

GRAND STRATEGY IN A VOLATILE ENVIRONMENT. THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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***Abstract:** Developing a Grand Strategy is never an easy task, as it geared towards building a framework for the use of all the instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, economic, military) in order to achieve national objectives that ultimately serve to support the national values and interests. The current volatile environment complicates the issue even further, by changing at a fast pace the external and internal conditions in which a country evolves. The aim of this paper is to analyze the main directions of Romania's security and defense approach as outlined in the current Strategy for the Country's Defense and to highlight the degree to which the current strategy is suitable for a volatile environment.*

***Key words:** strategy, volatility, risks, threats, ways of action, Romania*

1. INTRODUCTION

A “grand strategy” is defined as “the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state's deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state's national interest” [1]. Although this term is more familiar to Anglo-Saxon readers, I will prefer its use throughout the paper when talking about the generic concept, in order to avoid any confusion, as the corresponding Romanian strategic planning documents have changed their names in time, from the National Security Strategy to National Defense

Strategy to National Strategy for the Country's Defense.

In the last two decades, Romania's Grand Strategy changed not only its name, but also its approach. The 2001 National Security Strategy, developed in a more stable and predictable security environment, considered that the “main security problems faced by Romania are economic issues”, mentioning as security risks the classical terrorism/migration/weapons of mass destruction/extremism challenges. The document is mostly a collection of general, political statements, both in terms of the analysis of the security environment, but also in regard to the future ways of action.

The security environment has changed dramatically since then, and Romania's Grand Strategy attempts to keep up with the new developments. It is the purpose of this paper to analyze Romania's strategic approach as derived from the National Strategy for the Country's Defense 2020-2024 and the degree to which it is suited for the current environment, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

2. CHALLENGES OF A VOLATILE ENVIRONMENT

In the real world, the development of the strategy is inextricably influenced by constraints, of which the most important are time and information and in the current volatile environment, both constraints are acutely felt by strategic planners.

Time is a crucial resource in planning, as it is the foundation of anticipation, decision making and action in the area of security and defense. Compared to the cold war environment and the relatively predictable environment of 10 years ago, when the time dimension was relatively forgiving as strategies could be created for longer periods of time, the current uncertain environment means that the timeframe has narrowed down significantly. The current security environment is different from the one of 4 years ago, which makes the development of appropriate and realistic strategic planning documents even more important, but at the same time more difficult.

A good strategy relies heavily on reliable intelligence, understanding of the potential risks, threats and vulnerabilities and efficient analysis based on planning assumptions. Romania's 2020 new Strategy for the Country's Defense, focused on the 2020-2024 timeframe was developed in a particular security environment, in which the classical threats of terrorism and actions from state/non-state actors have been accompanied by new problems that gained precedence over the ones identified in the previous years. These problems are related to more "traditional" areas such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or terrorist, but also to newer issues, such as health security and economic security, generated by the COVID 19 pandemic. In a way, it is fortunate that timing of Romania's election cycle led to the development of the 2020-2024 Strategy for the Country's Defense after the debut of the COVID 19 pandemic, which meant it could address this pressing issue. But this also highlights the need to make proper assumptions and to identify and envision ways of action even for what appears at first glance an improbable event, but also to adapt the strategy, if need be, to a security environment that can shift with surprising speed.

3. ROMANIA'S STRATEGIC APPROACH

Unlike the previous Strategy for the Country's Defense 2015-2019, which has a more classical

approach in its design (as it debuts with identifying the national interests and security objectives), the current strategic document starts with a chapter highlighting Romania's status as a "NATO and EU member, as a resilient state and a pole of regional stability" [2]. This first chapter does not follow the traditional logic and structure of building a strategic planning document. It presents a mixture of political statements, snippets of analysis of current security challenges and duplicate information that can be found elsewhere in the document. It aims to introduce the concept of resilience, which recently became a buzzword in many areas, including security. The concept is widely used in the context of crisis and uncertainty, and the COVID 19 pandemic only served to amplify its popularity. The inclusion of the concept in Romania's Strategy for the Country's Defense is aligned with its inclusion in the 2016 European Union (EU) Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy, where resilience is mentioned 34 times.

Romania's grand strategy defines resilience as "inherent capacity of entities - individuals, communities, regions, state - to resist and adapt in an articulated manner to violent, stressful events, to shocks, disasters, pandemics or conflicts... and... to the ability of these entities to quickly return to a functional state of normalcy" [3]. The concept is further detailed as the need for a collaborative, multi-dimensional approach to resilience is emphasized.

The focus of the concept is the society and critical infrastructure resilience, as outlined in the various instruments proposed in this respect, focused mainly on combating fake news and disinformation at the level of society and the need to "increase the awareness of the population, public central and local institutions and private companies on the importance of critical infrastructure protection". [4]

Although the issues these instruments and their corresponding means of action should definitely make the object of the strategy, it is not clear why they are not highlighted in the chapter detailing the various security dimensions and their associated ways of action, as they clearly relate to the intelligence, counterintelligence and security dimension. The purpose appears to highlight the concept of resilience and present it as a priority, but the result is somewhat redundant, leading to information overload and difficulty in following the main train of thought in the document.

The current grand strategy mainly follows on with the main security threats and risks identified in the previous one (for the period 2015-2019), consequently the security and defense policy approach that can be derived from it does not contain fundamental changes. Nonetheless, there are a few points that are worthy of attention, in respect to the main security threats and risks.

One noteworthy difference concerns the Russian Federation.

Although the Russian Federation was mentioned in the National Strategy for the Country's Defense 2015-2019, it was viewed as an actor that "tries to consolidate its status as a regional power and whose actions influence the regional stability and the European aspirations of Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia ... by its actions in the Black Sea Region, infringing upon international law, questioning international order, preserving frozen conflicts and the annexation of Crimea." [5]

In the 2020 grand strategy, Russia is perceived as a greater destabilizing factor and a special mention is made regarding the "strengthening the military potential in the vicinity of Romania, including on the Eastern flank and on the NATO border (militarization of Crimea and the Black Sea basin in general by the Russian Federation, conducting military exercises and strengthening capabilities through which offensive and defensive operations can be carried out)". [6]

In other words, Russia's perception as a potential security threat has evolved from a political actor influencing mainly political processes (such as European aspiration of countries in the region) towards a potential military threat. The issue of security in the Black Sea is highlighted, with the Russian Federation seen as a destabilizing force.

Yet, with the exception of another paragraph mentioning the changing positions of certain NATO

allies (not specifically identified, although the reference to Turkey and perhaps other countries can be presupposed) regarding their position towards the Russian Federation, no further mention about the Russian Federation is made throughout the document. Russia is not identified outright as an explicit threat, the Strategy preferring the use of generic and ambiguous phrases, that may refer to the Russian Federation or not, depending on the reader's point of view: "the offensive/aggressive behavior, including in economic terms, of some state entities whose interests are contrary to those of our country, blockages in the European/transatlantic course and/or perpetuation of economic instability may lead to developments with negative security impact in the vicinity of Romania and in Black Sea region." [7]

Another interesting issue that signals a change in the strategic approach is the priority given to the Black Sea region. In the 2007 Romanian National Security Strategy, the Black Sea is viewed as "a connector of strategic importance ... requiring a distinct way of action within the Strategy, through actively promoting the need for a Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Black Sea area" [8]. The issue of the Black Sea region was highlighted in an entire chapter of the Strategy, but the main threats identified then were the classic ones: terrorism, organized crime, inefficient governance and separatist conflicts.

Despite President's Basescu's less than friendly statements towards the Russian Federation [9], the Strategy did not explicitly identify Russia as a threat or a risk factor for the Black Sea region.

In the 2015 Strategy issued under the Klaus Johannis administration, the importance of the Black Sea region was somewhat reduced. Ensuring the security in the region is mentioned as a national security objective, but this objective is not linked to very specific and determined lines of action. The Black Sea region was mentioned in the 2015 Strategy just 6 times, in relation to Russia's actions, frozen conflicts and energy security. The lines of action are rather generic, on the general approach of ensuring security in the region by consolidating military cooperation and in promoting the Black Sea's strategic significance and cooperation formats.

In the 2020 Strategy, the Black Sea region is mentioned not only in relation to the threats emerging in the region, but explicitly as an "area of maximum strategic interest ... requiring a comprehensive approach, including, besides the military area, relevant aspects from the economic, transport, energy, environment and society resilience". [10]

This leads us to the reason why the Russian Federation had a rather vigorous reaction to the new Strategy. Russia outright accused Romania of "serving other people's confrontational ideas regarding Russia even at the cost of their own interests, which, inter alia, arise from

Romania and Russia both being part of the Black Sea region" and stated that the Strategy "will be used to intensify the buildup of the US and NATO military presence in the Black Sea". [11]

The statement is based on the provisions in the Strategy that mention in no uncertain terms that the security of the Black Sea area is to be ensured through increasing the allied presence on Romania's soil and on the emphasis placed on the Strategic Partnership with US: "Romania intends to consolidate the military cooperation with the US, not just as a generic way of action derived from the allied status, but as an operational objective to be implemented on the national territory" [12].

This approach marks a definite change from the more diplomatic tone adopted in the previous strategic documents, which avoided clearly specifying such threats and ways of action and mirrors the increased tensions and volatility of the international environment. Considering that the purpose of a security strategy is not only to provide strategic guidelines for the national decision makers, but also to publicly showcase Romania's security approach, this apparent change in approach may have implications on two distinct directions.

On one hand, it shows Romania's commitment to its EU, NATO allies and its support for the US as a strategic partner, hopefully acting as a deterrent against potential threats. On the other hand, Romania's straight forward and more

ambitious approach differs from the one of its neighbors, which prefer a more diplomatic way of tackling the increased assertiveness of the Russian Federation and it may have the drawback of an escalation of the tensions in the region.

Besides the Russian Federation, three other countries are explicitly mentioned as a source of instability: North Korea, Afghanistan and Pakistan in relation to the security situation in the Middle East and Asia, but they impact is approached on a global level, affecting Romania indirectly through migratory flows and the reconfiguration of the geostrategic situation.

Another issue worth mentioning about the new strategy is the planning assumption it is built upon and which is clearly stated: “the predominance of the US in the international system shall remain uncontested for the predictable future”. [13] This planning assumption is a very confident one, considering the high volatility of the international security environment and the fact that the same Strategy is also build on assumptions such as “the international security architecture will be strongly shaped by the redefinition of the security interests of state actors with global interests and by the reconfiguration of the relations between them”[14]. The same paragraph offers yet another apparently contradictory statement “given that there are no significant premises that would generate a paradigm shift in relations between the US and its strategic competitors,

the areas of intersection of regional hegemonic ambitions (Europe and Asia-Pacific) will be the most exposed to consistent transformations in the security evolutions” [15].

This apparent contradiction may appear from the use of different time horizons for statements grouped in the same paragraph. Indeed, it is unlikely that the US will lose its role as a hegemon in international relations in the next four years, but the long term trend is clearly in the direction of a change in the international balance of power and the strategy should clarify the timeframe used for its planning assumption, in order to avoid the impression of unclear and contradictory statements.

In relation to the planning assumption mentioned before, the 2020 Strategy also bring another novel view on Romania’s approach to China. Although China is by no means mentioned explicitly as a security risk to international security, the mention of the potential vulnerabilities of the 5G networks with serious security implications is in line with the statement that “China’s multi-decade doctrine and milestones will increasingly influence ??? and the way the US perceives and respond to the systemic role of this state.” ??? [16] The approach that can be drawn from the stipulations in the Strategy is that Romania’s strategy towards China follows that of the US and signifies a change from the traditional good relations Romania had with China towards a more cautious approach, especially

in relation to the 5G technology and the Chinese investments.

The issue of the Republic of Moldova is another area that marks a change in tone in comparison with the previous strategies, as a logical follow-up of the changes in the security environment. In the 2007 Strategy, the cooperation with the Republic of Moldova was considered a priority, deriving from “a common history, language and culture”. [17]

The 2015 Strategy follows in the same line, albeit in a slightly less enthusiastic manner, considering that “regional instability limits Romania’s ability to promote its strategic interests, especially those regarding supporting Moldova’s European route” [18].

In the 2020 Strategy, the evolution in the Republic of Moldova is considered a risk to national security, “due to the perspective of counterbalancing the European orientation with the orientation towards the Eurasian direction.”[19].

Although the issues of supporting the Republic of Moldova’s European approach, the participation in bilateral strategic interconnection projects and the common language, history and identity are still mentioned in the 2020 strategy, the approach is presented as a wish to “contribute to the political, economic and security stabilization of the EU/NATO neighborhood”, with less or no emphasis on special relations and of the “single nation – two states” concept put forward in the 2007 Strategy.

3. CONCLUSIONS

As the purpose of this paper was to analyze the main directions of Romania’s security and defense approach as outlined in the current Strategy for the Country’s Defense in view of the volatility of the environment, numerous other issues have been left out of the analysis (the approach on technology, economy, energy etc).

The current strategy does reflect the main issues and challenges generated by the uncertain environment, and attempts to highlight ways of action to mitigate the identified risks and threats.

It clearly states Romania’s Euro-Atlantic direction, perhaps in a way that is considered too determined by other countries (such as Russia) and it touches upon most of the security and defense issues faced by countries in the Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkan area, the EU and NATO.

At the same time, there are still areas that could benefit from improvement, first of all in relation to the clarity and the organization of the document. Secondly, some ideas could benefit from rephrasing and the blunt mentioning of a state as a threat is not always conducive to cooperation. The current phrasing does send a message, but this message should be backed up by clear ways of action and further details, in other strategic planning documents.

Lastly, the planning assumptions base on which the

document is developed should be carefully analyzed and updated if necessary, in order to make the strategy more suitable for a volatile security environment.

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