

The NATO Summit Is Another Chance to Counter Russia in the “South”

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.

 Brief Analysis

The alliance has already been shifting toward greater engagement with the Middle East and Africa, but various maritime and infrastructure threats require more urgent attention, as does the broader problem of countering Moscow’s narrative.

On July 9-11, NATO will hold [its latest summit \(https://www.act.nato.int/activities/nato-summit/\)](https://www.act.nato.int/activities/nato-summit/) at a key moment in its evolution. As the alliance turns seventy-five, Russia’s war against Ukraine continues to threaten global security, leading many to acknowledge that resolving the conflict requires looking beyond Ukraine. This includes putting the Middle East and neighboring regions front and center in NATO strategy, both at the Washington summit and beyond—a message that alliance officials have repeatedly emphasized in public and private.

The question then becomes how best to counter Moscow in these regions while still engaging effectively with local partners. A good place to start is by focusing on three key issues: protecting maritime trade routes, securing critical infrastructure, and countering Russia’s narrative.

The War and NATO’s South

The Ukraine war has highlighted the extent to which events in NATO’s South (i.e., the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, and adjacent maritime regions) directly shape Euro-Atlantic security. Perhaps the clearest example is Moscow’s deepening relationship with Tehran, which includes using Iranian drones to conduct combat, suicide, and intelligence missions in Ukraine. Russia’s presence in Syria and Libya likewise poses multiple security challenges to the West; indeed, the Wagner Group and its Africa Corps successor have helped the Kremlin achieve multiple foreign policy objectives at a low cost across the Middle East and Africa. Russia is also [reportedly using \(https://apnews.com/article/poland-belarus-migrants-russia-ukraine-59d6050c2ea6853de3154150e8c9dcb5\)](https://apnews.com/article/poland-belarus-migrants-russia-ukraine-59d6050c2ea6853de3154150e8c9dcb5) its ally Belarus to weaponize migration from these regions, redirecting individuals who might normally have attempted to enter Europe via southern routes and sending them across the eastern frontier instead.

Strategic waterways tie NATO to the “South” as well, as highlighted by the Ukraine war, the Gaza war, and the Red Sea shipping crisis. For example, the Suez Canal [accounts \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/business/red-sea-crisis-global-trade-explained/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/business/red-sea-crisis-global-trade-explained/index.html) for 10-15 percent of global trade (including oil exports) and 30 percent of container shipping volume, while the Black Sea is central to the global food crisis that was greatly exacerbated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Middle East and Africa [stand to lose the most \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mena-countries-stand-lose-most-if-ukraine-grain-initiative-falters\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mena-countries-stand-lose-most-if-ukraine-grain-initiative-falters) from that ongoing crisis, especially in the wake of Russia’s [withdrawal \(https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/03/russia-food-vladimir-putin-black-sea-grain-initiative-eu-aid#:~:text=What%20was%20the%20Black%20Sea%20grain%20deal%20and%20why%20did%20it%20collapse%3F&text=Despite%20these%20well%20known%20and,endangering\)](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/03/russia-food-vladimir-putin-black-sea-grain-initiative-eu-aid#:~:text=What%20was%20the%20Black%20Sea%20grain%20deal%20and%20why%20did%20it%20collapse%3F&text=Despite%20these%20well%20known%20and,endangering) from the Black Sea grain deal in July 2023. Moscow also seeks access to a [naval base \(https://sudantribune.com/article286475/\)](https://sudantribune.com/article286475/) on the Red Sea, further raising the regional stakes for NATO.

Of course, Middle Eastern countries engaged with NATO for years before these crises, from the [Mediterranean Dialogue \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_60021.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_60021.htm) to the [Istanbul Cooperation Initiative \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52956.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52956.htm). And NATO has never been shy about intervening in the Middle East, most notably in Libya in 2011. But alliance discussions about engaging the region have shifted to a deeper strategic level over the past couple years. At its June 2022 summit in Madrid, NATO [established \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm) a “360 approach to defense and deterrence.” In 2024, the alliance has released two key documents on related subjects: a May report by an independently appointed group of experts with [concrete proposals \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_225245.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_225245.htm) for addressing the southern neighborhood, and an April report by a NATO Parliamentary Assembly committee [highlighting \(https://www.nato-pa.int/content/mediterranean-and-middle-east-special-group-gsm\)](https://www.nato-pa.int/content/mediterranean-and-middle-east-special-group-gsm) Russia’s destabilizing role in these regions.

Elsewhere, Jens Stoltenberg became the first sitting NATO secretary-general to [visit Saudi Arabia \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_220769.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_220769.htm) last December, laying out a vision for deeper cooperation with the kingdom. NATO also aims to open an office in Jordan. Internally, the alliance is hiring more Arabic speakers and recently named a woman of Arab descent as its [main spokesperson \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/who_is_who_223095.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/who_is_who_223095.htm).

Countering Russia’s “Ghost Fleet”

Another external factor fueling the war on Ukraine is Russia’s so-called “ghost fleet (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/23/how-greek-companies-and-ghost-ships-are-helping-russia/>)” of oil tankers—a tactic that Moscow [learned from Iran \(https://www.ft.com/content/955389bf-d01b-4acb-bd15-b764425a8a18\)](https://www.ft.com/content/955389bf-d01b-4acb-bd15-b764425a8a18) in order to evade sanctions and deliver its oil around the world. These ships regularly obscure their ownership, engage in “flag hopping” (i.e., repeatedly change flags to avoid detection), and switch off their automatic identification systems, enabling them to operate virtually unimpeded during the war. Their numbers have grown substantially, reaching an estimated [1,400 ships \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russias-growing-dark-fleet-risks-for-the-global-maritime-order/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russias-growing-dark-fleet-risks-for-the-global-maritime-order/) as of January. By April, the fleet was [reportedly \(https://kse.ua/about-the-school/news/russian-oil-revenues-decline-despite-active-shadow-fleet-and-higher-oil-prices/\)](https://kse.ua/about-the-school/news/russian-oil-revenues-decline-despite-active-shadow-fleet-and-higher-oil-prices/) transporting 3.1 million barrels of oil per day, or 83 percent of Russia’s total crude exports. Notably, the majority of this flow [passes through \(https://www.deepseareporter.com/the-ghost-ships-oil-the-russian-war-machine/\)](https://www.deepseareporter.com/the-ghost-ships-oil-the-russian-war-machine/) NATO waters in the Baltic and Turkish Straits, then through the Suez Canal, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean en route to East Asia.

Besides the military threat this fleet represents by funding Russia’s war effort in Ukraine, it also poses serious environmental and trade-related threats. Its ships tend to be old, poorly maintained, run by inexperienced crews, and lacking sufficient indemnity insurance. This makes them a serious liability for NATO’s southern flank and, by extension, the secure flow of global maritime commerce. In particular, these ships have a higher risk of causing major oil spills whose aftermath could create irresolvable dilemmas about liability and cleanup responsibilities.

To counter such threats, NATO countries should make environmental arguments to designate these ships as uninsured assets liable for penalties. Earlier this month, the Danish

government [announced \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmark-aims-limit-shadow-fleet-russian-oil-tankers-2024-06-17/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmark-aims-limit-shadow-fleet-russian-oil-tankers-2024-06-17/) steps to tackle the ghost fleet together with a group of allies, though it did not provide details on these plans. In tandem, NATO countries could use existing justifications stemming from the invasion of Ukraine to sanction the fleet, as the EU demonstrated this week by [imposing new sanctions \(https://apnews.com/article/russia-eu-sanctions-ukraine-war-Ing-gas-c56cf96fd7930a12044f36a36984607b\)](https://apnews.com/article/russia-eu-sanctions-ukraine-war-Ing-gas-c56cf96fd7930a12044f36a36984607b) on Russian tankers moving liquefied natural gas to Europe and other destinations. In any case, rigorous sanctions enforcement will become even more important in the coming months—a challenge noted by G7 leaders at their summit earlier this month.

Protecting Critical Undersea Infrastructure

In recent years, experts have warned that Russian submarines pose an acute threat to undersea cables and pipelines that serve as the multibillion-dollar backbones of the internet, global commerce, regional energy flows, allied military logistics, and more. In the Western Atlantic, the Kremlin has [repeatedly \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-submarines-are-prowling-around-vital-undersea-cables-its-making-nato-nervous/2017/12/22/d4c1f3da-e5d0-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-submarines-are-prowling-around-vital-undersea-cables-its-making-nato-nervous/2017/12/22/d4c1f3da-e5d0-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html) sent navy subs to [probe \(https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/stalking-seabed-how-russia-targets-critical-undersea-infrastructure\)](https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/stalking-seabed-how-russia-targets-critical-undersea-infrastructure) undersea infrastructure for weaknesses. In the Middle East, offshore natural gas fields and facilities owned by Egypt, Israel, and other states could be vulnerable to such sabotage. Analysts privately note that they would not be surprised if Russia has been mapping all of this critical undersea infrastructure for years. An attack on any of these complex systems would put Europe's economy at serious risk.

Perhaps the starkest warning about these undersea vulnerabilities came in a British [report \(https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/from-space-to-seabed/\)](https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/from-space-to-seabed/) issued this February. In addition, senior officials close to President Vladimir Putin [have threatened \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-says-moscow-now-has-free-hand-destroy-enemies-undersea-2023-06-14/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-says-moscow-now-has-free-hand-destroy-enemies-undersea-2023-06-14/) to attack undersea cables in response to alleged Western involvement in the 2022 sabotage incident that damaged Russia's Nord Stream gas pipeline.

NATO has long been concerned about the resilience of military, civilian, and economic infrastructure, but these worries grew after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The alliance [has called for \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm) hardening such elements against hybrid or military attacks, invoking Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty as the legal foundation for this effort. New efforts to enhance resilience could include joint exercises with NATO partners and other cross-regional engagement, with the aim of better understanding key vulnerabilities and investing in technology to enhance protection of key systems.

Countering Russia's Regional Narrative

Unfortunately, Moscow's skewed narratives about the Ukraine war tend to [resonate widely \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-disinformation-machine-has-middle-east-advantage\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-disinformation-machine-has-middle-east-advantage) in the Middle East and Africa, as noted in NATO's [May experts report \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_225245.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_225245.htm). This resonance could help explain why these nations have not actively supported the West in bolstering Ukraine.

Recognizing this war of narratives, Kyiv has been [opening \(https://www.barrons.com/news/ukraine-opening-embassies-across-africa-to-counter-russia-1269d530\)](https://www.barrons.com/news/ukraine-opening-embassies-across-africa-to-counter-russia-1269d530) more embassies across Africa, but it simply does not have enough diplomats to staff these facilities. Accordingly, it would benefit a great deal from unified NATO demarches to the region regarding the Russian threat, as well as direct support for its diplomatic capacities and information operations from both individual NATO countries and the alliance itself.

The same goes for the Middle East, where more NATO resources and public diplomacy would be quite beneficial alongside amplified support for Ukraine's diplomatic outreach. For example, NATO could bring Ukrainian officials to brief Middle East partners about Russian activity on a regular basis. Besides assisting the war effort, such initiatives would represent a long-term strategic investment.

Conclusion

All of the above recommendations are based on the principle that turning the tide in Ukraine will require shifting Putin's cost-benefit calculus—namely, by sapping Russia of the resources and will it needs to continue its war of aggression. The Middle East is a key arena in this regard, providing NATO with numerous opportunities to create strategic dilemmas for Moscow, work more closely with the alliance's southern partners, and empower Ukraine's regional outreach.

In addition to specific steps like raising the environmental protection aspect of Russia's ghost fleet, NATO should put more emphasis on broader issues such as sharing intelligence with regional partners. For instance, Stoltenberg could bring various NATO chiefs of defense on a multi-region tour and announce professional military workshops with NATO's southern partners. These would also be good forums for enhancing [protection of undersea infrastructure \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/24/nato-undersea-cable-network-russia-infrastructure-defense/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/24/nato-undersea-cable-network-russia-infrastructure-defense/) and countering Russia's narrative.

NATO is primarily a defensive military alliance, but there are many steps it can take short of full military action to push back against Russia and boost Ukraine's war effort. At the end of the day, the global security and economic order is at stake, and NATO's south can play a constructive role in preserving it.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. ❖

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Hanin Ghaddar,
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