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Black Sea: Pentagon's Gateway to Three Continents and the Middle East

by Rick Rozoff

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The Black Sea region connects Europe with Asia and the Eurasian land mass to the Middle East through Turkey on its southern rim, which borders Syria, Iraq and Iran.

The northern Balkans lie on its western shores and the Caucasus on its eastern end, the latter a land bridge to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

Ukraine, Russia and the strategic Sea of Azov are on its northern perimeter.

Given its central location, the Black Sea has been coveted for millennia by major powers: The Persian and Roman empires, Greeks and Hittites, Byzantines and Huns, Ottoman Turkey and Czarist Russia, even by Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany in their wars to unite Europe to Asia and the Middle East.

The famed Trojan War was fought for control of Troy/Dardania/Ilium, the entrance to the Sea of Marmara which connects the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. The strait connecting the two is still called the Dardanelles after ancient Dardania.

Going back to Antiquity a third continent has also been involved, Africa; the Greek historian Herodotus claimed that the Black Sea city of Colchis, now in modern Georgia, was founded by Egyptians and in Virgil's if not Homer's account of the siege of Troy Memnon, king of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), is slain by Achilles fighting in defense of Troy.

A Romanian news source recently reiterated the importance of the region for the modern era:

"Through the Black Sea, the European area strategically meets Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East, hydrocarbon production and transit areas." (Nine O'Clock News, May 14, 2008)

Allusions to the Black Sea's importance for not only energy and transit but for world military purposes will occur frequently in citations to follow.

Prior to the breakup of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 and the Soviet Union two years later the Black Sea was mainly off limits to the West in general and to the Pentagon and NATO in particular. Until 1991 only four states bordered the sea, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and the Soviet Union.

Turkey as a key NATO member state was the West's sole beachhead in the region with Bulgaria and Romania, the second more nominally than in fact, members of the Eastern bloc and the Warsaw Pact.

In the intervening eighteen years the situation in this region, like so many others, has been transformed and a new battle for control of it has emerged.

There have arisen two new littoral states, Georgia and Ukraine, with Abkhazia added last August, and every past Warsaw Pact nation outside the former Soviet Union is currently a full member of both NATO and the European Union - Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the former German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia - with three former Soviet republics on the Baltic Sea - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - also dual members.

As an Indian commentator, Premen Addy, described it last summer:

"NATO's noose is drawn ever tighter round the Russian neck. American military and missile bases are already ensconced in Romania and Bulgaria - two states once in harness with Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and the invading Nazi legions into the USSR - in a bid to strangle the possible emergence of a rival centre of power in the Black Sea...." (Daily Pioneer, August 16, 2008)

A year earlier the online intelligence site The Power and Interest News Report in an analysis called "Bulgaria, U.S. Bases and Black Sea Geopolitics" summarized the situation regarding one key Black Sea state in the following words:

"Geographically speaking, Bulgaria provides the U.S. (and N.A.T.O.) a greater presence in the Black Sea, through which there are plans to build oil and gas pipelines. "Also, it is close to the former Yugoslavia, a place of constant tensions, particularly in the last decade. "The [new Pentagon] bases allow the U.S. to keep increased control of the country and the Greater Middle East region, as Washington now has a military presence in the south (America's 5th fleet is based in Bahrain) and will have a presence in the north through nearby Bulgaria." (August 29, 2007)

Georgia

Since 1991 but especially since the December 2003 "Rose Revolution" the United States has transformed Georgia on the Black Sea's eastern border into a private military preserve, first

dispatching Green Berets, then Marines to train, equip and transform the nation's armed forces for wars abroad and at home.

The revamped Georgian army was first tried out in Iraq, where with a 2,000-troop contingent it had the third largest foreign force in Iraq until last August when the US military, whose creation it was, flew the soldiers home for the war with Russia.

Before the echoes of last August's gunfire and artillery rounds had died down the US sent its warship the USS McFaul to the Georgian port city of Batumi and the flagship of its Sixth Fleet, the USS Mount Whitney, to Poti whose mission was announced to the chronically credulous as delivering "juice, powdered milk and hygiene products."

Batumi is the capital of Ajaria, a former autonomous region subjugated by the then newborn 'Rose' regime in April of 2004 after its US-trained army staged Georgia's largest-ever military exercises in nearby Poti and threatened invasion, lies just south of the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi, where Russian ships were then stationed. Warships of the world's two major nuclear powers faced off against each other off the Black Sea coast just 75 kilometers apart.

At the same time NATO deployed a naval strike group to the Black Sea consisting of three US warships, a Polish frigate, a German frigate and a Spanish guided missile frigate as well as four Turkish vessels with eight more warships planning to join the flotilla.

The NATO warships were only 150 kilometers from Russian counterparts then docked in Abkhazia.

Ukraine

On the north end of the Black Sea the US has led annual Sea Breeze NATO exercises in Ukraine's Crimea, evoking mass outrage and spirited protests from the Crimeans themselves whose parliament three days ago voted against a proposed US representative office being set up, one which no doubt would oversee both the suppression of increased autonomy demands and anti-NATO actions in Crimea and prepare the groundwork for the eviction of Russia's Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol.

Regarding the second point, a Russian news site offered these insights:

"Analysts speak about Ukrainian plans to kick out Russia and turn over the Crimean bases to NATO and the United States, as both salivate for a military presence in the Black Sea Basin." (Voice of Russia, May 28, 2008)

"One of the conditions for NATO membership is absence of foreign bases on the country's territory....[Ukraine's 'orange' authorities] do what they can to drive away the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the Crimea. In such a way Kiev signals to Brussels that it is preparing a base for NATO naval ships in the Black Sea." (Voice of Russia, May 22, 2008)

Georgia's and Ukraine's next, complete, phase of integration as Pentagon's military outposts was announced last December and January, respectively, when Washington signed Strategic Partnership Charters with first Kiev and then Tbilisi. Months before that and only days after Georgia launched its attack on South Ossetia and Russian peacekeepers there, triggering last

August's war, all 26 NATO members sent representatives as part of a delegation to the Georgian capital to establish a new NATO-Georgia Commission.

At the same time the regime of Ukraine's Viktor Yushchenko, who rode to power on the US-financed and -directed 'orange revolution' of December 2004, and whose wife Kathy is a Chicago-born and -raised former official in the Reagan State Department and the George H. W. Bush Treasury Department and was once described by a fawning admirer as "a Reaganite's Reaganite," used the deployment of Russian ships to the Black Sea during the war with Georgia to apply pressure on the Black Sea Fleet, at one point implying the ships might not be permitted to return to Sevastopol.

Several weeks after the Caucasus war ended, Washington sent an intelligence gathering ship, U.S. Pathfinder, to Sevastopol harbor.

The Yushchenko junta renewed its accusations against the Russian fleet late last month on another score, slightly over a month after the Charter on Strategic Cooperation was signed with Washington.

The Black Sea connects with the Sea of Azov, surrounded almost entirely by Russia, at the Kerch Strait, the scene of a confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in 2003.

A Russian newspaper at the time explained what was at stake in the dispute:

"The Kerch Strait at the center of Russia's dispute with Ukraine controls access to the Azov Sea, which is reputed to have largely untapped hydrocarbon reserves. "Ownership rights to potential oil and gas resources have not been decided between the two countries, despite years of negotiations to delimit the seabed. "Although unlikely to be a second Caspian, geologists believe the Azov Sea is likely part of the same seam of hydrocarbon deposits that stretches from southern Ukraine and Russia through the Black Sea to the Caspian and beyond." (Moscow Times, October 24, 2003)

The US's Stratfor augmented the above with this brief analysis:

"The Kerch Strait is a 25-mile-long channel that is no wider than 9 miles, linking the critically important Black Sea to the Sea of Azov off of Russia's Northern Caucasus border. It has served as a key location for some strategic battles in the past from the Crimean wars to a Nazi-Soviet naval clash. To Russia, the Kerch Strait is a continuation of the Northern Caucasus into Ukraine's Crimea regions, which is one of the country's most pro-Russian regions and home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet located at Sevastopol." (November 10, 2008)

More concisely and even more to the point, a few weeks ago this quote appeared in a Ukrainian press wire report:

"Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations require that it solves all its problems, including border disputes. They need a border [in the Kerch Strait] for just one reason: to be able to join NATO as soon as possible." (Interfax-Ukraine, January 31, 2009)

Bulgaria and Romania

The US has signed Strategic Partnership Charters with both Georgia and Ukraine over the past two months and the two nations are the centerpieces for Washington's takeover of the Black Sea and indeed the former Soviet Union as a whole.

They are the main fulcra for the US-created GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) bloc originally set up in 1997 as the main transit route for 21st century Eurasian energy wars and for undermining and undoing the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States. They are also the foundation stones of the European Union's Eastern Partnership.

But to date the main emphasis of the Pentagon's campaign to conquer the Black Sea region, and arguably the major focal point for its international shift to the east and the south, is with Bulgaria and Romania.

Both nations were formally brought into NATO at the 2004 Istanbul summit of the Alliance and since became the last - perhaps in both senses of the word, most recent and final - members of the European Union.

Earlier, Bulgaria and Romania both denied Russia use of their airspace to transport supplies to troops they had moved into Kosovo in June of 1999.

Russia was acting within its rights under the terms of UN Resolution 1244 to protect ethnic minority communities in the Serbian province, but clearly Bulgaria and Romania were following US and NATO orders in blocking the flights.

Whether, if Russia had persisted in its intent, the two nations would have grounded the Russian aircraft or even shot them down is a matter of conjecture, though perhaps not much.

Later Romania allowed the US to use its Mikhail Kogalniceanu Air Base in 2002 for the buildup to the following March's invasion of Iraq.

In December of 2005 US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled to the Romanian capital to sign an accord to use - take control of - four military bases, the aforementioned Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base and training and firing grounds in Babadag, Cincu and Smardan.

The US's explanation at the time was that it was to employ the four bases for training, including joint and multilateral exercises, provision of supplies and transit for the downrange wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

And Romanian territory has served those purposes ever since.

In April of the following year, 2006, the US signed a comparable agreement with neighboring Bulgaria for the use of three of its major military bases - the Bezmer air base, the Novo Selo army training range and the Graf Ignatievo airfield.

Both pacts were signed for an initial ten year duration.

The US was allowed to station troops - estimates vary from 5,000-10,000 - on a rotating or permanent basis in both countries.

In the case of Bulgaria it will be the first time foreign troops have been stationed on its soil since Nazi Wehrmacht forces were driven out in 1944 and with Romania since Soviet troops withdrew in 1958.

The seven sites in both countries will be the first US military bases in former Warsaw Pact territory.

The Bezmer air base in Bulgaria is a major facility, similar in scope to Romania's Mihail Kogalniceanu, and its scale and purpose for current and future campaigns in the east and south are indicated by this Bulgarian description:

"[T]he airbase...according to the US-Bulgarian agreement...will acquire the status of a strategic military facility in two years, like the Incirlik airbase in Turkey and Aviano in Italy." (Standart News, June 10, 2007)

The same newspaper added that, "The Bezmer military airport near the town of Yambol (southeastern Bulgaria) will be transformed into one of the six new strategic airbases outside US borders." (Standart News, June 6, 2007)

Britain's Jane's Defence Weekly in late 2006 informed its readers of the strategic sweep of the Pentagon's move into the Black Sea:

"[T]he new land, sea and airbases along the Black Sea will provide much improved contingency access for deployments into Central Asia, parts of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. "Perhaps just as significantly, the new land, sea and airbases along the Black Sea will provide much improved contingency access for deployments into Central Asia, parts of the Middle East and Southwest Asia." (Sofia Echo, November 17, 2006)

From the other end of the planet Lin Zhiyuan, deputy office director of the World Military Affairs Research Department of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, saw the developments through the same lens but with trepidation:

"[N]ew military bases, airports and training bases will be built in Hungary, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria and other nations to ensure 'gangways' to some areas in the Middle East, African and Asia in possible military actions in the years ahead." (People's Daily, December 5, 2006)

Both preceding analyses were confirmed by the US military itself the following year when Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, the U.S. Army Europe operations chief and deputy chief of staff, spoke of Romania to an armed forces publication:

"It's in a critical location with emerging partners, at a location which is really a place that has been *a historical transit route for bad guys.*"

The interview added "The bases would house rotating U.S. troops that would train under the command of Joint Task Force East, headquartered at Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base. "The U.S. signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Romania in December 2005 to allow U.S. forces to use the former communist nation for training, pre-positioning of equipment and, if necessary, staging and deploying troops into war zones." (Stars and Stripes, May 4, 2007)

Two months after the US-Bulgarian agreement the US led joint military training exercises in Bulgaria in which the head of local troops involved effused, "We want to be certified as part of NATO forces. We want to conduct expeditionary exercises as part of NATO." (Stars and Stripes, July 22, 2006)

The war games, named Immediate Response 2006, were designated to break in the new bases in Bulgaria and Romania and to implement the Rumsfeld era Pentagon's plans for military 'lily pads' from which to spring into action to points east and south.

In reporting on the exercise the main newspaper of the US armed forces provided this background perspective:

"According to the agreements, the U.S. would be able to use the Romanian and Bulgarian bases for pre-positioning of equipment, and to send U.S. troops and equipment into war if necessary. The "forward operating sites," as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld calls them, would be in Romania at the Smardan Training Range, Babadag Training Area and Rail Head, Mihail Kogalniceanu air base, and Cincu Training Range." (Stars and Stripes, July 5, 2006)

A Bulgarian civilian cited by the same source said, "Every day we can see them (U.S. troops) in the cities and villages." (Stars and Stripes, July 24, 2006)

By September of the same year, "Sofia and Washington are to sign about 13 additional agreements to regulate the joint usage of several military bases in Bulgaria. "Defence Minister Veselin Bliznakov has announced that next week US European Command (EUCOM) experts will arrive in Bulgaria to draw a draft document." (Sofia News Agency, September 21, 2006)

The pacts with Bulgaria and Romania are, as usual in such instances, to be jointly used by NATO as all three signatories are members of the bloc.

In a US armed forces dispatch titled "England-based airmen head to NATO exercise in Bulgaria" it was reported that a British "squadron plans to test-fire laser-guided and general-purpose weapons at a Bulgarian range, as well as conduct air-to-air training with the Bulgarian MiG-29 and -21 aircraft" in war games coded Exercise Immediate Response. (Stars and Stripes, July 13, 2006)

Later NATO continued its leapfrogging over the Pentagon into Bulgaria as detailed in an article called "NATO bases may be set up near Bulgaria's Sungulare" which included this report:

"NATO asked if the former buildings of a tank brigade in the town of Aitos could be turned into a reserve storage base. "NATO planned to store here the equipment for one or two battalions, which would be based in the military bases of Novo Selo and Bezmer." (Sofia Echo, January 3, 2008)

In fact what NATO achieved was securing a base of its own.

"NATO will pay 150 million US dollars to the Municipality of Sungurlare (central Bulgaria) in exchange for a plot of municipal land for the construction of a military base." (Standart News, December 2, 2007)

The comparison between the Bulgarian Bezmer air base and the US's and NATO's main strategic air (bombing) bases in Aviano, Italy and Incirlik, Turkey was established earlier and this report later confirmed the analogy's accuracy, though immediately in reference to another air base.

"NATO will move aircraft from the US air base in Aviano, northeastern Italy, to Bulgaria's Graf Ignatievo air base near Plovdiv." (Sofia News Agency, October 6, 2007)

The above news item described the transfer as temporary, but it may have been a portent of what is planned for the future.

Aviano was the main base used by the US and NATO in their joint Operation Deliberate Force bombing of the Bosnian Serb Republic in 1995 and in the 78-day terror bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999.

To leave no further doubt as to under whose auspices the Pentagon was able to secure its seven new bases for attacks to the east and south, in the autumn of 2007, "A top general from the NATO's Southern Command in Naples will inspect the two-week military exercises of army units from Bulgaria, the USA and Romania which will be held near the town of Sliven, in southern Bulgaria." (Standart News, September 3, 2007)

And to dispel any misconceptions as to who the main target of the US- and NATO-acquired bases was, in June of that year Russian President Vladimir Putin, citing the emerging and unmistakable pattern of "a new base in Bulgaria, another in Romania, a site in Poland, radar in the Czech Republic," rhetorically queried "What are we supposed to do? We cannot just observe all this." (New Europe [Belgium], Week of June 2, 2007)

The severity and urgency of the threat perceived by Russia was such that General Vladimir Shamanov, adviser to Russia's Defense Minister, was quoted as saying "We will point our missiles at the US military facilities in Bulgaria and Romania." (Standart News, June 6, 2007)

This concern was echoed by the Russian foreign ministry:

"Russia once again voiced her concern with the deployment of US military facilities in Bulgaria and Romania. "We are deeply concerned, because such a move entails an expansion of the US forces in countries, which not long ago were allies of Russia," Anatoly Antonov, Head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Security and Disarmament Department, said at an extraordinary conference on the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (DOVSE,) held in Vienna." (Standart News, June 13, 2007)

The Russian military, most directly alert to and aware of the repercussions of the deployments, voiced its alarm in the person of Maj. Gen. Vladimir Nikishin, a representative of the Defense Ministry's Main International Military Cooperation Department, who said, "The location of NATO bases in Bulgaria and Romania actually means that the Alliance is creating bases for building up its forces in Eastern Europe, which is at variance with the adapted Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty." (Interfax-Military, September 19, 2007)

Two months afterward Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would add, "Russia finds it hard to understand some decisions of the NATO like, for example, the deployment of US military facilities in Bulgaria and Romania." (Standart News, December 7, 2007)

Lastly, the then chief of the general staff of the Russian armed forces, Yuri Baluevsky, voiced concern that "Plans are...afoot to set up new US military bases in Bulgaria and Romania, and unlike Russia, no NATO country has so far raised a finger to ratify the modified CFE treaty." (Voice of Russia, December 17, 2007)

The above apprehensions could not have been assuaged by comments that year from Solomon Passy, former Bulgarian foreign minister, advocating that US infantry, air and naval forces be followed by missile deployments.

"Following the NATO treaty and the agreement for joint military bases in Bulgaria I think this will be the next strategic step that would enhance the security of the country, the region and the whole of Europe....This shield should be [placed] above all member states of NATO and the EU." (Focus News Agency, June 10, 2007)

Nor could Russian fears be alleviated by the announcement the same month that "NATO defence ministers agreed at their Friday meeting in Brussels to initiate procedures for adding a short-range missile defence system in Eastern Europe to the on the US proposes that would also include Bulgaria." (Sofia News Agency, June 15, 2007)

Slightly over a year after the US-Bulgarian bases accord had been inked it was announced that US troops were heading there and Romania and "The bases are part of an ambitious plan to shift EUCOM's [the Pentagon's European Command's] fighting brigades from western Europe - mostly Germany - to forward bases closer to the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa, for a quicker strike capability." (United Press International, May 18, 2007)

The same report added:

"When this rebasing process is complete, two-thirds of USAREUR's [United States Army Europe and Seventh Army's] maneuver forces will be positioned in southern and eastern Europe,' [EUCOM and NATO's top commander John] Craddock told the U.S. Senate in written testimony. "USEUCOM has requested \$73.6 million to build out Mikhail Kogalniceanu Air Base, Romania, and to establish a forward operating station in Bulgaria." (Ibid)

The Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base received the first US troops deployed to Romania in 2007 and has hosted the US European Command's newly formed Joint Task Force East, formerly the Eastern Europe Task Force.

The title of that unit alone reveals volumes.

As soon as the Bulgarian and Romanian "full spectrum" air, land and sea bases were acquired, the Pentagon moved to expand and integrate them with its other Black Sea military partners, Georgia and Ukraine.

Referring specifically to the Romanian bases, it was reported that "It is also possible that troops from others nations would go to the sites to train, and that U.S. forces based there would, as part of their six-month tour, travel to nearby nations such as Georgia and Ukraine for shorter training missions." (Stars and Stripes, July 8, 2007)

In May of 2007 the commander of US Air Forces in Europe, Gen. Tom Hobbins, "visited with defense and air force leaders in Bulgaria and Georgia May 14-16 to discuss air force capabilities, modernization and future goals." (U.S. Air Forces in Europe, May 18, 2007)

The same commander the following month, described as looking "eastward to the Black Sea and southward into Africa," said: "Both Bulgaria and Romania have over a dozen projects where runways are being enhanced, facilities [and] buildings are being built. So we're actually taking advantage of the fact that there's a lot of NATO money being spent...." (Air Force Magazine, June 2007)

To make maximal use of the runways Hobbins mentioned, in February of 2007 Reuters reported that the US was selling Romania 48 new fighter jets and recalled that "The Romanian facilities and bases in Bulgaria will be the first U.S. military installations in the former Soviet bloc." (Reuters, February 22, 2007)

In August the US launched war games in Romania to inaugurate its new forward sites and break in its new Joint Task Force East, a process accompanied by no little fanfare:

"About 1,000 mostly Europe-based military personnel and civilians will have a ceremony today to commence the United States' first deployment to Joint Task Force East." (MakFax [Macedonia], August 17, 2007)

The significance of the exercise, named Proof of Principle, was highlighted as being a watershed, that "The U.S. military's new era in Eastern Europe has begun."

The same news source elaborated:

"American and Romanian military forces marked the start of a historic, two-month exercise on Friday that will serve as a trial run for thousands of U.S. troops expected to rotate in and out of Romania and Bulgaria for years to come." (Stars and Stripes, August 18, 2007)

Two months afterward the US held the Rodopi Javelin 2007 air warfare exercise in Bulgaria at the Graf Ignatevio air base where US F-16s were able to practice against Russian-made Bulgarian MiG-29s for future purposes.

Earlier in the year a US destroyer, the San Jacinto, had docked in the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Varna.

In April of last year the US reprised the earlier joint air exercise, also at the Graf Ignatevio air base. Similar aerial combat drills have been conducted in Romania and in both countries US warplanes are provided the opportunity of test their abilities against Russian-made aircraft.

A month afterward the US embassy announced that "a deal to re-fit a Bulgarian military base, one of four due to be used...in autumn 2008. "The Novo Selo camp in eastern Bulgaria will undergo a \$6.5 million refurbishment by the German-based company Field Camp Services (FCS). "The Pentagon has also set aside some \$60 million for the construction of a permanent base at Novo Selo." (Agence France-Presse, May 14, 2008)

In June a Bulgarian news source, in an article titled "US Army Town to be Built near Novo Selo," wrote:

"Five hundred soldiers and officers will settle in Bulgaria permanently, the other 2,500 will live in the bases of Bezmer, Novo Selo, Graf Ignatievo and Aitos on a rotation principle. "It means that up to 5,000 troops may be using the bases when need arises....The first US servicemen will arrive in Bulgaria this August. "Over 1,200 soldiers will take part in a three-month exercise called "The Bulgarian Panther." (Standart News, June 23, 2008)

The following day another Bulgarian report appeared on the expansion of US military sites in the nation:

"[T]he US military base to be built near Novo Selo...is expected to be of the size of an average Bulgarian town....500 US rangers and their entire families would arrive at the base then to live permanently there while deployed to Bulgaria. "Another 2,500 US soldiers would use on rotation bases the military facilities in Bezmer, Graf Ignatievo and Aitos....[T]he military airport in Bezmer...is slated to become one of the 6 strategic military airport bases outside the US...." (Sofia News Agency, June 24, 2008)

Events proceeded similarly in Romania.

"Construction of a permanent U.S. base in Romania to house 1,700 personnel is well under way, with work on a similar facility for up to 2,500 personnel due to start in Bulgaria this winter, according to a U.S. official." (Stars and Stripes, July 27, 2008)

In August of 2008 the Deputy of the Office for Defense Cooperation with the US embassy in the Bulgarian capital Jake Daystar held an interview with a Bulgarian news agency in which he said of one of the new US bases in the nation, "The main purpose of the base is to improve abilities through training " both of NATO troops and divisions of the US Army....The imperatives are hidden in the location of the state "with its geographic location Bulgaria has always been a strategically important country, as it stands on the crossroad between Asia and Europe." (Focus News Agency, August 14, 2008)

If Daystar was quoted accurately, his comments contain an amazing admission. US army divisions range in size from 10,000 to 30,000 troops. Though perhaps he intended divisions as in various units rather than in the formal designation.

By September of last year Russian concerns over the escalating US military buildup in the Black Sea had not abated and in citing the Pentagon's new bases in Bulgaria and Romania as well as its missile shield plans and ongoing NATO expansion to its borders, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Parity as the basis of the strategic balance in the world has been violated." (Itar-Tass, September 29, 2008)

Nothing loath, within days of Lavrov's dire warning it was reported that "U.S. warships will call at the Bulgarian ports of Varna and Burgas, and drills involving the U.S. and Bulgarian air forces are also scheduled for next month...." (Sofia News Agency, October 15, 2008)

While that dispatch was being filed US and Bulgarian troops were engaged in a joint military drill at the Novo Selo Training Area and "Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and Commander of the U.S. Army in Europe Gen. Carter Ham...watched the drill....".

The news story added, "More than 62 million dollars will be spent on the training area's permanent facilities and equipment in the next two years, and construction is expected to be completed by then conflict zones in the Middle East and beyond." (Ibid)

Bulgaria and Romania, now full NATO members for almost five years, have deployed military contingents to the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq and have lost troops in the last two nations.

While neither hosted Soviet forces or Warsaw Pact bases during the Cold War, both are on the front line of future wars in the Black Sea region like that of last August between Georgia and Russia, one which might easily have drawn in Ukraine and in alleged defense of Ukraine NATO and the US directly.

As Romanian President Traian Basescu was quoted in a feature of last August titled "Romania is responsible for EU, NATO borders protection," "The Romanian navy is responsible in the name of the EU and allied countries." (Focus News Agency, August 15, 2008)

Romania and Bulgaria will both be held to that pledge. That is one of the crucial reasons they were absorbed into the Alliance.

Both will be ordered to intervene in former Yugoslavia - Kosovo and Bosnia - if their masters in Washington and Brussels will it.

They are both involved in the transit of troops and materiel for the war in Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq.

For two years now it has been repeatedly mentioned that Bulgarian, now joint Bulgarian-US, air bases may be used for attacks against Iran, most recently by Russian envoy Dmitry Rogozin last September.

The US and allied NATO military expansion into the Black Sea is aimed at all four compass points.

A proponent of this dangerous strategy, Vakhtang Maisaia, Chairman of the Foreign Policy Association of Georgia, offered this terse yet comprehensive summary of what is involved in the Georgian Times of April 2, 2008:

"The Black Sea is a vital geo-strategic area for the Alliance in conjunction with the Alliance's ISAF mission in Afghanistan, logistic operations in Darfur, the NATO training mission in Iraq, and peacekeeping operations in Kosovo. "Currently, some clear signs of the new interest of NATO in the Black Sea region comprised of the South Caucasus and the South-East Europe sub-regions and Black Sea area itself, can be seen by looking at the geo-economics (including the Caspian energy reserves)....

"[W]ith the inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria into the Alliance, the Black Sea has been incorporated into NATO's Article 5 (collective defense) operational zone where activation of the Combined Joint Task Force (a deployable, multinational, multi-service force with a land component and comparable air and naval components) is possible.

"In the event of crises which jeopardize Euro-Atlantic stability and could affect the security of Alliance members, the Alliance's military forces may be called upon to conduct crises response operations.' (1999 NATO Washington Summit)."