

# U.S. Leaders Should Continue to Deepen Partnership with Romania

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Romania is an important and willing U.S. ally, and has proven itself a willing NATO member, contributing to NATO missions and prioritizing investment in defense.

Strong relations between the U.S. and Romania have bolstered security in the Black Sea region, and will continue to pay security, economic, and political dividends.

The U.S. should deepen cooperation with Romania, support its OECD membership and Visa Waiver Program inclusion, and continue support for the Three Seas Initiative.

Romania is an important ally in Europe, described by U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper as an “anchor of Black Sea security.”<sup>1</sup>

The Black Sea region is critical for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) collective defense, yet it is under-resourced, and requires more focused U.S. and alliance attention. Since joining NATO in 2004, Romania has proven itself a willing ally, contributing to a number of NATO missions and making robust investment in defense capabilities a priority. In particular, Romania has attained both NATO spending benchmarks and is deepening defense cooperation with the U.S. through equipment purchases, bilateral security agreements, and joint exercises.

The Black Sea region is a theater where the threat from Russia is felt acutely, and where more can be done to bolster collective defense. U.S. engagement in the region will be magnified by its strong ties with

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Romania. Regardless of the makeup of the White House and Congress in 2021, strengthening U.S.–Romanian ties is in the U.S. national interest. As such, the U.S. should seize a host of available diplomatic, economic, and security opportunities to deepen ties with Romania, thus furthering regional economic freedom and collective defense.

## A Strong Ally that Invests in Defense

Romania is making a concerted effort to invest in defense and rebuild its capabilities. In 2019, it was one of only nine NATO members that spent the required minimum of 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense (2.04 percent), and one of 16 NATO allies that spent 20 percent of their defense budgets on “major new capabilities” (25.7 percent).<sup>2</sup>

Romania has prioritized purchasing U.S. equipment, which means it not only receives battle-tested equipment, but also gains a deeper military relationship with the United States. In 2017, Romania signed a \$3.9 billion contract to purchase seven Patriot missile defense systems; further announcing in 2018 the purchase of three more, bringing the total numbers of systems acquired to 10.<sup>3</sup> In September 2020, Romania received its first shipment of Patriot missiles,<sup>4</sup> and Romania’s Ministry of Defense announced it would receive another three systems by the end of 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The Patriot purchase is part of Romania’s investment to bolster integrated air defense. In 2013, Romania purchased 12 F-16 fighters from Portugal, with delivery completed in 2017. In January, Portugal and Romania announced a purchase of a further five F-16s (with delivery to be completed in 2021). Romania is reportedly interested in acquiring an additional 36 F-16s from allies. Romania also plans to upgrade its helicopter fleet, with three U.S. companies, along with the European Airbus, expected to submit bids for the contract.<sup>6</sup> Romania has reportedly “filed a request for information with the U.S. government for a potential acquisition of 24 attack helicopters and 21 medium-size transport helicopters.”<sup>7</sup>

On October 8, 2020, U.S. Secretary of Defense Esper and Romanian Defense Minister Nicolae Ciuca signed a 10-year road map for defense cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Minister Ciuca remarked, “The United States is our strongest ally. Romania’s recent National Defense Strategy 2020–2024 highlights both the importance and the priority of working together in securing U.S. strategic flexibility in the Black Sea.”<sup>9</sup>

Romania hosts an Aegis Ashore site in Deveselu, which became operational in May 2016, and is an important component of NATO’s ballistic missile defense. Furthermore, Romania’s Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base is

a major logistics and supply hub for U.S. equipment and personnel traveling to the Middle East. Romania is investing €2.5 billion (\$2.96 billion) in rebuilding the base to NATO standards and increasing capacity.<sup>10</sup> In addition, “other facilities used by American forces in Romania include the training ground in Babadag (together with its railway infrastructure), the air force base in Câmpia Turzii, and the training grounds in Cincu and Smârdan.”<sup>11</sup>

Romanian troops have for years served alongside American and British forces stationed in Orzysz, Poland, participating in the U.S.-led Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup. Currently, 120 Romanian soldiers serve in the battlegroup, including a ground air defense battery.<sup>12</sup> Romanian troops also take part in the NATO’s Kosovo Force (57) and Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan (738).<sup>13</sup> Romania has also taken some steps to safeguard itself from pernicious Chinese influence, signing an agreement on fifth-generation wireless technology (5G) with the U.S. in August 2019, which will “seek to avoid the security risks that accompany Chinese investment in 5G telecommunications networks.”<sup>14</sup> Also, in January this year, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban announced the termination of cooperation with Beijing on the expansion of the nuclear power plant in Cernavodă.

## Romania’s Importance for Black Sea Security

The Black Sea sits at an important crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus. Many important oil and gas pipelines, as well as fiber optic cables, crisscross the sea. Throughout the history of the region, the Black Sea has proven to be geopolitically and economically important.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea is an unprecedented act of foreign-state aggression in the 21st century. The annexation has de facto cut Ukraine’s coastline in half, and has helped Moscow with its long-term goal of turning the Black Sea into a Russian-controlled lake. Russia has since claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean Peninsula previously belonging to Ukraine. Russia has taken steps to strengthen its grip on Crimea through a major effort at increasing capabilities, especially anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

At the July 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO also agreed to “develop [a] tailored forward presence in the southeast part of the Alliance territory. Appropriate measures, tailored to the Black Sea region.”<sup>15</sup> The land component of NATO’s tailored forward presence is a multinational framework brigade based in Craiova, Romania, under the control of NATO’s Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast (HQ MND–SE) in Bucharest.<sup>16</sup> HQ MND–SE achieved final operational capability in March 2018.<sup>17</sup> The 5,000-strong brigade “still consists mainly of Romanian troops, but they

are supplemented by Bulgarian and Polish troops and headquarters staff from various other NATO states.”<sup>18</sup> The U.S. and Romania jointly organize a biannual exercise called Saber Guardian, which is “designed to improve the integration of multinational combat forces.”<sup>19</sup> In the 2019 iteration, “[a]lmost 8,000 soldiers from six countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and United States of America)” took part in exercises across Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.

Following the U.S. announcement that 12,000 troops were being withdrawn from bases in Germany, U.S. Secretary of Defense Esper stated, “We see putting more rotational forces into the Black Sea region, Romania in particular.”<sup>20</sup> While it is positive that some of the 6,500<sup>21</sup> troops returning to the U.S. may be deployed rotationally to the Baltic and Black Sea region, such rotations can be achieved effectively today from the mature and robust basing that exists in Germany. Furthermore, it would be far preferable for the U.S. to establish a permanent presence in Eastern Europe, rather than relying on rotational forces. This presence should, however, not be drawn from U.S. forces in Germany, but rather come as an additional complementary initiative to bolster U.S. contributions to collective defense in Europe.

## Reaffirm U.S.–Romanian Economic and Political Ties

The U.S. should continue to develop its economic ties with Romania and the greater Eastern European region. One critical initiative is the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which seeks to strengthen trade, infrastructure, energy, and political cooperation among countries bordering the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. A strong, prosperous, and secure Eastern Europe is in America’s interest, and the 3SI can play an important role in making this happen. The Trump Administration has embraced 3SI, and the Administration and Congress should continue this support as a centerpiece of U.S. engagement in the region.

A component of this support is financial investment in the Three Seas Investment Fund. The fund was created in June 2019 by the Gospodarstwa Krajowego Bank in Poland and the Romanian EximBank.<sup>22</sup> The fund “is a dedicated commercial fund targeting critical infrastructure investment in the region.”<sup>23</sup> In February 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the U.S. would invest up to \$1 billion<sup>24</sup> in the fund to finance energy projects via the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. pledge is to match 30 percent of 3SI combined contributions up to \$1 billion.<sup>26</sup> The U.S. announced a \$300 million investment in the fund at the recent October Three Seas Initiative Summit.<sup>27</sup> Currently, the Three

Seas Investment Fund has €913 million (\$1,080 million), from 10 contributing nations (nine 3SI members and the U.S.),<sup>28</sup> along with the international firm Amber Infrastructure Group.<sup>29</sup>

Another area where the U.S. can support Romania is in the nation's efforts to attain membership in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In August 2019, Secretary of State Pompeo announced U.S. support for Romania's accession in a letter to OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría.<sup>30</sup> Other U.S. allies, such as France, also support Romania's accession.<sup>31</sup> Romania is a strong candidate ranking 38th in the 2020 Heritage Foundation *Index of Economic Freedom*, higher than 13 of 37 OECD member nations (Belgium, Colombia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey).<sup>32</sup> U.S. diplomatic heft will be vital to Romania joining the OECD, and the U.S. should reiterate its support. Within the organization, Romania could become an important ally to advance needed reforms.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the U.S. should consider expanding the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) to include vital allies, including Croatia and Romania. Such a move is reportedly under review.<sup>34</sup>

There is much the U.S. can do to strengthen bilateral ties with its “anchor of Black Sea security.” These include:

- **Developing a strategy for the Black Sea region.** Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea has essentially become a Russian lake. This is a direct threat to U.S., NATO, Ukrainian, and Georgian security interests. Many of the recent initiatives at the NATO level have not met expectations. The U.S. should be a leader inside the Alliance to develop meaningful ways for working with the Black Sea littoral states to develop a strategy for regional security.
- **Establishing a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the Baltic Air Policing mission.** NATO's interest in Black Sea security is increasing, but the overall presence of non-Black Sea NATO warships is decreasing. NATO should establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the successful Baltic Air Policing mission, in order to maintain a robust NATO presence in the Black Sea in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention. This would require non-Black Sea NATO countries to commit in advance to a regular and rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea.<sup>35</sup>
- **Not neglecting the land and air component of Black Sea security.** With much of the attention on the Black Sea region focused on the

maritime realm, U.S. policymakers cannot ignore the important air and land component in the region. NATO should consider the feasibility of a Black Sea Air Policing mission, for example.

- **Establishing a permanent military presence in Eastern Europe.** U.S. basing structures in Europe harken back to a time when Denmark, West Germany, and Greece represented the front lines of freedom. The security situation in Europe has changed, and the U.S. should account for this shift by establishing a permanent military presence in allied nations further east, potentially including Romania. A robust, permanent presence displays the U.S.'s long-term resolve to live up to its NATO treaty commitments.
- **Encouraging continued contributions to the Three Seas Investment Fund.** The U.S. pledge to match contributions to the Three Seas Investment Fund up to \$1 billion is a positive, concrete example of U.S. support for the 3SI. The U.S. should keep this pledge and encourage every 3SI member to contribute to the fund, including encouraging wealthy 3SI non-members, such as Germany and the U.K., to make similar matching contributions to the U.S.
- **Considering opportunities to fund 3SI projects that help to advance America's interests.** The U.S. should consider using the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act of 2018 to allow American funding for 3SI projects that help advance U.S. economic, security, and geopolitical interests.
- **Promoting the idea of non-EU states joining the 3SI.** Currently, the 3SI only includes EU member states. This serves as an artificial constraint to regional cooperation, since so many countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey, and much of the Western Balkans, are not EU members. Chinese investments have often focused on those nations that are not fully ensconced within the transatlantic community. Broadening the scope of the 3SI will help to steel vulnerable nations against undue influence from China.
- **Continuing support for Romania's bid to join the OECD.** A key foreign policy goal of Romania for nearly two decades<sup>36</sup> has been accession to the OECD. Romania is a strong candidate for accession, and the U.S. should reaffirm its diplomatic support, which will be vital

to Romanian membership. The U.S. should work with like-minded allies within the organization to advance needed reforms.<sup>37</sup>

- **Including Romania in the Visa Waiver Program.** The VWP pays security dividends, as countries in the program share information on serious criminals, terrorists, and lost and stolen passports with the U.S. in exchange for visa-free travel up to 90 days. In addition, the VWP smooths business travel and tourism between foreign countries and the U.S., and further strengthens the transatlantic bond. Congress should evaluate alternative eligibility that considers overstay rates and other national security objectives, such as defense spending by NATO members.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Strong bilateral relations between the U.S. and Romania have helped to bolster security in the Black Sea, and will continue to pay security, economic, and political dividends. The U.S. should act swiftly to deepen cooperation with Romania by leading NATO to institute measures for more robust collective defense in the Black Sea, support Romanian OECD membership and inclusion in the VWP, and ensure that 3SI continues to remain a centerpiece of U.S. engagement in Europe.

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