STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

– *Vice Admiral Mihai Panait, PhD,*
Chief of The Romanian Naval Forces –

Strategic Impact (S.I.): Vice Admiral Mihai Panait, welcome back to *Strategic Dialogue*.

In your previous interview you emphasized the issue of tensions in the region resulting from the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea. Meanwhile, these tensions have escalated, and the launch of the Russian invasion in February 2022 has brought the democratic world, which has expressed solidarity with Ukraine, face to face with Russia, as an aggressor. Moreover, in the Black Sea, both a bridge and a frontier between Europe and Asia, the Russian Federation has focused not only on preserving its sphere of influence and blocking the enlargement of the Western one, but also on pursuing the expansion of its own strategic interests.

Your perspective on the security situation in the Black Sea is of great value, both in your capacity as Chief of the Romania Naval Forces, and as an officer with extensive international expertise acquired in complex missions and high-level meetings with counterparts around the world as well.

S.I.: In the light of the aforementioned considerations, we kindly ask you to share with our readers an informed viewpoint on the geopolitical reconfiguration of our neighbourhood.

Vice Admiral Mihai Panait, PhD (VADM M.P.): The geopolitical reconfiguration of Romania's vicinity encompasses a range of significant factors, each of which exerts an influence on the country's security, economy and regional influence.

First, the Black Sea is a focal point of major powers' interests, including NATO, Russia, Türkiye and the European Union. Changes in naval power dynamics in this region have a direct impact on Romania.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for the security of NATO's eastern flank. The activity of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the blocking of the maritime lines of communication pose a threat to the Alliance and its partner states (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia). Although the Alliance's ability to operate in the Black Sea is limited by the Montreux Convention, NATO has helped to stabilize the area by increasing its military presence in the region and expanding cooperation with international partners.

Secondly, Romania is engaged in close collaboration with international partners with the objective of ensuring the security of the Black Sea. This includes participating in multinational exercises, exchanging information and coordinating security efforts, such as:

• SEA SHIELD – national exercise with international participation;

• EP MCM DIVE – national exercise with international participation (in cooperation with the 6th Fleet);

• ARIADNE – territorial waters of Greece;

• NUSRET – territorial waters of Türkiye;

• MCM POSEIDON – territorial waters of Bulgaria;

• Naval operation OSG – Mediterranean Sea;

• IRINI – Mediterranean Sea;

• SNMCMG-2 – Mediterranean Sea;

• TRITON – territorial waters of Bulgaria;

• BALTOPS – multinational joint exercise;

• MARE APERTO - maritime areas and coastal zones of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Ionian Sea, the Adriatic Sea, and the Sardinian Sea.

I therefore believe that the geopolitical reconfiguration of Romania's neighbourhood is a complex and dynamic process, influenced by internal and external factors. Romania must continue to invest in modernizing its naval forces, strengthen its international alliances and adapt to new threats in order to ensure security and stability in the Black Sea region.

S.I.: *In this context, how has the balance of forces in the Black Sea region changed over the last two years, with specific reference to the role of naval forces?*

VADM M.P.: Over the last two years, the distribution of power in the Black Sea region has undergone significant changes, influenced mainly by increased tensions between Russia and the West, as well as by developments within NATO and countries bordering the Black Sea.

Since the beginning of the war, Russia's fleet has lost an impressive number of ships, significantly damaged or sunk by unmanned surface vehicle and missile attacks. Despite consequences, the Russian Black Sea Fleet maintains control over Crimea. In this context, the Russian fleet continues to enhance port security at its main naval bases and to improve port facilities in Kerci, Novorossisyk, Sochi and Tuapse in order to be able to continue its naval exercise. In addition, the presence of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea is likely to remain low because of the continued threat of Ukrainian missiles and USVs.

From the beginning, I would like to point out that the Russian Federation's unjustified military aggression against Ukraine has significantly changed the security landscape in the Black Sea region. The ongoing military confrontation, the large number of mines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and other dangerous materials adrift in the Black Sea, and Russia's posture and continued aggressive intervention, by closing some areas and patrolling activity have had a significant impact on the level of maritime traffic. Black Sea riparian states are making great efforts to maintain the security of maritime transport routes.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created a variety of risks in the naval sector. The most problematic threat to merchant ships is hitting a marine mine. Since the beginning of the conflict Ukraine has launched 420 mines in accordance with Novorossiysk Navtex 2022. To date (27 of June, 2024) 103 mines have been confirmed and neutralized. Five mines have been found and destroyed in Romania's area of responsibility, including one near the entrance to the Port of Constanta under the Traffic Separation Scheme. This obviously creates problems regarding the safety of navigation and leads to high costs on the maritime industry such as fishing, offshore activities and tourism.

The distribution of power in the Black Sea region has changed significantly in the last two years, as Russia has strengthened its military presence, and NATO and its Allies have responded by reinforcing naval capabilities and intensifying multinational exercises. Along with other regional players, Romania has allocated resources towards the modernization of its fleet and naval infrastructure, in order to enhance its capacity to meet new security challenges.

Thus, the Romanian Naval Forces have facilitated the development of endowment and modernization plan that provides the most important programs:

• The "Coastal Defense and Anti-Ship Missile System", program which aims at equipping the Naval Forces with a system of four anti-ship missile launching systems;

• The "Minehunter" program representing the establishment of a mine warfare capability through the acquisition of two ships from the British Navy;

• The "Fast Intervention Diver Boat" program;

• The "ASuW- capability Helicopter" program;

• The "Assault Amphibious Vehicle – AA7" program which provides the Marine Infantry Regiment with 21 amphibious assault vehicles;

• Modernization program of 22-class frigates to upgrade combat capabilities and auxiliary systems;

• Missile Carrier Ships Modernization Program modernization of systems (energy, communications, navigation).

S.I.: Despite Russia's long-standing dominance of the Black Sea from a naval perspective over the last decade, since 2022 its strategy has proven not so effective in the face of Ukrainian ingenuity in employing surface and underwater drones against Russian ships.

Do you consider this to be a substantial change in the manner of conducting naval warfare, at least as far as the inland seas are concerned?

VADM M.P.: The use of unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) in this conflict poses a threat to maritime traffic, both for military and civilian ships. During the conflict, Ukraine has carried out more than 20 naval drone-attacks targeting military vessels in the Sevastopol and Novorossiysk naval bases and the Donuzlav and Kerch Straits.

I would like to emphasize that in 2024 the Russian Black Sea Fleet' activities were reduced due to the threat of unmanned surface vehicles operating at night. This was in response to the successful attacks by Ukraine, including on the patrol boat, Sergey Kotov. In late March, at least four Russian vessels were targeted by Ukraine.

As a result of its unique geography and facilities, which allow easy access from the sea to the Danube River, as well as its monitoring and warning capabilities on maritime threats, Romania plays a crucial role in securing maritime and inland waterway transport routes in the region.

In order to guarantee security of the river area, forces and means have been deployed, as follows:

• Surveillance and monitoring of river traffic in the area of responsibility of Romania and augmentation of the acknowledged maritime image;

• Providing pilotage service in the context of the massive traffic intensification on the maritime Danube;

• Use of autonomous unmanned systems;

• Protection of critical infrastructure and the Exclusive Economic Area through the development of maritime and river drone systems.

Another aspect that I would like to bring to your attention is that, as a result of the fact that the Russian Federation did not agree to the extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative to 2023, Ukraine has started to use its ports on the Danube River. To

prevent this, Russian Armed Forces have attacked Ukrainian infrastructure on the Danube using drones. These types of drones have been used throughout the conflict in attacks against other regions of Ukraine. Attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure (Reni, Ismail) are also have an impact in Romania.

Concurrently, other risks are associated with the use of the Danube River for grain transit:
• Increased risk of collision;
• Increased risk of maritime pollution;
• Increased threat of collision with maritime mines.

S.I.: *It is acknowledged that the Romanian Naval Forces play an important role in maintaining regional and international stability.*

Has the war in Ukraine resulted in far-reaching changes in the direction of mission development of this category of forces?

VADM M.P.: Romania's national interest is to maintain freedom of navigation on the Black Sea and the Danube River; to this end, Romanian Naval Forces promote and defend national interests and sovereign rights at sea and on the river, independently, in a joint force or as part of a multinational force. Furthermore, the Naval Forces continue to be an active contributor to regional security and stability, as part of various cooperation initiatives in the Wider Black Sea Area.

The Romanian Naval Forces must be able to fulfil the following missions:
• contribute to national security;
• defend national sovereignty and integrity;
• contribute to collective defence;
• promote regional and global stability;
• support local authority in civil emergency management.

The Romanian Naval Forces maintain the freedom of navigation of maritime communication lines, which are a critical factor for economic development and prosperity.

The Naval Forces have adopted their own tactics, techniques and procedures by planning and conducting mine surveillance and systematic actions of active search. The forces used in these actions consisted of warships, helicopters, drones and EOD teams. Additionally, support was provided by other military structures, the Coast Guard and maritime patrol aircraft (from France, the USA, and Türkiye).

The Romanian Naval Forces have engaged in numerous procurement programs that will ensure the availability of the capabilities required to meet the challenges of the current security environment in the Black Sea. Our organisation is engaged in a number of projects, of which a NATO-level project – Maritime Unmanned System (MUS), one as part of the EU initiative - Permanent Structured Cooperation

(PESCO) – Maritime (semi-) Autonomous Systems for Mine Countermeasures (MAS MCM), PESCO EUNDC – with the main objective to develop a network of diving centres in the EU Member States and one in MDA-ASW.

The MUS initiative allows participating nations to work together to integrate all existing data into the supply of military equipment manufacturers or the data extracted from their own experience to create a common picture of the present and future of maritime unmanned systems. Areas of cooperation are: information exchange, standardization, doctrine development, operational research and experimentation, logistics, training, procurement and military industry partnerships.

The objective of the PESCO MAS MCM project is to provide, in the medium and long-term, a diverse world-class of underwater, surface and airborne (semi-) autonomous maritime mine action technologies in order to increase cooperation between Member States, reduce Member States' efforts in this field, enhance interoperability, address gaps and reinforce the industrial and technological base. The project aims to support future common procurement to reduce research costs, create prototypes and mass production.

European Union Network of Diving Centres (EUNDC) is a PESCO project with the main objective of creating a network of diving centres to facilitate the coordination of diver certification and training at EU-level, based on common standards and procedures, as well as their certification for European missions. Interoperability between diving centres can facilitate the coordination of common operations, strengthening EU's capacity to respond to common threats to maritime security and other environmental and security challenges.

Also, within the MDA-ASW project carried out in collaboration with the strategic partner, the Romanian Naval Forces are engaged in dialogue to be equipped with maritime unmanned systems to improve electro-acoustic surveillance at the Black Sea. The development of autonomous vehicles, using cutting-edge technology and an operational architecture, with a modular configuration, will significantly contribute to EU maritime security, helping to counter the threat of sea mines.

S.I.: *At operational level, an important element of the war in the proximity of Romania is the threat of sea mines. In the first part of this year, the Romanian Armed Forces was approved to take part in operations under the aegis of the Task Force to Counter the Sea Mines in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea), alongside Bulgarian and Turkish naval forces. We kindly request further elaboration on this component of the Naval Forces' missions.*

What are the most important lessons identified so far from mine warfare?

VADM M.P.: The war in Ukraine is a reminder that while modern technology can bring advantages over older systems, quantity still matters. The conflict once

again proved the pivotal role of technological and industrial companies' capabilities in warfare. Also, the use of cheap unmanned systems has increased significantly with favourable outcomes.

The recent signing of the "Trilateral Initiative" between Bulgaria, Türkiye, and Romania for the establishment of a Task Force to Counter the Sea Mines in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea) is a proof of the political will of the countries in the region to get involved in ensuring maritime security against the threat of drifting mines in the Black Sea.

This initiative, which has its origins in close collaboration and mutual understanding between the three allied nations, represents a crucial step in addressing the threat of sea mines and ensuring safe navigation.

The Memorandum of Understanding outlines a clear and efficient operational structure. With a rotating command every six months and a minimum of two planned activations in each rotation, a reliable framework has been established to ensure vigilance and continuous readiness.

The first activation of the task group was on July 2nd, for a 15-day period, during which the Romanian Naval Forces engaged with a minesweeper vessel. This structure not only increases the collective operational capabilities, but also addresses the conflict in our region, which required the mobilization of the three NATO Black Sea-bordering countries to ensure freedom of navigation, in compliance with the Montreux Convention.

The primary objectives of the MCM BS Task Group are:

- conducting reconnaissance and surveillance operations against the threat of naval mines in the Black Sea;

- conducting MCM operations in designated areas and related SAR operations, if required;

- integrating forces and participating in common exercises to share expertise and improve interoperability;

- identifying ways and means of collaborating and ensuring complementarity, with SNMCMG-2 and other relevant allied non-coastal operations when present in the Black Sea, in accordance with the Montreux Convention. Where appropriate, such collaboration could include unmanned systems, intelligence, maritime patrol aviation, special operation and boarding teams, EOD;

- contributing to raising awareness of NATO's maritime situation in the Black Sea;

- conducting visits to the ports of the participants for cultural exchange and improving mutual understanding;

- performing other tasks within the scope of this Memorandum of Understanding as agreed by the three parties.

S.I.: The Washington Summit in July 2024 has marked NATO's 75th Anniversary. In its final Declaration, NATO reaffirmed its continued support for regional efforts undertaken by Allies with the objective of upholding security, safety, stability and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea region (in compliance with the Montreux Convention).

Please provide your opinion on how Alliance's contribution in the area can be increased, and what would this entail in the field of maritime security?

VADM M.P.: In the light of the ongoing discussions in the aftermath of the NATO Summit in Washington, it is imperative to reiterate the strategic importance of the Black Sea and to reinforce the measures taken to ensure regional security.

To increase NATO's contribution in the Black Sea, I consider that certain measures are needed to bolster military presence, strengthen the national capabilities of the littoral states and promote regional cooperation.

To deter aggressive actions and to demonstrate our commitment to regional security, the organisation of regular patrols and common exercises between the naval forces of NATO member states in the Black Sea is essential. The rotational and permanent deployment of an increased number of NATO vessels in the Black Sea will ensure a continuous presence and the ability to rapidly respond to any incidents, thus enhancing maritime security.

Providing technical and logistical support to Romania and Bulgaria, to modernize fleets and maritime infrastructure will enhance national capabilities and facilitate regional cooperation. The implementation of training programs and effective information exchange mechanism for their maritime forces will improve readiness and coordination.

Advancing cooperative initiatives among riparian states to develop common maritime security strategies will reinforce regional solidarity and responsiveness to threats. MARSEC COE is a regional centre of excellence for maritime security acting as a hub for maritime security research, training and cooperation in the area of maritime security, strengthening regional capabilities and facilitating the exchange of best practices.

Investments in modernizing ports and logistics support infrastructure are essential to facilitate an effective naval presence and improve logistical capabilities. The deployment of advanced surveillance technologies and early warning systems will enable effective monitoring of maritime activities and prompt response to any threat, thus ensuring the continued protection of the region.

The implementation of these measures will enable NATO to significantly enhance maritime security in the Black Sea. Strengthened military presence and national capabilities will serve to deter threats, while regional cooperation will enable a coordinated and effective response to security challenges. Investments in

technology and infrastructure investments will ensure continuous monitoring and protection of the region. These actions will not only strengthen maritime security, but they will also demonstrate NATO's firm commitment to the stability and protection of its Allies and Partners in this strategic region. Essentially, through a comprehensive and coordinated approach, NATO can ensure a robust and effective presence in the Black Sea, thus contributing to long-term peace and security in this vital area.

As far as Romania is concerned, the maritime security strategy must be the programmatic document adapted to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Such a strategy should be aligned with the strategic objectives of the European Union and NATO in the Black Sea region and emphasize Romania's national interests in the Black Sea and the Danube. The strategy will set the policy development of all ministries that will address maritime security.

Key elements of Romania's maritime security strategy will be based primarily on international cooperation by strengthening partnerships with NATO and EU to ensure a robust military presence in the Black Sea and on active participation in security exercises and operations, as well as the intelligence sharing with Allies.

Secondly, this strategy will facilitate the acquisition of new naval capabilities and the modernization of outdated ones by investing in fleet and equipment modernization as well as developing cyber warfare and intelligence capabilities to counter Russian hybrid threats.

Security of critical infrastructure, port protection, offshore extraction platforms, gas pipelines, and cables against attacks will be an important chapter of the strategy, along with the implementation of rigorous security measures for maritime transportation and Danube infrastructure for grain and general cargo.

If we consider the threat posed by drifting mines, the freedom of navigation, the environmental and resource protection, the promotion of Romania's economic interests by ensuring safe trade routes, we think of another chapter of Romania's maritime security strategy.

Implementing such a strategy, Romania will not only ensure its maritime security in a complex regional context, but will also contribute to collective stability and security in the Black Sea, in line with EU and NATO strategic objectives.

S.I.: *In your work published this year by the "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy Publishing House, entitled "Leadership and Security in the Black Sea", you assert that "The Romanian Naval Forces serve as a pivotal element in the reinforcement of regional security, a promoter of security culture, a genuine instrument for the implementation of state diplomacy at sea, leadership through cooperation being a way to guarantee credibility by assuming commitments which, at the level of the Romanian Naval Forces, are translated into a wide range of national and multinational missions".*

In the light of the concept of "leadership through cooperation", what is your assessment of the role that Romania should play in the future Black Sea security architecture? How would you evaluate Romania's contribution within the Three Seas Initiative?

VADM M.P.: In the context of the Black Sea security architecture, Romania has a major responsibility in ensuring security and stability in this strategic region. The Black Sea is not only a transit area for energy and maritime routes, but also a vital geographical border for Europe's energy and geopolitical security. The Romanian Naval Forces must be prepared to respond rapidly to security challenges, including by participating in multinational exercises and operations in close cooperation with NATO and regional Allies.

As part of the Three Seas Initiative, Romania can play a leading role in promoting regional security cooperation. The initiative brings together Central and Eastern European states in a framework of strategic collaboration, focused on infrastructure, energy and security. The Romanian Naval Forces can support this initiative by facilitating dialogue and organizing common exercise with partner states to strengthen operational capabilities and interoperability in the maritime domain.

The Romanian Naval Forces actively participate in conferences with other NATO member states in order to facilitate dialogue: The Black Sea Maritime Forum, organized in 2022 and 2024 in Bucharest, SEA BREEZE 23-2 Maritime Commanders Planning Conference, organized in 2023 in Constanta.

In conclusion, Romania's role in the future security architecture of the Black Sea and the Three Seas Initiative must be that of a leader and promoter of regional stability. By assuming an active leadership in naval and military cooperation, Romania can strengthen its credibility and influence in the region, thus contributing to the common security and prosperity of the partner states in Central and Eastern Europe.

S.I.: *Finally, we would be particularly interested to receive your perspective on how you assess the situation in the Black Sea in the context of the elaboration of future strategic documents, namely Romania's National Defence Strategy, the White Paper, and the Military Strategy. We would also be interested to receive your assessment of the priorities that Romania should adopt in terms of naval forces in the coming period.*

VADM M.P.: With regard to issuing the National Defence Strategy, the White Charter and the Military Strategy, Romania's priorities in terms of naval forces should reflect the strategic importance of the Black Sea and the need to respond effectively to the security challenges in this region. In my opinion, the priorities

should include strengthening operational capabilities, modernizing the fleet, and increasing international cooperation

In the first instance, it is essential to strengthen the operational capabilities of the Romanian Naval Forces. This will entail an increase in the level of personnel training, the conduct of joint and multinational exercises and improvement in interoperability with our NATO Allies. The development of rapid and flexible response capabilities is crucial to deal with asymmetric threats and to ensure the protection of maritime critical infrastructure.

Secondly, modernization of the naval fleet is a top priority. This involves acquiring modern vessels equipped with advanced technology, capable of operating effectively in a complex and dynamic environment. In particular, we should invest in multirole frigates and corvettes, patrol vessels and surveillance and reconnaissance equipment. The modernization of the fleet will enhance our ability to ensure maritime security and contribute to NATO and EU missions.

Another priority is increasing international cooperation, both within NATO and with regional partners. Working closely with our Allies, sharing intelligence and participating in common exercises are essential to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to threats. We should also promote bilateral and multilateral partnerships with Black Sea littoral states to develop a common maritime security strategy.

In conclusion, Romania's priorities in terms of naval forces, in the context of future strategic documents, should focus on strengthening operational capabilities, modernization of the fleet and increased international cooperation. These measures will ensure an effective defence of national interests and contribute to stability and security in the Black Sea region, reflecting our strong commitment to the North Atlantic Alliance and to our regional partners.

S.I.: Vice Admiral Mihai Panait, thank you very much for sharing with the readers of Strategic Impact your most valuable insights on the Black Sea issues and the role of the Romanian Naval Forces in the new security context.