COMMENTARY

NATO in 21st Century: Managing Maritime Security across Gray Zones

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ABSTRACT *NATO's primary challenge in 2026 is no longer limited to deterring conventional aggression; it is managing the gray zones that increasingly define its borderlands. From the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and across the Mediterranean and the Gulf, the Alliance faces a common pattern of hybrid coercion, maritime disruption, infrastructure sabotage, drone incursions, and ambiguous escalation below the threshold of war. Although these challenges are often treated as separate regional problems, the Baltic-Black Sea corridor and the southern flank are becoming strategically interconnected theaters shaped by similar threats and vulnerabilities. The Ankara Summit should therefore prioritize a coherent borderland strategy focused on situational awareness, resilience, attribution, integrated air and maritime defense, and stronger political mechanisms for responding to gray zone pressure before it undermines deterrence and Alliance cohesion.*

Keywords: Hybrid Threats, Borderlands, Gray Zones, NATO, Maritime Security, Ukraine-Russia, Iran War

Insight Turkey 2026
Vol. 28 / No. 2 / pp. 71-85

Received Date: 28/5/2026 • **Accepted Date:** 20/6/2026 • **DOI:** 10.25253/99.2026282.6

Introduction

The July 2026 NATO summit in Ankara will convene after a year in which the Alliance's eastern and southern peripheries have been repeatedly tested by incidents that are coercive, dangerous, and often ambiguous rather than clearly war-triggering. This is why the Alliance's central challenge is not only to deter a major conventional attack, but to govern a continuous zone of coercion below that threshold. NATO itself describes hybrid threats as activity that combines military and non-military, covert and overt means, deliberately blurring the line between war and peace. In practice, that blurring is now most evident in the borderlands of the Alliance: the eastern flank from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the southern maritime arc from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and Straits of Hormuz. The July summit will therefore confront a single strategic problem expressed in two theaters: how to maintain credible deterrence while managing ambiguous escalation, distributed maritime risk, and alliance political friction.

The Baltic Sea remained a focal point of hybrid-security concerns in 2026, with particular attention directed toward the vulnerability of critical undersea infrastructure. In June, Finnish authorities announced that four individuals were suspected in connection with damage to telecommunications cables between Finland and Estonia linked to the cargo vessel Fitburg,[1] an incident that forms part of a broader pattern of disruptions affecting power cables, telecommunications links, and energy infrastructure across the region since 2022. NATO has responded during the last few years by increasing its military presence and surveillance activities in the Baltic, including the deployment of frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, naval drones, and the continuation of Operation Baltic Sentry, which was established to protect critical undersea infrastructure.[2] At the same time, the 2026 BALTOPS exercise placed renewed emphasis on securing maritime supply routes and safeguarding critical infrastructure amid heightened tensions with Russia.[3]

Yet NATO's challenges have become even more acute in the Black Sea region and along its southern flank, where two ongoing conflicts continue to undermine regional stability. At the time of writing, developments in the Black Sea provide perhaps the clearest illustration of the intensification of hybrid warfare, with operations increasingly targeting both critical infrastructure and social cohesion. These activities are particularly concerning because of their direct impact on civilian populations in NATO member states. In Romania, the sequence of incidents in spring 2026 points to a potential escalation of hybrid warfare: drone fragments and property damage near Galați and Tulcea on April 25,[4] a Russian-made Geran-2 drone striking an apartment building in Galați on May 29 and injuring two civilians,[5] a naval mine neutralized on Romania's coast on June 3,[6] and a maritime drone self-destructing in the port of

Constanța on June 5 after Romanian authorities secured the area.[7]

On May 28, three tankers operating near Türkiye's northern Black Sea coast were reportedly attacked by drones while conducting commercial operations, marking one of the most significant incidents involving merchant shipping in the region this year.[8] Although no casualties were reported and no party claimed responsibility, the attacks demonstrated the growing vulnerability of commercial vessels operating far from active combat zones. Just over a week later, a Turkish-flagged fishing vessel, Duru 67, was attacked and sunk west of Sevastopol near occupied Crimea, killing one sailor and injuring four others.[9] Turkish authorities did not identify the perpetrator, but the incident further illustrated the deteriorating security environment for civilian maritime traffic in the Black Sea.

These incidents are not isolated events, but symptoms of a broader gray zone environment characterized by persistent pressure, ambiguous attribution, and tangible consequences on Allied territory below the threshold of war. A similar pattern is emerging on NATO's southern flank. While the Alliance has expanded cooperation with Gulf partners,[10] and strengthened its focus on maritime security, counter-UAS capabilities, critical infrastructure protection, and regional stability, divisions remain over whether NATO should assume a direct security role in the Strait of Hormuz. These debates highlight a growing challenge for the Alliance: maintaining cohesion and burden-sharing amid simultaneous pressures on its eastern and southern flanks.

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Borderland states are no longer merely security consumers, they are increasingly shaping NATO's agenda. At the May 2026 Bucharest Nine-Nordic summit, co-hosted by Romania and Poland, Secretary General Mark Rutte highlighted the strategic continuum "from the Black Sea to the Arctic," underscoring the growing importance of NATO's eastern and northern flanks.[11] Türkiye, meanwhile, occupies a unique position at the intersection of the Alliance's eastern and southern security challenges, linking Black Sea security with instability emanating from the Middle East.

These developments reinforce a broader reality: security dynamics across the Black Sea-Baltic-Mediterranean arc now have consequences that extend beyond regional stability, affecting transatlantic security and global economic flows. The July summit should therefore prioritize

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a borderland agenda focused on low-altitude air and missile defense, maritime surveillance and mine countermeasures, improved attribution and strategic communication, industrial capacity for low-cost defensive systems, more effective burden-sharing, and a clearer political pathway between Article 4 consultations and Article 5 collective defense. NATO already possesses many of the necessary tools; the challenge is to integrate them into a coherent strategy.

Borderlands as Gray Zones

"Gray zone" is not a formal NATO treaty category, but it is a useful analytical term for what NATO and other Western institutions now describe as hybrid activity below the level of full-scale armed conflict. In this commentary, gray zone is used as an analytical term for coercive activity below the threshold of overt interstate war: repeated hostile acts, ambiguous attribution, and calibrated pressure designed to test political cohesion and military reaction without necessarily inviting a full collective-defense response.

NATO's own description is that hybrid methods blend military and non-military, overt and covert means, blur the line between war and peace, and aim to destabilize societies.[12] However, when these methods intensify in the flanks, they transform flanks into fronts -the Eastern flank becomes the Eastern front as NATO needs to employ defensive operations, considering deterrence is no longer enough when under attack. As attacks slow down or become less frequent, the emphasis may shift toward strengthening deterrence. However, deterrence does not eliminate the need for defensive measures. Drone airspace violations, jamming and spoofing of navigation signals, cyber-attacks, sabotage targeting transport and infrastructure, and foreign information manipulation continue to occur even in environments where deterrence is in place. Because deterrence cannot fully prevent these activities, effective defensive capabilities remain essential for detecting, mitigating, and responding to them. At the same time, what makes borderlands decisive is that they absorb the most cumulative pressure from adjacent wars without always receiving the political clarity of a declared attack. Both these features make for what we may call a "gray zone" for international conflicts.

Romania's lower Danube, Western and Southern Black Sea coast, Tür-

kiye's Black Sea litoral, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant, and their respective airspace are no longer peripheral buffers. They are operational contact zones where Alliance territory, allied bases, trade routes, and civilian infrastructure are increasingly exposed to spillover, miscalculation, proxy action, and purposeful intimidation. NATO's own discourse reflects this shift. In the run-up to the Ankara summit, Secretary General Mark Rutte has stressed the need for a "stronger Europe in a stronger NATO,"[13] while NATO's Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood has explicitly framed the south as part of the Alliance's "360-degree approach" and has carried summit preparations into consultations with Gulf and Arab partners.[14]

This matters because the operational problem is no longer only "Can NATO win a war?" but also "Can NATO quickly detect, classify, attribute, communicate and respond to repeated ambiguous events before they erode deterrence?" NATO has already said that hybrid operations against Allies could reach the level of armed attack and could lead the North Atlantic Council to invoke Article 5. At the same time, the Treaty's Article 4 provides for consultations whenever an Ally sees its security as threatened, and NATO explicitly notes that Article 4 consultations are not a necessary precondition for action under Article 5.[15]

The challenge, then, is not a complete absence of legal tools. It is the political and operational difficulty of deciding when repeated drone incursions, sabotage, maritime harassment or electronic warfare become cumulatively strategic. Right now, the answer to addressing this challenge is in the gray zone. Recent developments in the Black Sea and along the southern flank illustrate how hybrid threats are designed to remain below the threshold of open conflict while steadily increasing pressure on Allied societies, infrastructure, and decision-making.

This is why recent incidents in the Black Sea and the broader southern theatre deserve closer attention. Taken individually, many fall below the level traditionally associated with collective defense. Taken together, however, they reveal a pattern of persistent pressure on critical infrastructure, commercial shipping, civilian populations, and alliance cohesion. In this sense, the eastern and southern flanks are no longer simply geographic peripheries. They are emerging fronts where state and non-state actors test NATO's ability to detect, attribute, deter, and respond to hybrid activities.

These developments also offer an opportunity. The Black Sea, the Baltic region, and the Mediterranean-Hormuz corridor have become laboratories for adaptation, exposing common vulnerabilities across domains and regions. Lessons drawn from these theatres can help NATO develop a more coherent approach to hybrid warfare by improving detection and attribution mechanisms, strengthening resilience, enhancing air and



Bayraktar TB3 conducts its first operational demonstration abroad from TCG Anadolu during NATO's Steadfast Dart-2026 exercise in the Baltic Sea.

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maritime surveillance, accelerating decision-making, and clarifying the relationship between persistent gray zone activity and collective defense.

Ambiguity at Work: The Black Sea Case

The Black Sea has become a textbook case of borderlands turning into gray zones. In June 2026, Romania and Türkiye have become one of the clearest pressure gauges for NATO's borders in the East. The sequence of recent incidents, leading up to those in June, is important because it shows how different forms of ambiguity now overlap. On April 25, 2026, Romania's Ministry of National Defense said ground-based radars tracked multiple aerial targets near Reni in Ukraine, RAF Eurofighters established radar contact with a target near Reni but could not engage because it did not enter Romanian airspace,[16] later, residents of Galați reported the fall of an object on the outskirts of the town.[17] Romania recovered fragments from two drones after that same night's Russian attack on Ukraine, with damage in Galați and Tulcea but no casualties.[18]

The next step up the escalation ladder came on May 29. Romania's May 31 technical investigation concluded that the suspicious object that struck a residential building in Galați municipality was a Russian-made Geran-2 one-way attack drone with an explosive warhead of roughly 30 kilograms TNT equivalent. The strike injured a woman and a child, marking the first such incident on NATO territory.[19] As a result, it was publicly reiterated NATO would defend Allied territory. Four days later, on

June 3, Romanian naval EOD divers neutralized a YaRM anti-landing sea mine found between Vama Veche and 2 Mai, the Romanian Navy said that since the start of the war it had neutralized nine of the 156 sea mines discovered in the Black Sea basin.[20]

Then, on June 5, a different type of incident occurred in Constanța. Romania's defense ministry said a maritime drone discovered that morning in the civil port of Constanța self-destructed at about 10:30 local time without casualties after the area had been secured, the preliminary investigation was ongoing, and authorities said only that the object was not Romanian and appeared to be of a type used in the war in Ukraine.[21] Minutes after the discovery in Constanța, an important public claim was added from Ukraine: Kyiv said Russian electronic interference had caused the sea drone to drift off course.[22] Because Constanța is Romania's biggest Black Sea port and an important logistics node for Ukrainian exports and regional energy flows, the incident mattered strategically even without casualties.

Analytically, the Galați and Constanța incidents should not be collapsed into the same category. The Galați strike was publicly attributed by Romanian investigators to a Russian-made Geran-2. The Constanța case was officially left more open, while measures against other similar incidents have been discussed and will likely continue to make the topic of defense and security officials.[23] Yet, that distinction is precisely the point.

The recent incidents highlight that effective security in the Black Sea increasingly depends on deeper regional cooperation and operational coordination among NATO littoral states

For NATO, both incidents create military, political and civilian consequences on Allied territory, even though one looks like direct Russian spillover and the other more like Russian-enabled war spillover. Gray zone deterrence, therefore, requires the Alliance to manage not only hostile action but also hostile externalities.

The very same week, that these incidents took place in Romania, on June 5, according to the Turkish Coast Guard, a Turkish-flagged fishing vessel Duru 67 was attacked west of Sevastopol and subsequently sank. Five wounded crew members were evacuated by a nearby Turkish fishing vessel, while one fisherman died during the return voyage to Türkiye. Turkish authorities reported that the survivors suffered shrapnel injuries, with one requiring emergency surgery during the rescue operation.[24] Notably, Ankara's official statements referred only to an "attack," they did not identify the perpetrator, the weapon used, or whether the strike originated from the air, sea, or shore. No actor has publicly claimed responsibility. In May, after several re-

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cent attacks involving Turkish-linked vessels in the Black Sea, the Turkish Foreign Ministry warned against an "uncontrolled escalation"[25] of the conflict and urged all parties to avoid actions that could increase risks to shipping and regional security.

This underscores the multifaceted implications of developments in the Black Sea region. First, deterrence now depends heavily on low-altitude detection, rapid political communication and the ability to act against drones whose trajectories change within seconds and may remain outside NATO airspace until the final moment. Romania's April 25 release made that problem explicit. Second, maritime security is no longer only about warships. It includes sea mines, uncrewed surface systems, ports, beaches, grain transit, oil terminals and insurance risk. Romania's Eastern Phoenix 2026 exercise with NATO Allied Command Transformation, the first event under ACT's Layered Counter-UAS Initiative, points in the same direction:[26] the answer is not only more air policing, but layered counter-UAS architecture, faster sensor fusion, and cheaper interceptors and electronic defeat mechanisms for low, slow, and numerous threats.

At the same time, the recent incidents highlight that effective security in the Black Sea increasingly depends on deeper regional cooperation and operational coordination among NATO littoral states. The Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group,[27] whose command passed from Romania to Türkiye in January 2026, reflects this trend toward regionally driven solutions within the Alliance framework. In operational terms, this raises the premium on maritime surveillance and reconnaissance, mine countermeasures, and integrated coastal denial networks, rather than on the establishment of a classic standing NATO surface fleet inside the Black Sea.

Third, escalation management is becoming increasingly complex because attribution is often ambiguous and layered. Incidents involving drones, mines, or other spillover effects from the war in Ukraine may be directly attributable to Russia, enabled by Russian actions without being explicitly directed against NATO, or simply generated by the dynamics of the conflict itself. This ambiguity complicates decision-making by making it harder to distinguish between deliberate hostile acts and unintended consequences of a nearby war, thereby increasing the risk of both underreaction and overreaction.

Fourth, alliance cohesion depends not only on deterrence but also on visible reassurance. As security incidents increasingly affect NATO territory along the Black Sea litto-

ral, frontline allies expect tangible demonstrations of collective commitment. Romanian authorities reported that several NATO allies were preparing measures to bolster air-defense capabilities on the eastern flank.[28] Italy's decision to send additional air-defense support to Romania demonstrates the Alliance's commitment to visible reassurance, building on NATO's earlier testing of layered counter-drone defenses in Romania under the Eastern Sentry initiative in April.[29] Together, these efforts reflect a broader recognition that maintaining alliance credibility requires both political solidarity and practical measures to improve detection, attribution, and defense against low-cost, difficult-to-identify threats.

The Mediterranean and the Southern Flank

NATO's southern flank is increasingly viewed as an integral component of Allied security rather than a peripheral concern. Reflecting this shift, the Alliance now characterizes the southern neighborhood as a "cornerstone" of its 360-degree approach, while senior Allied officials convened in Istanbul in February 2026 to evaluate developments across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel.[30] This evolution in NATO's strategic thinking matters because it places instability in the Mediterranean and Gulf regions squarely within the Alliance's collective security calculations, rather than treating it as a separate set of partnership challenges.

The military picture has sharpened since early 2026. On March 5, NATO said Iran's continued attacks across the Middle East and beyond had led the North Atlantic Council to review the security environment, strongly condemned Iran's targeting of Türkiye, and stated that the ballistic threat had been identified, tracked and successfully intercepted.[31] NATO also said SACEUR would continue adjusting force posture as needed. In parallel, NATO's Mission Iraq moved all personnel from Baghdad to Allied Joint Force Command Naples in March 2026 while continuing the mission remotely from Europe.[32] Together, these facts show that the southern crisis is already affecting NATO territory, NATO force protection and NATO operational geography.

NATO also moved politically to deepen southern consultations. On March 18, 2026, the North Atlantic Council met with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to discuss the Middle East security situation and its impact on Euro-Atlantic security. The official readout explicitly highlighted maritime security, countering uncrewed aerial systems, critical infrastructure protection and counter-terrorism as areas for practical cooperation.[33] That is a revealing list: it is almost identical to the threat set appearing on the eastern flank, only in a different theater and with different partners.

The limitation NATO has is internal political cohesion. The debate over a possible NATO role in the Strait of

Hormuz exposed significant political divisions within the Alliance. On May 19, Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Alexus Grynkewich stated that NATO was not conducting operational planning for a Hormuz mission and that any such deployment would require a political decision by the Allies.[34] At the same time, several European member states remained reluctant to support a NATO role,[35] reflecting concerns that the Alliance could be drawn into a conflict in which it was not directly involved.

Türkiye, the Black Sea gatekeeper is also the pivotal state in on the Southern Flank as well. Türkiye's military activity in 2025-2026 highlighted both its importance to NATO's collective defense mission and its own ambitions as a regional maritime power. Ankara was a significant contributor to NATO's Steadfast Dart exercises in both years. In Steadfast Dart 2025,[36] Türkiye participated in the Alliance's first major deployment of the newly established Allied Reaction Force (ARF), which focused on reinforcing NATO's southeastern flank through exercises conducted in Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. The exercise tested the Alliance's ability to move forces rapidly into the Black Sea-Balkan region and respond to a crisis along NATO's eastern frontier. One year later, Türkiye deployed approximately 2,000 personnel to Steadfast Dart 2026, NATO's largest military exercise of the year. Conducted across Central Europe with Germany serving as the principal host nation, the exercise marked a shift from a southeastern-flank reinforcement scenario toward a broader test of strategic mobility and multinational force integration across the European theatre. Bringing together around 10,000 troops from thirteen Allies, Steadfast Dart 202[37] exercised the rapid deployment of the ARF and the coordination of land, air, maritime, cyber and special operations capabilities.

Only weeks after Steadfast Dart 2026 concluded, the Turkish Armed Forces launched *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) 2026, one of the country's largest maritime exercises. Conducted from April 3-9 across the Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean, the exercise involved approximately 15,000 personnel, more than 120 naval platforms, 50 aircraft and coast guard assets.[38] *Mavi Vatan* tested a wide range of capabilities, including amphibious operations, anti-submarine warfare, air defense, maritime surveillance and joint command-and-control functions. Beyond its military objectives, the exercise served as a demonstration of Türkiye's Blue Homeland doctrine, which emphasizes the protection of Turkish interests across surrounding maritime spaces and the development of indigenous naval capabilities.

Ankara's responses to recent attacks show both resolve and vulnerability. While maintaining caution in the Black Sea, warning about the risk of the war in Ukraine posing a risk to the freedom of navigation, the March 2026 Iranian missile incidents

showed an evolution of the Turkish posture in the region. In March 2026, after ballistic munitions launched from Iran entered or approached Turkish airspace, Ankara warned that it reserved the right to respond to hostile acts and said it was coordinating closely with NATO. Yet, the same incidents also showed Türkiye's dependence on Alliance air and missile defense: NATO assets in the Eastern Mediterranean intercepted the munitions, and additional allied Patriot systems were deployed to reinforce Türkiye's southern airspace.[39] The Turkish and NATO messages were therefore two-sided: restraint, de-escalation, and regional stability on one hand; unmistakable insistence on sovereign airspace defense on the other. That combination -firmness without immediate Article 4 or Article 5 escalation- could become a template for future gray zone incidents on NATO's borderlands.

The Eastern Mediterranean, meanwhile, has become a grey zone extension of the Middle Eastern conflict system. The March 2026 drone strike on the British sovereign base area at RAF Akrotiri on the island of Cyprus exposed how allied military assets in the region can be targeted even outside NATO's formal treaty framework.[40] Although the Greek Cypriot Administration itself is not a NATO member, RAF Akrotiri is a key British military installation used for operations across the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. The attack therefore highlighted a growing vulnerability: adversaries can pressure NATO members and their regional support infrastructure without directly attacking NATO territory in a way that would trigger a clear collective-defense response.[41]

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Black Sea has evolved into a laboratory for modern maritime warfare

The United Kingdom responded by deploying additional counter-drone and surveillance assets, while reports indicate that the incident intensified domestic debate in the Greek Cypriot Administration over the continued presence of the British bases and the island's exposure to regional conflicts.[42] For NATO, the lesson is not that the Cyprus island has become an Alliance theatre, but rather that critical military infrastructure owned and operated by NATO members in the Eastern Mediterranean can increasingly be challenged through drones, proxies and other gray zone methods that fall into the space between peacetime competition and conventional armed attack.

Conclusion

These developments point to a wider challenge for the Alliance. NATO's existing toolkit on the southern flank appears increasingly ill-suited to the evolving threat environment. The Alliance's principal maritime operation

The Alliance's challenge is not simply to defend separate regions , but to adapt institutions and capabilities built for traditional maritime-security

in the Mediterranean, Operation Sea Guardian, is a non-Article 5 mission launched in 2016 to improve maritime situational awareness, support counter-terrorism efforts, uphold freedom of navigation, and assist partner countries in developing maritime-security capabilities. Although the operation can be expanded by political decision to support the protection of critical maritime infrastructure or key sea lines of communication, it was designed for an era in which the primary concerns were terrorism, trafficking and maritime instability rather than mass drone attacks, ballistic-missile spillover, threats to energy infrastructure and persistent gray zone competition.

What makes this challenge particularly significant is that the threat environment emerging on NATO's southern flank increasingly resembles the one that has already developed in the Black Sea. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Black Sea has evolved into a laboratory for modern maritime warfare, characterized by the extensive use of uncrewed surface vessels and aerial drones, attacks on ports and energy infrastructure, electronic warfare, GPS interference, pressure on commercial shipping and repeated challenges to freedom of navigation. Many of the same dynamics are now appearing in the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea and Gulf. The attacks on commercial shipping by the Houthis, Iranian missile and drone strikes, threats to offshore energy infrastructure, risks to undersea cables and pipelines, and the growing vulnerability of ports and logistics hubs all point to a convergence between the Black Sea and southern security environments. In both regions, adversaries seek to impose costs and generate strategic effects below the threshold of conventional interstate war while exploiting the dependence of NATO economies on maritime trade and energy flows.

NATO has begun adapting to some of these challenges. The Alliance's Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell and wider critical-undersea-infrastructure network, established after the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines and subsequent concerns about subsea cables and energy links, have increasingly focused attention on vulnerabilities in the Mediterranean, where energy pipelines, electricity interconnectors and digital communications cables connect Europe to North Africa and the Middle East. Yet the Mediterranean's strategic significance increasingly extends beyond the region itself: it functions as the maritime bridge linking the Black Sea, the Suez route, the Red Sea and the Gulf. Disruption in any one of these theaters can rapidly affect the others.

At the same time, developments elsewhere have revealed the limits of available resources. NATO's annual BALTOPS (Baltic Operations) exercise, one of the Alliance's largest maritime drills in the Baltic Sea, was reportedly scaled back in 2026 as Allied naval assets were redirected to other missions, including deployments associated with protecting maritime traffic and deterrence operations around the Strait of Hormuz. Simultaneously, the European Union was debating whether Operation Aspides, the EU naval mission established in 2024 to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea from Houthi attacks, should assume a broader role in future maritime-security operations, including potential mine-clearance activities linked to Hormuz contingencies. The result is a growing competition for the same finite pool of naval vessels, missile-defense systems, surveillance assets and high-readiness forces.

For NATO, the strategic problem is therefore no longer one of geography but of functional similarity. The Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea and Gulf are increasingly connected by a common threat set: drones, missiles, maritime coercion, attacks on critical infrastructure, contested shipping lanes and pressure on energy flows. The Alliance's challenge is not simply to defend separate regions, but to adapt institutions and capabilities built for traditional maritime-security to a security environment shaped by interconnected gray zones, where hybrid threats generate persistent pressure below the threshold of conventional war.

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