval base that's been reinforced considerably in the past three years. So, Romania really is the first line of defense for Eastern Europe here” (Welna, 2017).

Whereas once the Black Sea was very region-specific, the aftermath of Crimea has brought it to the forefront of Alliance concern (Les, 2017). One scholar noted, “As a result of the new configuration of major interest zones for NATO, Romania’s geostrategic value has been recognised and an important role as “strategic control point” of the space situated at the East of the Black Sea has been assigned to it, while numerous analysts consider this area “point zero” of the world politics over the next few years” (Cracium, 2007). Romania’s strong anti-Soviet sentiments and fear of Russian aggression are powerful motivators for the country to quickly enact new defensive measures. Romania wastes no time in strengthening its military security as the threats from Russia around the Black Sea continue to grow. The country is thus an incredibly steadfast member that NATO can rely on to consistently be active in securing the Eastern flank.

Romania is also important regarding Russia and energy security. The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes, “the [Black Sea] region is also the gateway for most of the oil and gas transported from Central Asia and Caucasus towards Europe. Security of energy infrastructure crossing this region is therefore critical for the European energy security” (Romania NATO, 2017). The Center for European Policy Analysis made a similar argument, that “Central and Eastern European energy security has gained new urgency since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis” (Romania’s Energy Crisis, 2016). Regarding Romania they argue, “Romania is in a somewhat privileged position since it has energy resources of its own and a strategic location at the crossing point between east-west and north-south energy transit routes” (Romania’s Energy Crossroads, 2016).

Currently Lukoil, a Russian company, supplies much of Europe's energy, including, for example, 100% of Bulgaria's oil imports (Rankin, 2017). This is a problem because Russia could cut off energy supplies as leverage in a security stand-off. Additionally, European nations reliant on Russian oil could be more likely to side with Russia in a crisis. During this period of unstable relations with Russia, Europe cannot afford to rely on it for energy.

A study on EU energy dependency found that "EU Member States most exposed to security of supply risks include the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, most of which are heavily reliant on pipelines from a single country, Russia, for their supply of crude oil" (Oil Dependency, 2016). Romania has the third-largest natural gas reserves in the EU, and it is likely that "Romania could play a vital role as gas supplier, helping to achieve the EU's objectives to create an Energy Union and a single gas market, and improving the energy security of its neighbors" (Visenescu & Bartelet, 2017). Romania has a long way to go to make this a reality, but with reforms it is possible, especially with the help of its neighboring countries. It has already signed an agreement to export billions of cubic meters of gas to Hungary by 2020. The Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijarto said "This is the first opportunity in the last few decades that Hungary can buy large quantities of natural gas from sources outside Russia,' adding that this agreement represents a historic step towards ensuring energy security in Hungary" (Romania Gas Exports, 2018). Romania must make many changes in order to be truly successful in the energy sector, but it has the potential to alter Black Sea energy security away from Russia if it continues on its current trajectory.

A Note on Romania's Neighbors

True, Romania is not the only country on the Black Sea. But for various reasons, it is the most reliable Black Sea state for NATO at this time. Many people tend to view Romania and

Bulgaria as if they were essentially the same nation, but this is a fundamentally wrong approach on several points. First, the cultures and histories of these two nations are surprisingly different despite their geographic proximity. As suggested by its name, Romania descends from the Roman empire and is closest linguistically with Italian. It suffered under a brutal communist (but not USSR) regime that finally fell in 1989, and many remnants of this tumultuous past still permeate life throughout the country.

Bulgaria, on the other hand, is a Slavic nation with strong ties to Russia. While Romanians harbor strong anti-Russian sentiments, Bulgaria is leaning more and more towards its Eastern neighbor. Currently, Bulgaria has “a socialist “pro-Russian” president in favour of lifting sanctions against Russia while formally being a NATO supporter, and with a centre-right wing prime minister who is considered to capitalize politically from opposing to NATO naval cooperation in the Black Sea” (Naumescu, 2017).

Bulgaria is not the only regional partner with Russian leanings. An early 2017 poll surprisingly found “Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia and Turkey picking Russia as a defence partner if a threat emerged” (Novinite 2017), while the vast majority of NATO member states prefer the United States ... The same survey confirmed that Bulgaria and Greece see their biggest security threat coming from Turkey, an ally within NATO” (Naumescu, 2017). These results should be extremely concerning for NATO as it realizes that its members are worried about each other and not truly unified in who heightened security is meant to deter. Unlike these other Black Sea countries, Romania is an unfaltering NATO supporter and will continue this loyalty.

Conclusion

Romania’s advancements over the last few years are truly astounding. Since Crimea, it has stepped into a position as a regional NATO leader and embraced the opportunity to

modernize its military. Other regional NATO members should look to Romania as an example of NATO commitment, improved military security, and leadership in the deterrence of the Russian threat. By increasing its financial contributions to NATO, Romania has strengthened its position in the organization. Romania has been extremely proactive in improving its military security, and this will help itself and NATO against the Russian threat in the years to come.

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