



BULGARIA AND BLACK SEA SECURITY

SIEMON T. WEZEMAN AND ALEXANDRA KUIMOVA*

The security environment in the wider Black Sea region—which brings together the six littoral states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine) and a hinterland including the South Caucasus and Moldova—is rapidly changing. It combines protracted conflicts with a significant conventional military build-up that intensified after the events of 2014: Russia's takeover of Crimea and the start of the internationalized civil war in eastern Ukraine.¹ Transnational connections between conflicts across the region and between the Black Sea and the Middle East add further dimensions of insecurity. As a result, there is a blurring of the conditions of peace, crisis and conflict in the region. This has led to an unpredictable and potentially high-risk environment in which military forces with advanced weapons, including nuclear-capable systems, are increasingly active in close proximity to each other.

In this context, there is an urgent need to develop a clearer understanding of the security dynamics and challenges facing the wider Black Sea region, and to explore opportunities for dialogue between the key regional security actors. This background paper on Bulgaria is part of the Black Sea Regional Security Initiative, a project launched by SIPRI in 2017 to provide independent data and analysis on security developments in the region and to promote transparency around military issues.² This paper continues by describing Bulgaria's situation on the Black Sea (section I), it then outlines recent trends in Bulgaria's defence policy, including an overview of Bulgaria's national documents (section II), the structure (section III) and deployment (section IV) of its armed forces, its military spending (section V), and its arms holdings and acquisitions (section VI), with a specific focus on their relations

* The authors would like to thank the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs for providing the funding that allowed this Background Paper to be produced. They would also like to thank all those who agreed to share their expertise at the SIPRI workshop 'Shifting Black Sea Security Dynamics', 7–8 Dec. 2017.

¹ Russia gained control over Crimea in Mar. 2014 after a referendum in Crimea favoured secession from Ukraine to join Russia. Russia and a few other countries claim this to be a legal accession. However, Ukraine and most other countries call the referendum and accession to Russia an illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. This paper uses the term 'takeover' to mark only the factual change of control of Crimea.

² As well as background papers mapping the developments in each of the 6 Black Sea littoral states, the project will publish a paper covering the various conflicts in the region: Klimenko, E., 'Protracted armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space and their impact on Black Sea security', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2018/8, Dec. 2018, and a longer paper on the challenges in the region: Melvin, N. J., *Rebuilding Collective Security in the Black Sea Region*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 50 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2018). The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs provided funding for the project.

SUMMARY

● The Black Sea region is experiencing a changing military balance. The six littoral states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine) intensified their efforts to build up their military potential after Russia's takeover of Crimea and the start of the internationalized civil war in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Bulgaria aims to support NATO's security objectives of increasing military spending, enhancing defence capacities and developing interoperability. Bulgaria contributes to NATO's military activities in the Black Sea region and regularly hosts and participates in exercises with NATO partners. However, Bulgaria also tries to remain on good terms with Russia by way of bilateral economic and political cooperation.



Figure 1. Map of Bulgaria

Credit: Ahlenius, H., Nordpil, 2018.

with Black Sea security. Conclusions (section VII) summarize Bulgaria’s position on Black Sea issues.

I. Background

Bulgaria was a member of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and one of the closest allies of the Soviet Union. Since the end of the cold war its relations with its neighbours have been generally positive: it became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and of the European Union (EU) in 2007 while remaining on good terms with Russia. As a NATO member, Bulgaria supports NATO initiatives and activities in the region, which it deems critical for regional security. It has also started to increase military spending and to modernize the equipment of its armed



forces, albeit at a slow pace. However, it wants to maintain good-neighbourly relations and economic and political cooperation with Russia, even after the events of 2014.

Bulgaria is situated in South Eastern Europe, bordered by Greece and Turkey to the south, by Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to the west and by Romania to the north (see figure 1). To the east it has a 414-kilometre coastline with the Black Sea, where it claims the standard 12 nautical miles of territorial waters and 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone, both of which border Romania and Turkey (see table 1).³

II. Defence policy

Soon after Bulgaria joined NATO and the EU, it conducted a strategic defence review. This resulted in a plan for the development of the armed forces, published in 2008, and a new defence policy, adopted in 2009, to fit Bulgaria into NATO and the EU.⁴ In 2010 Bulgaria published a white paper on defence, followed in February 2011 by the adoption by the National Assembly of a 10-year national security strategy.⁵ The latter document has a much broader scope than defence but includes an updated military doctrine and military strategy. It emphasizes the decreased risk of a major war and sees none of Bulgaria's neighbouring countries as a direct military threat, but it notes the increased threat from attacks by ballistic missiles and various instabilities in other regions.⁶ In April 2011 the Council of Ministers adopted a stand-alone national defence strategy.⁷

In September 2014, shortly after the takeover of Crimea by Russia and a few days before a NATO summit in Newport, Wales, the Bulgarian Government published a 'non-paper' on defence.⁸ As part of the Readiness Action Plan adopted at that summit, NATO decided to form six NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) on its eastern flank—in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria—to support collective defence planning.⁹

This non-paper was followed in October 2014 and September 2015 by official and more detailed defence programmes that outlined plans until 2020.¹⁰ The 2015 document includes the potential threat of hybrid warfare among a

³ Saunders, S. (ed.), *IHS Jane's Fighting Ships 2016–2017* (IHS: Coulsdon, 2016), p. 92; and Stanchev, H. et al., 'Determination of the Black Sea area and coastline length using GIS methods and Landsat 7 satellite images', *Geo-Eco-Marina*, no. 17 (2011), p. 29.

⁴ Updated Plan for Organizational Build-up and Modernization of the Armed Forces on the Basis of the Plan for Organizational Build-up and Modernization of the Armed Forces until 2015, Council of Ministers Decree no. 54, 21 Mar. 2008; and Law on Defence and Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria, in force 12 May 2009.

⁵ Bulgarian Ministry of Defence (MOD), *White Paper on Defence and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria* (MOD: Sofia, 2010); and National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria, adopted by the National Assembly 25 Feb. 2011.

⁶ Dikov, I., 'The Bulgaria 2011 review: defense', *Novinite*, 6 Jan. 2012.

⁷ Bulgarian Ministry of Defence (MOD), *National Defense Strategy*, adopted by the Council of Ministers 14 Apr. 2011 (MOD: Sofia, 2011).

⁸ Bulgarian Council of Ministers, 'Bulgaria in NATO and in European defence 2020', Non-paper, 2 Sep. 2014.

⁹ On the NFIU in Romania see Wezeman, S. T. and Kuimova, A., 'Romania and Black Sea security', SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2).

¹⁰ Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *National Programme: Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020* (Council of Ministers: Sofia, 3 Oct. 2014); and Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *Programme for the Development of the Defence Capabilities of the Bulgarian Armed Forces 2020* (Council of Ministers: Sofia, 30 Sep. 2015).

**Table 1.** Basic facts about Bulgaria and the Black Sea

Area	111 000 km ²
Black Sea coastline	414 km
Waters claimed in the Black Sea	
Territorial waters	12 nautical miles (22 km)
Exclusive economic zone	200 nautical miles (370 km)
Neighbouring countries	
Land borders	Greece, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Turkey
Maritime borders in the Black Sea	Romania, Turkey
Population (2018)	7.0 million
GDP (2017)	
Total (current US\$)	\$56.9 billion
Per capita	\$8 064
Membership	
NATO	Member since 2004
European Union	Member since 2007
Military spending (2017)	
Total (current US\$)	\$866.7 million
As a share of GDP	1.6%

GDP = gross domestic product; NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Sources: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, Apr. 2018; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, May 2018; Stanchev, H. et al., ‘Determination of the Black Sea area and coastline length using GIS methods and Landsat 7 satellite images’, *Geo-Eco-Marina*, no. 17 (2011); and Oral, N., ‘Summary of EEZ zones in the Black Sea’, Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution, [n.d.].

broad range of potential risks and threats. It recognizes the deterioration of the security environment in Bulgaria’s neighbourhood but also continues to see no looming direct conventional threat to NATO and Bulgaria.

Bulgaria has been an active member of NATO. It participates in many NATO exercises, shares Bulgarian bases with the United States (under a 2006 agreement) and has opened a major training area for troops from other NATO member states.¹¹ It has also deployed troops on various NATO missions. Bulgaria would like an expanded NATO presence in the Black Sea region, and in support of this has held a growing number of joint military exercises in recent years (see section IV). However, NATO is not particularly popular in Bulgaria. A 2016 survey conducted in 24 Central and East European countries found that 28 per cent of Bulgarian respondents viewed NATO as a protection for Bulgaria while 20 per cent saw it as a threat. This was the worst score for NATO support in any of its Central European members.¹²

In 2016 NATO agreed to establish a Bulgarian–Romanian multinational brigade.¹³ However, a Ukrainian suggestion in 2016 for a Ukrainian–Romanian–Bulgarian brigade did not seem to find support from NATO or Bulgaria and in 2017 Bulgaria rejected a Romanian initiative to create a joint Bulgarian–Romanian–Turkish fleet in the Black Sea, after initially supporting the idea.¹⁴ Among the reported reasons behind Bulgaria’s refusal to

¹¹ Svan, J. H., ‘Bulgarian training area expecting more US, NATO troops’, *Stars and Stripes*, 7 July 2015; and Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria in Defense Cooperation, 28 Apr. 2006.

¹² Smith, M., ‘Most NATO members in Eastern Europe see it as protection’, Gallup, 10 Feb. 2017.

¹³ Novinite, ‘NATO to set up Romanian–Bulgarian multinational brigade’, 9 July 2016.

¹⁴ Defence24, ‘Ukrainian–Romanian–Bulgarian brigade to be formed?’, 30 Apr. 2016; Lupu, V., ‘Sofia opposes NATO fleet countering Russia, Bulgarian PM says. President Plevneliev had a dif-



participate in the joint fleet were fears that increasing militarization of the region could have a negative impact on the Bulgarian economy and that a growing number of warships off the coast could negatively affect the important tourism industry.¹⁵

Bulgaria has not always been clear in the direction of its defence policy. President Rosen Plevneliev was highly critical of Russia's actions while he was in office from January 2012 to January 2017, seeing them as a direct threat to the EU. He therefore supported a stronger NATO role in the Black Sea region.¹⁶ His successor, President Rumen Radev, who is a former commander of the air force, seeks to maintain close ties with Russia while having a good relationship with the EU and NATO partners. He has made statements seen as being to some extent supportive of Russia's takeover of Crimea.¹⁷

By the end of 2017 military personnel strength was 20 per cent below the authorized level

Radev supports substantial and urgent increases in Bulgaria's military spending and a modernization of military equipment to NATO standards. In 2017 he emphasized the need for 'strong navy forces' to 'uphold [Bulgaria's] military sovereignty' and guard 'economic and energy interests'.¹⁸

Many Bulgarians—especially, but not exclusively, supporters of the Socialist party—feel that it is important to maintain a good relationship with Russia and show some support for Russian policies. The importance of maintaining good relations with Russia has been mentioned as a partial explanation for the lack of urgency displayed by Bulgarian leaders in the acquisition of military equipment and is likely to be another reason for the resistance to a joint fleet.¹⁹

Interest in defence issues among Bulgarians is low. In a 2015 survey, only 25 per cent of Bulgarians expressed a willingness to fight for their country, ranking Bulgaria as 54th of the 64 countries surveyed.²⁰ The armed forces are also not seen as a good career opportunity and Bulgaria faces serious problems in recruiting and retaining military personnel. By the end of 2017 personnel strength was 20 per cent (around 6000 people) below the authorized level.²¹ Military salaries are low compared with other sectors.²² According to the Ministry of Defence, salaries would need to be doubled to

ferent stance during the visit of President Iohannis', *Romania Journal*, 16 June 2016; and *Romania Insider*, 'NATO strengthens naval presence in the Black Sea', 16 Feb. 2017.

¹⁵ Assenov, M., 'Bulgaria's Black Sea dilemma', Center for European Policy Analysis, 20 July 2016; and Miller, C., 'Why the Black Sea?', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 23 Jan. 2017.

¹⁶ Administration of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 'Address by President Rosen Plevneliev to the European Parliament', 8 June 2016; Novinite, 'Bulgaria to call for enhanced NATO presence in Black Sea at Warsaw Summit', 8 July 2016; and Cooper, H. and Oliver, C., 'Bulgaria caught between NATO and the Kremlin', *Politico*, 17 Feb. 2017.

¹⁷ Independent Balkan News Agency, 'Bulgaria's outgoing foreign minister criticises President-elect over statements on Crimea', *Sofia Globe*, 24 Nov. 2016; and Cooper and Oliver (note 16).

¹⁸ Novinite, 'Bulgarian President: "Project for purchase of new fighter should not be dropped"', 22 Aug. 2017.

¹⁹ Mladenov, A. and Grozev, K., 'Bulgarian government backtracks on Gripen selection', *Flight International*, 26 Sep. 2017.

²⁰ Novinite, 'Gallup International: Only 25% of the people in Bulgaria are ready to fight for their country', 21 Aug. 2017; and Gallup International Association, 'WIN/Gallup International's global survey shows three in five willing to fight for their country', Press release, [Dec. 2015].

²¹ *Sofia Globe*, 'Report on Bulgarian armed forces: personnel shortages, insufficient resources, obsolete equipment', 30 Aug. 2017; Subev, V., 'Bulgarian military industry to participate in army's rearmament as well?', *Radio Bulgaria*, 7 Apr. 2017; and Novinite, '5400 positions in the Bulgarian Army are vacant', 13 Dec. 2017.

²² Subev (note 21).

Table 2. Bulgarian armed forces, selected years 1987–2017

	1987	1992	2002	2007	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<i>Personnel</i>									
Active personnel	152 800	107 000	68 450	40 747	31 300	31 300	31 300	31 300	31 300
Army	110 000	75 000	31 050	18 773	16 300	16 300	16 300	16 300	15 300
Air Force	34 000	22 000	17 780	9 344	6 700	6 700	6 700	6 700	6 700
Navy	8 800	10 000	4 370	4 100	3 450	3 450	3 450	3 450	3 450
Other MOD	15 250	8 530	4 850	4 850	4 850	4 850	5 850
Reserves	216 500	472 500	303 000	303 000	303 000	303 000	303 000	3 000	3 000
Paramilitary ^a	165 000	12 000	12 000	12 000	12 000	12 000	12 000	12 000	12 000
<i>Equipment</i>									
Tanks	2 100	2 250	1 543	1 474	80	80	80	80	90
Other armour	1 410	1 963	3 213	2 641	280	280	280	280	321
Artillery over 100 mm	1 850	1 700	1 443	1 796	437	437	437	437	311
Combat aircraft	270	259	232	80	42	42	42	36	36
Helicopters	87	92	98	53	33	33	33	30	30
Major warships ^b	7	4	2	3	4	4	4	4	4
Minor warships ^b	9	19	13	9	5	3	3	3	3

.. = no data available; MOD = Ministry of Defence.

Notes: Definitions and available information may not be consistent for all years—changes may be partly due to differences in definition or available information. Equipment in storage is included but not all equipment may be operational.

^a The paramilitary forces are the Border Police (under the Ministry of Interior) and, for 1987, the People's Territorial Militia (which was abolished by 1991).

^b Major warships are combat ships of 1250 tonnes or more standard displacement; minor warships are combat ships of less than 1250 tonnes standard displacement.

Sources: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, various editions; Bulgarian Ministry of Defence; and media sources.

be comparable to those of most other NATO members, but it also realizes that funds will probably not be available for that.²³ The military profession does not have a good reputation and President Radev has called for the social status of soldiers to be raised.²⁴ Improving conditions for soldiers—higher salaries, better career opportunities and raised social status—was an important theme in the government's 2016 annual report on the armed forces and in the Programme for the Development of the Defence Capabilities of the Bulgarian Armed Forces 2020 approved in September 2015.²⁵ To bolster troop levels, in 2016 the government proposed to increase the reserve forces, which were set to disappear after the abolition of conscription in 2008, either through a new type of conscription or as a voluntary reserve force.²⁶

III. Armed forces structure

The active and reserve strengths of the Bulgarian armed forces have been drastically reduced since the end of the cold war (see table 2). In 2008, following a trend in many European countries, Bulgaria abolished conscription and the personnel of the armed forces was limited to voluntary career

²³ Novinite, 'Bulgarian Minister of Defense requests BGN 90M for the fleet in next budget', 13 Aug. 2017.

²⁴ *Sofia Globe*, 'Bulgarian President calls for "long-term policy" to end dangerous personnel outflow from armed forces', 5 May 2017.

²⁵ *Sofia Globe* (note 21); and Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *Programme for the Development of the Defence Capabilities of the Bulgarian Armed Forces 2020* (note 10).

²⁶ *Sofia Globe*, 'Bulgaria plans register of young people eligible for military service', 24 Feb. 2016.



soldiers.²⁷ This meant that the reserve force made up mainly from conscripts was largely abolished.

The Ministry of Defence's armed forces development plan published in 2010 proposed to reduce costs through further reduction of the armed forces. Personnel strength was reduced by almost 25 per cent by 2014, with 80 tanks, 280 other armoured vehicles and 80 combat aircraft.²⁸ By 2017 the armed forces consisted of 31 300 active personnel. However, later that year President Radev called for the reductions to be reversed.²⁹

The army has been most affected by the downsizing: since the end of the cold war, it has lost more than 80 per cent of its active troops and nearly all of its reserve strength. It has also lost most of its heavy equipment. Its remaining heavy equipment is almost entirely from before 1990 and has only undergone limited modernization since. The air force has also been substantially reduced, losing most aircraft. The aircraft that it continues to fly were acquired before 1990 and remain largely unmodernized, having only undergone the overhauls necessary to keep them operational.³⁰ The navy was least affected by the post-cold war downsizing since it was already small. Some outdated ships supplied before 1990 by the Soviet Union have been replaced with second-hand ships from Western states (see section VI).

IV. Armed forces deployment

Almost all Bulgarian armed forces are deployed at home and organized, trained and equipped for conventional military operations in defence of national territory. The 2011 national defence strategy allows a deployment of up to 1000 personnel (about 3 per cent of total troop strength) on operations overseas.³¹ Since becoming a member of NATO and the EU, Bulgaria has almost continuously deployed up to 800 personnel on NATO and EU foreign missions, including in Afghanistan, Georgia, Iraq, Kosovo and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as small contributions to several United Nations peace operations.³² It has also participated in the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), the EU Battle Groups, the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG).³³ The deployments in Afghanistan were the largest: Bulgaria contributed up to 600 troops to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) until 2014 and has since provided smaller deployments for the follow-on Resolute Support mission.³⁴ By May 2017 Bulgaria had 92 troops deployed to Afghanistan and in August 2017 a fresh contingent

Since the end of the cold war the Bulgarian Army has lost more than 80 per cent of its active troops and nearly all of its reserve strength

²⁷ Updated Plan for Organizational Build-up and Modernization of the Armed Forces (note 4); and Law on Defence and Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria (note 4).

²⁸ Bulgarian Ministry of Defence (MOD), *The Republic of Bulgaria's Armed Forces' Development Plan* (MOD: Sofia, 2010); and Dikov (note 6).

²⁹ *Sofia Globe* (note 24).

³⁰ *Scramble*, 'Military news & updates', no. 464 (Jan. 2018), p. 71; and Deutsche Welle, 'Bulgarian air force pilots refuse to fly outdated MiG-29 jets', 24 Oct. 2017.

³¹ Bulgarian Ministry of Defence (note 7), p. 13; and Dikov (note 6).

³² NATO, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), 'Bulgaria', [n.d.]; Novinite, 'The Cabinet will decide today on the participation of Bulgarian arms forces in Afghanistan', 26 July 2017; and SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, June 2018.

³³ NATO (note 32).

³⁴ Dikov (note 6).



of over 100 troops increased the total to 160.³⁵ Over the years these foreign deployments have given the Bulgarian armed forces, especially the ground forces, valuable experience in joint operations.

While meant for military defence, the Bulgarian Army has the additional task of supporting the Border Police (under the Ministry of Interior) in guarding the Bulgarian–Turkish border. In 2016 over 2700 troops were involved in this task and in 2017 an additional 600 troops were allocated.³⁶

Operations and major exercises

Since joining NATO, Bulgaria has regularly hosted or participated in exercises with NATO partners. The size and frequency of such exercises have increased in recent years.

The US-led Saber Guardian army exercise has been held since 2013 in the Black Sea region. The July 2017 exercise, which was co-hosted by Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, was the biggest ever, with 14 000 US troops and 11 000 troops from 21 other NATO members and NATO partner countries. Saber Guardian 2017 was also the first major exercise involving the Bulgarian–Romanian brigade set up in 2016, on this occasion under Bulgarian command.³⁷

In May 2017 one of the largest recent NATO exercises, Noble Jump 2017, was conducted in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.³⁸ For the first time the Bulgarian armed forces tested their capabilities to provide logistic support to other NATO forces on a large scale, which would be an important element of any potential fast deployment of NATO forces to Bulgaria in times of crisis.³⁹

The annual Thracian Star air exercise in Bulgaria was originally a Bulgarian–US event. It has since grown to include other NATO members; in 2018 it involved several aircraft from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and the USA, including Bulgarian MiG-29 and the US F-15C/D.⁴⁰

The Bulgarian Navy has been very active in exercises. In recent years it has participated in several international exercises and it hosts the annual large Briz (breeze) exercise. Briz 2018 involved 2340 personnel and 25 combat and auxiliary ships and cutters from 11 countries, including Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and the USA.⁴¹

³⁵ NATO, Resolute Support, ‘Resolute Support Mission: key facts and figures’, May 2017; Novinite, ‘Today Bulgaria will send the 34th contingent of the Bulgarian Army to participate in NATO mission in Afghanistan’, 15 Aug. 2017; and Novinite, ‘Bulgarian Government decided: more Bulgarian troops to be needed in Afghanistan’, 26 July 2017.

³⁶ *Sofia Globe* (note 21); Novinite, ‘600 armed military to protect border between Turkey and Bulgaria’, 17 Aug. 2017; and Novinite, ‘Interior Minister: over EUR 57m of European funds for border protection absorbed’, 10 Aug. 2017.

³⁷ US Army Europe, ‘Saber Guardian 2017’, Media information kit, 10 July 2017; Novinite, ‘Novo Selo training polygon hosted the biggest multinational exercise Saber Guardian 2017’, 20 July 2017; and King, W. B., ‘Army signal soldiers support Bulgarian-led multinational brigade at Saber Guardian 17’, US Army, 12 July 2017.

³⁸ Markus, I., ‘NATO Operation Noble Jump: thousands of troops assemble in South-Eastern Europe’, *Sofia Globe*, 31 May 2017.

³⁹ Lenkin, I., [Bulgaria will take part in NATO exercise Noble Jump], TASS, 31 May 2017 (in Russian).

⁴⁰ BTA, ‘Joint flights of Bulgarian, Greek, US and UK air forces during Thracian Star 2018 exercise’, 16 July 2018.

⁴¹ Zdravkova, G., ‘The Bulgarian naval exercise BREEZE 2018 is ongoing’, Bulgarian Military News, 16 July 2018.



Bulgaria also participates in ‘security cooperation’ activities (e.g. training courses, operations and military exercises) organized by the US Black Sea Rotational Force stationed in Romania and involving US Marines and partners in the Black Sea region (including Romania), the Balkans and the Caucasus.⁴² Bulgaria participated in related exercises in 2016, 2017 and 2018. The August 2018 exercise, Platinum Lion 2018, was a counterinsurgency peacekeeping exercise involving 700 personnel from NATO members (Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania and the USA) as well as members of the Partnership for Peace programme (Georgia, Moldova and Serbia).⁴³

In 2016 NATO agreed on an initiative to station multinational units in its eastern members

In 2016 NATO agreed on the Forward Presence initiative to further strengthen its eastern flank by stationing multinational units in its eastern members. The initiative has two main components: the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), which focuses on Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP), which focuses on Bulgaria and Romania.⁴⁴ As part of the TFP, Bulgaria has provided a small number of troops for the Multinational Brigade Southeast (MN BDE-SE) stationed in Romania.⁴⁵

Foreign forces deployed in Bulgaria

Bulgaria and Greece reached an agreement in 2014 on the joint policing of Bulgarian airspace, but implementation has stalled probably due to a lack of Bulgarian funds and, reportedly, a lack of NATO funding.⁴⁶ However, as part of the NATO ‘assurance measures’ under the Readiness Action Plan set up in 2014, Italy deployed four combat aircraft in July 2017 for three to four months to support the small number of Bulgarian combat aircraft in patrolling Bulgarian airspace.⁴⁷ In August 2016 the USA did the same with two aircraft for two weeks.⁴⁸

No foreign land forces are permanently based in Bulgaria. However, under the 2006 Bulgarian–US Defense Cooperation Agreement, the USA can deploy up to 2500 troops and military equipment to Bulgarian military bases for such military activities as security cooperation exercises and joint operations involving NATO and NATO partner states.⁴⁹

⁴² Lutz, T., ‘US Marines in Bulgaria conclude exercise Platinum Lion’, US Marines, 23 Dec. 2016; and Vergun, D., ‘US soldiers in Bulgaria, Romania deter aggression, assure allies’, US Army, 26 Sep. 2017.

⁴³ US Embassy in Bulgaria, ‘Closing ceremony for Platinum Lion 2018 security exercise’, 9 Aug. 2018; and *Sofia Globe*, ‘Bulgaria hosts multinational “Platinum Lion 2018” military exercise’, 8 Aug. 2018.

⁴⁴ NATO, ‘Boosting NATO’s presence in the east and southeast’, 1 Feb. 2018.

⁴⁵ See Wezeman and Kuimova (note 9).

⁴⁶ Chakarova, L. and Muzyka, K., ‘Naval gazing’, *IHS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, vol. 27, no. 11 (Nov. 2015), p. 29.

⁴⁷ NATO, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), ‘NATO assurance measures’, [n.d.]; NATO, Allied Air Command, ‘Italian jets deploy to Bulgaria under NATO’s enhanced Air Policing’, 7 July 2017; and NATO, Allied Air Command, ‘NATO air policing in Bulgaria’, 5 July 2017.

⁴⁸ NATO, ‘United States to augment air policing over Bulgaria, demonstrating Allied solidarity’, 24 Aug. 2016.

⁴⁹ Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria in Defense Cooperation (note 11).

Table 3. Bulgarian military expenditure, 2007–17

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 ^a
In national currency (current leva m.)	1 475	1 388	1 355	1 320	1 166	1 229	1 356	1 232	1 166	1 336	1 508
Annual change (%)	26.0	-5.9	-2.4	-2.6	-11.7	5.4	10.3	-9.1	-5.4	14.6	12.9
In US dollars (constant 2016 US\$ m.)	1 043	874	830	789	669	685	732	690	654	755	843
Annual real-terms change (%)	16.1	-16.2	-5.0	-4.9	-15.2	2.4	6.9	-5.7	-5.2	15.4	11.7
As a share of GDP (%)	2.3	1.9	1.9	1.8	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.3	1.4	1.6
Per capita (current US\$)	136	138	129	121	113	111	124	116	92	106	122
As a share of total government spending (%)	7.0	5.7	5.5	5.1	4.5	4.6	4.5	3.9	3.5	4.3	4.4

GDP = gross domestic product.

^a Data for 2017 is for budgeted spending; for all other years data is actual spending.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, May 2018.

While basing of air and land forces is technically without limitations, non-Black Sea countries cannot base ships in Bulgaria and even temporary deployments for exercises are limited. The 1936 Montreux Convention prohibits naval ships from countries outside the Black Sea from staying longer than 21 days in the Black Sea and puts limits on the type and maximum tonnage of any naval ships temporary deployed.⁵⁰

V. Military spending

Bulgarian military expenditure in 2007 was at its highest level since 1993, but by 2011 it had decreased by 36 per cent in real terms (see table 3). Between 2011 and 2015 annual spending was around \$700 million, equivalent to 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), but it varied from year to year. Between 2015 and 2017 spending grew by 29 per cent in real terms, in line with a substantial increase planned for 2016–20.⁵¹

Funding has been a major problem for Bulgaria's armed forces since the end of the cold war. Acquisitions of new equipment, training, salaries and operations have often been delayed, cut or kept low because of a lack of money. For example, Bulgaria's first naval deployment outside the Black Sea—a frigate sent to support NATO operations against Libya in 2012—was cut short due to a lack of money and in 2014 Bulgaria was not able to pay its 15 million leva (\$10 million) fee to NATO or a 14 million leva bill for the repair of aircraft.⁵²

Like other NATO members, Bulgaria has agreed to spend at least 2 per cent of its GDP on defence. The 2011 national defence strategy mandated a minimum of 1.5 per cent of GDP for defence and not less than 2 per cent when military pensions are included.⁵³ However, according to SIPRI estimates,

⁵⁰ Convention Regarding the Régime of the Straits, signed at Montreux 20 July 1936, entered into force 9 Nov. 1936, *League of Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 173, nos 4001–32 (1936–37), Article 18(2).

⁵¹ Bulgarian Council of Ministers (note 10).

⁵² Dikov (note 6); and Novinite, 'Rearmament of Bulgarian Army to cost BGN 1B by 2020', 15 Aug. 2014.

⁵³ Bulgarian Ministry of Defence (note 7), p. 22; and Dikov (note 6).



since 2011 Bulgaria's military spending, including pensions, has fluctuated between 1.3 and 1.6 per cent (see table 3).

Ahead of the September 2014 NATO summit that reaffirmed the 2 per cent goal, the Bulgarian Government was highly critical of Bulgaria's past failure to acquire new 'combat capabilities'. It planned to spend 1.5 per cent of GDP on the military in 2015 and to increase this share by 0.1 of a percentage point each year in order to reach 2 per cent by 2020.⁵⁴ This would double the budget in nominal terms (i.e. not taking account of inflation). Since the low level of salaries for the military is a major problem, it is likely that the planned increases in spending would mainly have gone to salaries. However, funding for acquisitions was also to be increased significantly, from 4–5 per cent of the total spending in 2014 to 15–20 per cent in 2015–20; or from about 50 million leva (\$31 million) in 2015 to over 400 million leva (\$248 million in 2015 prices) in 2020.⁵⁵

Shortly after the 2014 NATO summit and the announcement of the planned increases, a new prime minister, Boyko Borisov, took office. Borisov questioned the aim of reaching 2 per cent of GDP by 2020.⁵⁶ Indeed, military spending fell in 2015. As prime minister in 2011, when discussing equipment modernization plans he had prioritized 'butter before guns', making military spending secondary to economic growth and other government spending.⁵⁷ As early as 2016, although military spending did start to rise, the time frame for increasing military expenditure was adjusted, and the target date for reaching 2 per cent of GDP was delayed until 2024.⁵⁸ This illustrates the uncertainty that remains about the commitment of the Bulgarian political parties to both the schedule and the size of the planned increase.

Between 2015 and 2017 Bulgarian military spending grew by 29 per cent in real terms

VI. Arms holdings and acquisitions

Although the Bulgarian armed forces have been significantly reorganized since the end of the cold war, in 2014 the Bulgarian Government claimed that no new combat equipment had been acquired for 20 years or more.⁵⁹ While this is not entirely correct, it is true that little new equipment has been acquired since the end of the cold war. Most plans to acquire new equipment in the past 20–25 years have been delayed or cancelled, largely due to a lack of funds caused by a weak economy and a trend to favour investment in economic development over additional spending on the military.

Most of the weapons in service are or will soon become obsolete and are often dependent for spare parts and repairs on Russia. These two issues are recognized as among the main problems for the Bulgarian armed forces.⁶⁰ However, even the 2014 plan to use 15–20 per cent of the military budget for new equipment would allow only limited acquisitions: for example, even after the planned budget increases, the total acquisition budget for three

⁵⁴ Bulgarian Council of Ministers (note 8), p. 8.

⁵⁵ Bulgarian Council of Ministers (note 8), pp. 8–9.

⁵⁶ Novinite, 'Bulgaria's ranks average in military expenditure within NATO', 19 Apr. 2016.

⁵⁷ Dikov (note 6).

⁵⁸ *Sofia Globe* (note 21).

⁵⁹ Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *National Programme: Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020* (note 10), p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Sofia Globe* (note 21); and Novinite (note 52).



years would be swallowed up by the planned acquisition of the first 8 of 16 new combat aircraft (see below). Current plans are thus limited and focus on new equipment for the air force and navy.

Army

Of the three services, modernization of the army's inventory has been the least prioritized. A handful of new light armoured vehicles have been acquired in the past 10 years, mainly for Bulgarian forces on foreign missions. There are current plans to acquire new armoured vehicles for troop transport by 2029.⁶¹

Air Force

The main assets of the air force are 15–16 MiG-29 and 14–20 Su-25 combat aircraft acquired in the 1980s, some of which are in storage or not in a safe flying condition. Only seven of the MiG-29 aircraft were reported to be operational in late 2017 and even those were deemed so unsafe that some pilots refused to fly them.⁶² There have been plans to replace the current MiG-29 and Su-25 combat aircraft with new or second-hand aircraft since the late 1990s. Although replacing the aircraft has consistently been considered a priority, the process has been repeatedly delayed, mainly due to a lack of funds. In the interim the MiG-29s were upgraded in 2006–2009 by the original Russian producer to keep most of them operational.⁶³

The latest plan, announced in 2016, is for the acquisition of 16 combat aircraft by 2023 in two batches of 8.⁶⁴ For the first batch and related armament, 1.5 billion leva (\$815–900 million) was allocated and a tender for proposals was issued in late 2016. Several European countries offered surplus aircraft and in April 2017 the Swedish Gripen-C was announced as the 'preferred option'.⁶⁵ President Radev supports both the need for new aircraft and the selection of the Gripen.⁶⁶ However, the prime minister, Borisov, has questioned the need for new advanced combat aircraft and has suggested cheaper alternatives, while his party favours the second-hand F-16 offered by the USA.⁶⁷ In September 2017 a parliamentary investigation into the acquisition process found fault with the selection of the Gripen and the selection process was restarted in July 2018.⁶⁸ By the end of 2017 it was reported that the government now also considered the larger and more advanced F/A-18E as

Maintaining a force of major combat ships has been and will continue to be the main priority for the Bulgarian Navy

⁶¹ Subev (note 21).

⁶² *Scramble* (note 30); and Deutsche Welle (note 30).

⁶³ Holdanowicz, G., 'Bulgaria focuses on fighter procurement', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 Apr. 2010.

⁶⁴ Mladenov, A. and Grozev, K., 'Bulgaria issues RFP for new fighter', *Flight International*, 14 Dec. 2016.

⁶⁵ Tsalova, T. and Krasimirov, A., 'Bulgaria opts for Swedish Gripen combat jets', Reuters, 26 Apr. 2017.

⁶⁶ Novinite (note 18); and Mladenov and Grozev (note 19).

⁶⁷ Mladenov and Grozev (note 19).

⁶⁸ Krasimirov, A., 'Bulgaria issues request for proposals for fighter jets', Reuters, 25 July 2018; Mladenov and Grozev (note 19); and Bozinovski, I., 'Bulgaria considers Russia for MiG-29, Su-25 upgrade help', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 Aug. 2017, p. 12.



an option.⁶⁹ Krasimir Karakachanov, Bulgaria's defence minister, has subsequently also mentioned the possibility of obtaining Israeli second-hand F-16s.⁷⁰

In the meantime, Bulgaria is considering overhauling the MiG-29 and Su-25 aircraft with the help of the Russian companies that originally produced them, which will keep them operational until 2022 or, according to Karakachanov, until 2030.⁷¹ In October 2017 he saw no need to hurry the acquisition of new aircraft.⁷²

Navy

Maintaining a force of major combat ships has been and will continue to be the main priority for the Bulgarian Navy.

Three second-hand but modernized Wielingen-class frigates (built in the 1970s) were acquired from Belgium in 2005–2009 to supplement one frigate dating from the 1980s and replace outdated ships. In 2008 a lack of funds led Bulgaria to cancel a €700 million (\$824 million) plan for four similar ships to replace all four frigates then in service. A €400 million (\$471 million) tender for two new frigates was launched in August 2017.⁷³ Bulgaria also plans to modernize the current Wielingen frigates by 2020.⁷⁴

A new large patrol ship is planned to be acquired by 2020 to replace small combat ships dating from the late 1980s.⁷⁵ The project, however, has not made progress due to the decision by the shipbuilding company to cancel its proposal, largely because the Ministry of Defence reduced the price that it would pay.⁷⁶

Plans for new submarines were abandoned in 2011 when Bulgaria closed its submarine unit since there was no future prospect of funding and the unit's sole submarine had not been operational for years.⁷⁷

Anti-mine capabilities are another priority.⁷⁸ One former Belgian mine-hunter was acquired in 2007 to complement older minesweepers dating from the 1980s. The current ships will be modernized and acquisition of two new anti-mine ships is planned after 2020 to replace three old ships.⁷⁹

⁶⁹ *Scramble* (note 30).

⁷⁰ *Sofia Globe*, 'Bulgarian defence minister: fighter jet, infantry vehicle projects to go to cabinet on May 9', 27 Apr. 2018.

⁷¹ Reuters, 'NATO member Bulgaria picks Russia to overhaul aging MiG-29 jets', 14 Mar. 2018; Bozinovski (note 68); and Mladenov and Grozev (note 19).

⁷² Leviev-Sawyer, C., 'Bulgarian Defence Minister: "no need to hurry" in getting new jet fighters', *Sofia Globe*, 5 Oct. 2017.

⁷³ Tran, P., 'Macron might back warship pitch to Bulgaria', *Defense News*, 21 Aug. 2017.

⁷⁴ Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *National Programme: Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020* (note 10), p. 14; and Novinite (note 23).

⁷⁵ Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *National Programme: Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020* (note 10), p. 14.

⁷⁶ Bozinovski, I., 'Bulgaria weighs up options as patrol boat acquisition plans stall', *Jane's Navy International*, 5 Mar. 2018.

⁷⁷ Dikov (note 6).

⁷⁸ Bulgarian Council of Ministers, *National Programme: Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020* (note 10), p. 14.

⁷⁹ Saunders, ed. (note 3), p. 95.



VII. Conclusions

Bulgaria recognizes many actual and potential direct and indirect threats to its security and has seen those threats grow in recent years. It is committed to dealing with them as a member of NATO and the EU, and therefore supports NATO's aim to increase military spending and military cooperation, coordination and interoperability.

However, Bulgaria has limited means to modernize its largely outdated inventory of weapons or even to maintain troop levels. Plans for improvements lack urgency. This can be explained partly by continuous disagreement within the weak coalition governments on spending priorities and partly by a lack of government funds. Moreover Bulgaria has generally friendly relations with Russia and does not perceive any of its neighbours or other Black Sea littoral states as being among the major threats to its security.



Abbreviations

BLACKSEAFOR	Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group
EEZ	Exclusive economic zone
EFP	Enhanced Forward Presence
EU	European Union
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GDP	Gross domestic product
ISAF	NATO International Security Assistance Force
MOD	Ministry of Defence
MN BDE-SE	Multinational Brigade Southeast
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NFIU	NATO Force Integration Unit
NRF	NATO Response Force
SEEBRIG	South-Eastern Europe Brigade
TFP	Tailored Forward Presence

SIPRI is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament. Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public.

GOVERNING BOARD

Ambassador Jan Eliasson,
Chair (Sweden)
Dr Dewi Fortuna Anwar
(Indonesia)
Dr Vladimir Baranovsky
(Russia)
Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi
(Algeria)
Espen Barth Eide (Norway)
Jean-Marie Guéhenno (France)
Dr Radha Kumar (India)
Dr Patricia Lewis (Ireland/
United Kingdom)
Dr Jessica Tuchman Mathews
(United States)

DIRECTOR

Dan Smith (United Kingdom)



STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Signalistgatan 9
SE-169 72 Solna, Sweden
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00
Email: sipri@sipri.org
Internet: www.sipri.org

SIPRI BACKGROUND PAPER

BULGARIA AND BLACK SEA SECURITY

SIEMON T. WEZEMAN AND ALEXANDRA KUIMOVA

CONTENTS

I. Background	2
II. Defence policy	3
III. Armed forces structure	7
IV. Armed forces deployment	7
Operations and major exercises	8
Foreign forces deployed in Bulgaria	9
V. Military spending	10
VI. Arms holdings and acquisitions	11
Army	12
Air Force	12
Navy	13
VII. Conclusions	14
Abbreviations	15
Figure 1. Map of Bulgaria	2
Table 1. Basic facts about Bulgaria and the Black Sea	4
Table 2. Bulgarian armed forces, selected years 1987–2017	6
Table 3. Bulgarian military expenditure, 2007–17	10

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Siemon T. Wezeman (Netherlands) is a Senior Researcher with the SIPRI Arms Transfers and Military Expenditure Programme. His areas of research include the monitoring of arms transfers, with particular focus on the Asia–Pacific region and former Soviet Union, and the use of weapons in conflicts.

Alexandra Kuimova (Russia) is a Research Assistant with the SIPRI Arms Transfers and Military Expenditure Programme. Working with the SIPRI Military Expenditure, Arms Industry and Arms Transfers databases, she focuses on developments in the Middle East and North Africa region, and post-Soviet states.