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.

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. 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.

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 with NATO partners. However, Bulgaria also tries to remain on good terms with Russia by way of bilateral economic and political cooperation.

* 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.

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).

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. 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. 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. In April 2011 the Council of Ministers adopted a stand-alone national defence strategy.

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. 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.

This non-paper was followed in October 2014 and September 2015 by official and more detailed defence programmes that outlined plans until 2020. The 2015 document includes the potential threat of hybrid warfare among a
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. 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.

In 2016 NATO agreed to establish a Bulgarian–Romanian multinational brigade. 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. Among the reported reasons behind Bulgaria’s refusal to

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Table 1. Basic facts about Bulgaria and the Black Sea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>111 000 km²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Sea coastline</td>
<td>414 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waters claimed in the Black Sea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial waters</td>
<td>12 nautical miles (22 km)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive economic zone</td>
<td>200 nautical miles (370 km)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbouring countries</td>
<td>Greece, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land borders</td>
<td>Romania, Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial waters</td>
<td>7.0 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive economic zone</td>
<td>$56.9 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbouring countries</td>
<td>$8,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (2018)</td>
<td>Member since 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (2017)</td>
<td>Member since 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (current US$)</td>
<td>$866.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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


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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.

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. 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. 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’.

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.

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. 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.

Military salaries are low compared with other sectors.
be comparable to those of most other NATO members, but it also realizes that funds will probably not be available for that. The military profession does not have a good reputation and President Radev has called for the social status of soldiers to be raised.

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.

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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personnel</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active personnel</td>
<td>152,800</td>
<td>107,000</td>
<td>68,450</td>
<td>40,747</td>
<td>31,300</td>
<td>31,300</td>
<td>31,300</td>
<td>31,300</td>
<td>31,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>31,050</td>
<td>18,773</td>
<td>16,300</td>
<td>16,300</td>
<td>16,300</td>
<td>16,300</td>
<td>15,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>17,780</td>
<td>9,344</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>6,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>8,800</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>4,370</td>
<td>4,100</td>
<td>3,450</td>
<td>3,450</td>
<td>3,450</td>
<td>3,450</td>
<td>3,450</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other MOD</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>15,250</td>
<td>8,530</td>
<td>4,850</td>
<td>4,850</td>
<td>4,850</td>
<td>4,850</td>
<td>5,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserves</td>
<td>216,500</td>
<td>472,500</td>
<td>303,000</td>
<td>303,000</td>
<td>303,000</td>
<td>303,000</td>
<td>303,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paramilitary²</td>
<td>165,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equipment</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanks</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>2,250</td>
<td>1,543</td>
<td>1,474</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other armour</td>
<td>1,410</td>
<td>1,963</td>
<td>3,213</td>
<td>2,641</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artillery over 100 mm</td>
<td>1,850</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>1,443</td>
<td>1,796</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat aircraft</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helicopters</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major warships²</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor warships²</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

. . = 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.

² 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).

² 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.

### 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

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² Sofia Globe, ‘Bulgarian President calls for “long-term policy” to end dangerous personnel outflow from armed forces’, 5 May 2017.


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).


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

\(^32\) NATO (note 32).

\(^33\) Dikov (note 6).
of over 100 troops increased the total to 160.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{37}

In May 2017 one of the largest recent NATO exercises, Noble Jump 2017, was conducted in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{41}


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

\textsuperscript{40} BTA, ‘Joint flights of Bulgarian, Greek, US and UK air forces during Thracian Star 2018 exercise’, 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. 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).

In 2016 NATO agreed on an 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. As part of the TFP, Bulgaria has provided a small number of troops for the Multinational Brigade Southeast (MN BDE-SE) stationed in Romania.

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. 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. In August 2016 the USA did the same with two aircraft for two weeks.

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.

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45 See Wezeman and Kuimova (note 9).  
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{53} However, according to SIPRI estimates,


\textsuperscript{51} Bulgarian Council of Ministers (note 10).

\textsuperscript{52} Dikov (note 6); and Novinite, ‘Rearmament of Bulgarian Army to cost BGN 1B by 2020′, 15 Aug. 2014.

\textsuperscript{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.\footnote{Bulgarian Council of Ministers (note 8), p. 8.} 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.\footnote{Bulgarian Council of Ministers (note 8), pp. 8–9.}

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.\footnote{Novinite, ‘Bulgaria’s ranks average in military expenditure within NATO’, 19 Apr. 2016.} 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.\footnote{Dikov (note 6).} As early as 2016, although military spending did start to rise, the timeframe for increasing military expenditure was adjusted, and the target date for reaching 2 per cent of GDP was delayed until 2024.\footnote{Sofia Globe (note 21).} 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.

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.\footnote{Bulgarian Council of Ministers, National Programme: Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020 (note 10), p. 4.} 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.\footnote{Sofia Globe (note 21); and Novinite (note 52).} 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
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

61 Subev (note 21).
62 Scramble (note 30); and Deutsche Welle (note 30).
66 Novinite (note 18); and Mladenov and Grozev (note 19).
67 Mladenov and Grozev (note 19).
an option. Krasimir Karakachanov, Bulgaria’s defence minister, has subsequently also mentioned the possibility of obtaining Israeli second-hand F-16s.

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. In October 2017 he saw no need to hurry the acquisition of new aircraft.

**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.

A new large patrol ship is planned to be acquired by 2020 to replace small combat ships dating from the late 1980s. 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.

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.

Anti-mine capabilities are another priority. 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.
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

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

BULGARIA AND BLACK SEA SECURITY

SIEMON T. WEZEMAN AND ALEXANDRA KUIMOVA

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