



# The Black Sea Power Struggle: Geopolitical Tensions in the 21st Century

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**Abstract:** The Black Sea, historically a crossroads of empires and modern nations, has become a critical focal point in 21st-century geopolitics. This article examines its multifaceted importance, from strategic maritime linkages and energy reserves to its evolving role as a theater for great power competition. By analyzing the interests and actions of key players such as Russia, Türkiye, and NATO, we highlight the region's dual significance as both a hub of cooperation and a potential flashpoint for conflict. Drawing on historical context, current geopolitical developments, and strategic analyses, the article underscores the Black Sea's broader implications for global peace, trade, and stability in an era of renewed global power dynamics.

**Keywords:** Black Sea, geopolitics, cooperation, conflict, energy reserves, global power dynamic, Russia, Türkiye, NATO.

## Introduction

The Black Sea, often described as the “in-between” sea, has long been at the heart of geopolitical endeavors, conflicts, and alliances.<sup>1</sup> Located at the critical juncture between Europe and Asia, this body of water and the nations bordering it have become key players on the global stage, especially as the 21st century unfolds. The Black Sea is more of a region than just an area, as it encompasses

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Toucas, “The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region: A Brief History,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 2, 2017, [www.csis.org/analysis/geostrategic-importance-black-sea-region-brief-history](http://www.csis.org/analysis/geostrategic-importance-black-sea-region-brief-history).

the Balkans, stretches eastward beyond the Caspian to Eurasia, and serves as the gateway to the Mediterranean, Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Black Sea has been a melting pot of cultures, empires, and religions. It has witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations, from the Byzantines to the Ottomans. Today, it remains at the intersection of the interests of modern powers, such as Russia and NATO member states. Despite this diversity, one aspect has remained constant: the enduring strategic significance of the Black Sea.

The geopolitical significance of the Black Sea is multifaceted. Primarily, it serves as a gateway to critical waterways—most notably the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits<sup>3</sup>—that link it to the vast global oceans. This maritime connection positions the Black Sea as a vital conduit for trade, acting as a crossroads where East meets West and North meets South. Key ports like Constanta, Varna, and Odessa are essential to regional economies and play an integral role in the global trade network.

However, trade is only one aspect of the Black Sea's significance. The region is also an energy battleground, rich in undersea reserves and surrounded by areas abundant in oil and gas. This wealth has spurred a network of pipelines traversing the sea's depths, transporting vital energy resources from Central Asia to European markets, thereby placing energy politics at the forefront of regional concerns.

In recent decades, shifts in the global geopolitical landscape have further amplified the importance of the Black Sea. Key developments, such as NATO and EU expansion, Türkiye's proactive regional stance, and Russia's renewed assertiveness, have transformed the Black Sea into a focal point of great power competition. This dynamic was further intensified by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its recent activities in Eastern Ukraine, escalating tensions with the West.<sup>4</sup>

This article unravels a critical question: Why is the Black Sea region vital for regional and global stability and dynamics? The renewed focus and escalating tensions in the Black Sea extend beyond territorial or resource disputes; they reflect broader strategic ambitions, fears, and pursuits of influence. Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine has had the most significant and potentially long-lasting impact on Black Sea security, while Western efforts to maintain dominance continue to shape the region's dynamics.

As we explore the complex geopolitical tapestry of the Black Sea, it becomes clear that the region's dynamics have implications extending far beyond its

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<sup>2</sup> Harlan Ullman, "NATO Must Seize the Current Strategic Opportunity in the Black Sea," *Atlantic Council*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraine-alert/nato-must-seize-the-current-strategic-opportunity-in-the-black-sea/>.

<sup>3</sup> International Institute for Law of the Sea Studies (IILSS), "Analyzing Navigational Regimes: Bosphorus and Dardanelles," *IILSS*, September 27, 2023, <https://iilss.net/analyzing-navigational-regimes-bosphorus-and-dardanelles/>.

<sup>4</sup> Toucas, "The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region."

shores. The alliances formed, tensions ignited, and strategies implemented here have far-reaching effects, influencing global peace, trade, and stability.

## **The Significance of the Black Sea in Global Geopolitics**

The Black Sea has long been a focal point in global geopolitics, reflecting the ambitions, tensions, and collaborations of the nations bordering its waters. The region's significance can be understood through three overarching themes: strategic location, economic importance, and military significance.

The Black Sea's geographical position provides a unique advantage, bridging three vital landmasses: Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Historically, this region has been at the crossroads for diverse civilizations—from the ancient Greeks and Persians to the Byzantines and Ottomans—and has developed a rich cultural and political tapestry with lasting implications. As such, the Black Sea has consistently been a pivotal point of great-power rivalry, often central to the balance of power in both Europe and the Middle East.

The Black Sea has traditionally been an arena where Russian and European interests clash. This dynamic was notably evident during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, which led to two significant events: the Treaty of San Stefano and the Berlin Congress in 1878. The Treaty of San Stefano, signed on March 3, 1878, was perceived by European powers as a move to establish Russian dominance over the Black Sea, Constantinople, the Aegean Sea, and, indirectly, Asia Minor. This perception prompted the convening of the Berlin Congress, where diplomats gathered on July 13, 1878, to reassess the treaty. Bismarck's dictum at the Congress highlighted the broader European concerns: "If you think the Congress has met for Turkey," he told them, "disabuse yourselves. San Stefano would have remained unaltered if it had not touched certain European interests."<sup>5</sup> Since then, European powers have consistently sought to contain Russia's influence in the Black Sea region.

In contemporary times, the Black Sea's strategic location continues to make it a focal point of geopolitical activity. Its northern shores border the expansive territories of Eastern Europe and Russia, while its southern coast connects with the tumultuous yet strategically important Middle East. This positioning establishes the Black Sea as a critical juncture in regional dynamics. To the west, the sea extends towards the Balkans, reaching into the heart of Western Europe, while its eastern boundary serves as a gateway to the Caucasus and the vast Asian continent.

The objectives of revisionist alliances in this region are twofold. Their primary goal is to assert dominance over the Eurasian heartland, an area spanning Central Asia and parts of Siberia, and extend into the upper Middle East. This expansive territory is rich in global resources, making it strategically significant. In line with Halford Mackinder's geopolitical theory, the control of this heartland is seen

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<sup>5</sup> Leften S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1958), 410-413.

as crucial for achieving supremacy across the wider Eurasian landscape.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the goal is to oversee the strategic connections that encompass the Eurasian landmass, thereby influencing trade dynamics between its central, peripheral, and island nations. A key component of this network is the Eurasian Maritime Corridor,<sup>7</sup> which stretches from the northern borders of the Black Sea to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. As such, the Black Sea occupies a critical position of influence for any potential Eurasian superpower seeking to dominate regional trade and energy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Economic Importance: Trade Routes, Energy Resources, and Ports**

The economic significance of the Black Sea cannot be overstated. It acts as a crucial hub for global trade routes, particularly due to its connection to the Mediterranean Sea via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which are critical choke-points under Turkish control.<sup>9</sup> This strategic maritime link ensures seamless movement of goods between Asia, the Middle East, and European markets.<sup>10</sup>

Key ports along the Black Sea, such as Constanta in Romania, Varna in Bulgaria, and Odesa in Ukraine, play a crucial role in facilitating this trade. Not only do these ports bolster their national economies, but they also serve as vital links within the global trade network.

The Black Sea region is an important economic area, rich in energy resources, including oil and gas reserves. One of the major pipelines in the area is the TurkStream project, which transports energy resources from Central Asia and Russia to Europe. The control of these energy reserves and their transit routes often becomes a focal point of geopolitical contention, reflecting their immense economic and strategic value.<sup>11,12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 1904): 421-37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>.

<sup>7</sup> Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "The Middle Corridor and the Russia-Ukraine War: The Rise of New Regional Collaboration in Eurasia?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13744-the-middle-corridor-and-the-russia-ukraine-war-the-rise-of-new-regional-collaboration-in-eurasia?.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Kadri Tastan, "Turkey and European Energy (In)Security: What Role for Turkey in European Energy Security Following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine?" *SPW Comment*, no. 38 (June 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C38>.

<sup>10</sup> Aydın Özü, "The Black Sea as an Energy Transit Corridor," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2006): 133-149, <http://turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/TPQ2006-2-ozu.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Aura Sabadus, "Why the Black Sea Could Emerge as the World's Next Great Energy Battleground," *Atlantic Council*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-the-black-sea-could-emerge-as-the-worlds-next-great-energy-battleground/>.

<sup>12</sup> Aura Sabadus, "Black Sea Energy Supply Risks Must Be Countered by a Coordinated Regional Response," *The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, September 15, 2021,

It is important to view the energy crisis that occurred in early 2006 between Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from a geopolitical perspective. This is because these post-Soviet states increasingly aligned with pro-European policies while Russia pursued a more assertive strategy. At the same time, Europe was becoming progressively dependent on Russia for its energy supplies.<sup>13,14</sup>

Despite some reluctance from the European Union to fully acknowledge it, the Black Sea undeniably serves as a critical energy conduit to Europe. By 2030, EU member states were projected to import approximately 90 % of their oil, 60 % of their gas, and 66 % of their coal consumption.<sup>15</sup> This highlights the extent of Europe's energy dependence on Russia and underscores the strategic necessity of diversifying both the energy sources and their transportation routes.<sup>16</sup>

Several infrastructure projects play a crucial role in the region's energy dynamics. In oil transportation, the efficiency of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline could be enhanced by linking it with the Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan system, potentially augmented by a subsea pipeline across the Caspian Sea. The Odesa-Brody pipeline is earmarked for expansion, including a possible extension to Poland. In the realm of natural gas, new data suggests that the Shah Deniz reserves may surpass initial estimates, increasing the throughput of the Shah Deniz-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline and potentially positioning Türkiye as a key transit hub for Azerbaijani gas. Moreover, the optimal method for transporting Turkmenistan's substantial gas reserves remains a subject of active debate.

Another factor influencing regional cooperation is the volatile security environment. The region is home to several areas in a fragile state of peace, with unresolved conflicts that could easily reignite. These include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Transnistria in Moldova. The situation in these post-Soviet territories has evolved significantly over the past decade and a half since these conflicts entered a state of stagnation. Meanwhile, Russia's foreign policy has shifted from post-

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<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/black-sea-energy-supply-risks-must-be-counteracted-coordinated-regional-response>.

<sup>13</sup> Vit Stritecky, "Challenges for the Black Sea Region," Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/challenges-for-the-black-sea-region-.tr.mfa>.

<sup>14</sup> Fabrizio Tassinari, "A Synergy for Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Guidelines for an EU Initiative," *Policy Brief* no. 105, Centre for European Policy Studies, June 4, 2006, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/synergy-black-sea-regional-cooperation-guidelines-eu-initiative/>.

<sup>15</sup> Commission of the European Communities, "Green Paper – A European Strategy for Sustainable, Competitive, and Secure Energy," COM(2006) 105 final, Brussels, March 8, 2006, [https://europa.eu/documents/comm/green\\_papers/pdf/com2006\\_105\\_en.pdf](https://europa.eu/documents/comm/green_papers/pdf/com2006_105_en.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, "State of the Energy Union 2023: EU Responds Effectively to Crisis, Looks to the Future, and Accelerates the Green Transition," *Press Release*, October 24, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_5188](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5188).

Cold War disillusionment to adopting the “Near Abroad” doctrine,<sup>17</sup> coupled with a more assertive stance, partly influenced by global events after 9/11. Additionally, the emergence of “color revolutions” has had a notable impact, particularly in Georgia, which hosts two of these conflict zones.<sup>18</sup>

### **Military Significance: Naval Operations and Defense Considerations**

The military significance of the Black Sea has become increasingly pronounced within the evolving global geopolitical landscape. Naval dominance in this region is often regarded as a measure of regional supremacy, with various countries regularly conducting naval exercises to demonstrate their power and deter potential adversaries.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, Russia has considered the Black Sea region crucial for expanding and securing its territory, as well as for exerting influence in Europe, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. With this priority in mind, Russia has strategically deployed military forces, including its 102nd base in Gyumri, Armenia, and the Black Sea Fleet stationed in Sevastopol.<sup>20</sup> Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the launch of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have further underscored the Black Sea’s military significance. With control over Crimea and key areas such as Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk, Russia has strengthened its naval presence, significantly impacting the region’s defense landscape.<sup>21</sup> This includes the remilitarization of Crimea and interventions in Eastern Ukraine, which have enabled the deployment of advanced military systems and led to a recalibration of regional defense strategies.<sup>22</sup>

The Black Sea region has witnessed an increased NATO presence, characterized by naval patrols and exercises that highlight the Alliance’s commitment to securing its member states and maintaining regional stability. Türkiye, which controls the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, plays a pivotal role in this dynamic. As a

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<sup>17</sup> Juris Pucenoks and Eric James Seltzer, “Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the ‘Near Abroad,’” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (2021): 757-775, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.54>.

<sup>18</sup> Erik J. Grossman, “Russia’s Frozen Conflicts and the Donbas,” *Parameters: The US Army War College Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 51-62, <https://doi.org/10.5554/0031-1723.2944>.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Lundquist, “Exercise Sea Breeze Underway in the Black Sea,” *Seapower*, July 2, 2021, <https://seapowermagazine.org/exercise-sea-breeze-underway-in-the-black-sea/>.

<sup>20</sup> Toucas, “The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region.”

<sup>21</sup> Toucas, “The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region.”

<sup>22</sup> Toucas, “The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region.”

NATO member and a regional power with its own strategic interests, Türkiye adds complexity to the Black Sea's defense landscape.<sup>23,24</sup>

As we move further into the 21st century, understanding the complex power dynamics in the Black Sea is crucial for ensuring global stability and peace. Historically, the Black Sea has been more than a mere geographical feature; it has served as a mirror of international affairs, shaping and reflecting broader geopolitical trends.

## **Key Actors in the Black Sea Power Struggle**

### ***Russia***

Throughout history, Russia has consistently pursued a strategy to gain control of the Black Sea. Its goals have included securing direct access to the Mediterranean, influencing European security and energy, and curbing U.S. influence. Since the resurgence of hostilities in Ukraine, Russian military maneuvers appear to divert attention from their primary objective: securing a land connection with Crimea. Consequently, the outcome of the Ukraine war will be pivotal in determining the future power balance in the Black Sea region.

### ***Historic Geopolitical Struggle***

The Black Sea has always been a particular focus in Russian history and geopolitics. Tsarist Russia's southward expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries sought to secure a warm-water port in the Black Sea, leading to numerous Russo-Turkish wars. In the final war in 1878, the British Navy maneuvered into the sea of Marmara to deter Russian forces at San Stefano, a mere 16 kilometers from Constantinople.<sup>25</sup> Over time, cities like Sevastopol in Crimea became symbols of Russian naval power and a testament to its Black Sea ambitions. The region holds strategic importance and deep cultural and historical ties, particularly due to the significant presence of many ethnic Russians in countries surrounding the Black Sea. Russia's actions reflect its aspiration for renewed participation in global power competition.

In the 1990s, Russia's then-Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov articulated a vision of a multipolar global structure, positioning Russia as a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy and a counterbalance to the American-dominated world system. Since then, the Kremlin has worked to restore Russia's international standing lost after the Cold War, with a focus on challenging American primacy in

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen J. Flanagan et al., *Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, October 5, 2020), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR357-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR357-1.html).

<sup>24</sup> Ben Hodges, Steven Horrell, and Ivanna Kuz, "Russia's Militarization of the Black Sea: Implications for the United States and NATO," *The Center for European Policy Analysis*, September 22, 2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/russias-militarization-of-the-black-sea-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/>.

<sup>25</sup> Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453*, 408.

global affairs and renegotiating the European security architecture in particular.<sup>26</sup> Russia has continued to employ strategic narratives reminiscent of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) framework while officially justifying its military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. These interventions have often been framed as efforts to protect co-ethnic groups and Russian speakers, echoing pre-R2P era justifications for intervention.<sup>27</sup>

### *Russia’s Desired Strategic Outcome from the Ukraine War*

Russia seems to be on the verge of achieving a century-old strategic objective: direct control of the Black Sea. While holding Crimea is significant, without control of mainland access, the peninsula offers a limited strategic advantage. Therefore, Russia will likely pursue any means necessary to retain direct control over the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions. Securing these areas, along with Crimea, would consolidate Russia’s hold on the Sevastopol port, which serves as the key base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet. This would protect the fleet from further encirclement by the U.S. or NATO.

The Black Sea is a crucial gateway for Russia to access other strategically significant regions, including the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa. By maintaining control over the Black Sea, Russia aims to project its influence across these areas and exploit regional resources as part of its broader strategy to sustain its status as a global power.<sup>28</sup>

The Black Sea region holds significant strategic importance for Russia, serving as a counterbalance to NATO’s expanding influence, especially with the Alliance’s increasing activities in the area. Control over this region is crucial for Russia, both to challenge NATO’s presence and to protect its energy transit routes, including gas pipelines to southern Europe.<sup>29</sup>

It appears that Russia’s primary objective in its war on Ukraine is to maintain control over the occupied territories, demonstrating its determination to do whatever is necessary to retain this hold. The bolstering of military forces further strengthens Russia’s naval dominance in the Black Sea, enabling it to exert significant power and potentially threaten or influence the littoral states. Simultaneously, this stance could lead to a situation where Ukraine claims a Pyrrhic victory, a result to which Russia may not object.

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<sup>26</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, “Understanding Russia’s War on Ukraine Starts with Understanding Russia’s Black Sea Politics,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-russias-war-ukraine-starts-understanding-russias-black-sea-politics>.

<sup>27</sup> Pupcenoks and Seltzer, “Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the ‘Near Abroad’.”

<sup>28</sup> Hodges, Steven, and Kuz, “Russia’s Militarization of the Black Sea.”

<sup>29</sup> Seth Cropsey, “Strategic Nexus: The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War,” *Yorktown Institute*, July 2, 2023, <https://yorktowninstitute.org/strategic-nexus-the-black-sea-great-power-competition-and-the-russo-ukrainian-war/>.



### **China and Iran as Strategic Beneficiaries**

Should Russia retain its territorial gains in Ukraine, both China and Iran stand to benefit strategically. These nations seek to access and control the European market, influence European security, and manage energy and supply chains, all while curbing U.S. and Turkish influence in the Black Sea region.

The historically competitive China-Russia relationship has evolved into a pragmatic alliance. China's primary objective is to secure access to Europe's major markets. The conflict in Ukraine, which has strained Russia's economy, offers China an opportunity to deepen Russia's economic dependence. Furthermore, if Russia maintains its mainland connections, China stands to secure and protect its northern Belt and Road route.

Iran's strategic aim in the Black Sea is to diminish U.S., European, and Turkish influence, thereby enhancing its leverage against Israel and the Gulf states. This strategy includes bolstering security in its Azeri-populated north to prevent destabilization. Iran's objectives are closely tied to Russian dominance in the region, prompting Tehran to reinforce its support for Russia, acknowledging its essential role in achieving Iran's regional ambitions.

### **Türkiye**

The Republic of Türkiye plays a pivotal role in the Black Sea region, holding significant influence over its geopolitical dynamics. Its strategic location compels Türkiye to adopt a proactive leadership role in maintaining peace and balancing power in the area.

As NATO's long-standing ally in the Black Sea region, Türkiye has actively fostered closer economic and security cooperation in the region in the post-Cold War era. Ankara has shown early and strong commitment to regional initiatives like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and spearheaded security operations such as the BlackSeaFor and Black Sea Harmony (BSH). Inspired by NATO's Standing Naval Operations, BSH was launched by the Turkish Navy in 2004 to strengthen maritime security through naval presence along the sea lanes of communication, including shadowing, trailing, and interdiction operations.<sup>30</sup>

Control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles places Türkiye in a uniquely influential position within Black Sea dynamics. Historically, dominance over these vital waterways has been a key objective for regional powers, and they remain central to Türkiye's geopolitical strategy.

The ongoing war in Ukraine threatens to disrupt the regional balance, potentially strengthening Russia's control over the Black Sea and increasing its pressure on Türkiye. At the same time, despite being a non-Black Sea nation, the United States may explore avenues to circumvent the Montreux Convention to deploy forces in the region and counter Russian influence. As a result, Türkiye is

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<sup>30</sup> Lord Mark Lancaster, "Troubled Waters – How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security," Report, *NATO Parliamentary Assembly*, Defence and Security Committee, October 7, 2023, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2023-black-sea-security-report-lancaster-020-dscfc>.

likely to face significant pressure from both Russia and the United States, navigating a complex and challenging geopolitical landscape.

Türkiye's strategic location requires a proactive foreign policy to safeguard national interests and maintain NATO unity. This approach involves balancing the influence of all regional powers, ensuring that no single nation, including Russia, becomes overwhelmingly dominant, and fostering cooperative relations with all littoral states.

### ***NATO and Western Powers***

The West and NATO initially underestimated the strategic importance of the Black Sea, focusing instead disproportionately on the Baltic Sea area. Only after a significant delay did they begin to reassess the situation and pay adequate attention to the Black Sea, particularly after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. However, following Russia's renewed invasion in 2022, the situation in the region became increasingly untenable for the West and NATO.<sup>31</sup>

Since the Cold War, NATO's traditional centers of gravity and primary focus have been the Central Front and Fulda Gap, the Baltics, and the High North. However, the Russian occupation of South Ossetia in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 underscored the strategic importance of the Black Sea. Despite these developments, NATO's response in the Black Sea has not equaled the level of deterrence and reassurance measures seen in the Baltics. While the alliance has increased freedom of navigation exercises and conducted military drills, a broader strategic approach to fully exploit the Black Sea region remains unaddressed.

Unlike the Baltic states, which have advocated for a more substantial NATO military presence, the Black Sea littoral states (with the exception of Romania) have generally preferred a lighter NATO footprint in their region. This divergence in preferences has made it challenging for NATO to develop a shared and credible vision for this strategically significant area. Consequently, with NATO's primary military focus on the Baltic Sea region, some analysts now view the Black Sea as an increasing vulnerability for the alliance.<sup>32</sup>

Three of NATO's thirty-two members play essential roles in the Alliance's deterrence strategy in the Black Sea. Türkiye, in particular, has traditionally viewed Black Sea security primarily as the responsibility of the littoral states, aiming to limit the involvement of outside powers, including NATO, in the region. Hence, Türkiye has remained strongly committed to legacy Black Sea security initiatives, such as the BlackSeaFor, Black Sea Harmony, and the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation, aiming to ensure the security and economic vitality of the Black Sea.

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<sup>31</sup> Lancaster, "Troubled Waters – How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security."

<sup>32</sup> Lancaster, "Troubled Waters – How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security."

In contrast, Romania has actively advocated for a more prominent NATO role in the Black Sea region, especially since 2014. However, Romania currently lacks the necessary military—particularly naval—capacity to assume a leadership role alongside Türkiye. For instance, Romania and Bulgaria operate only seven aging escort frigates, considered major surface combatants, supported by a group of Soviet-era corvettes and missile boats.

Bulgaria remains broadly committed to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Black Sea region. However, with three parliamentary elections conducted in 2021 alone, the Bulgarian government faced constraints in formulating an effective response to the rapidly evolving Russian threat.

NATO's lack of a clear strategic direction in the Black Sea region from 2014 to 2022 stemmed from differing views among its members. Despite expressed intentions to bolster its presence, NATO's footprint in the Black Sea remained limited across land, air, and sea domains. This irregular presence was influenced by a reluctance to provoke Moscow, limited resources, budget constraints, and competing priorities. The last NATO warship to operate in the Black Sea before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was the French frigate *Auvergne*, which patrolled the area from December 14, 2021, to January 2, 2022.<sup>33</sup>

### ***The U.S. Stance and Its Evolving Strategy***

At its core, the Black Sea intersects with all major U.S. interests in Eurasia. Developing a comprehensive strategy that leverages American strengths and aligns the capabilities of U.S. allies is essential for strengthening the position of the U.S.-aligned coalition in the Black Sea region.

As NATO's most influential member, the United States has closely monitored the dynamics of the Black Sea, viewing the region as a critical extension of the broader European security framework. The U.S. strategy focuses on strengthening the defense capabilities of its regional allies and maintaining a consistent NATO presence to deter potential adversaries. The United States has also engaged in direct naval activities, such as deploying warships for joint exercises, to reinforce its commitment to the region's stability.<sup>34,35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lancaster, "Troubled Waters – How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security."

<sup>34</sup> Lisa Aronsson and Jeffrey Mankoff, "The Inhospitable Sea: Toward a New U.S. Strategy for the Black Sea Region," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/inhospitable-sea-toward-new-us-strategy-black-sea-region>.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Kochis and Brent Sadler, "Why a New Black Sea Strategy Is in the U.S. Interest," *The Heritage Foundation*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/why-new-black-sea-strategy-the-us-interest>.

## Emerging Threats and Challenges

The historically significant and strategically crucial Black Sea now faces modern threats. The evolving great power competition, which blends traditional strength with covert, technology-driven tactics, requires a balanced defense approach to ensure regional stability and peace.

### *Military Posturing and Naval Buildups; Naval Exercises, Patrols, and Increased Military Presence*

Recently, the Black Sea has witnessed a significant increase in naval activity, with countries such as Russia, the United States, and Türkiye ramping up their patrols, often described as routine exercises. However, these operations often carry deeper geopolitical implications. For example, the presence of the United States and NATO is viewed as both support for allied nations and a subtle counter to Russian expansionist ambitions. Notably, one factor in the failure to deter Russia's renewed invasion has been the consistent reduction of NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea. This trend underscores the complex interplay of military posturing and geopolitical strategy in the region.<sup>36</sup>

Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia has significantly bolstered its Black Sea Fleet, conducting large-scale naval exercises to demonstrate its military strength and assert regional dominance. This reciprocal military posturing, reflecting actions by other powers in the area, raises the risk of unintended clashes. In this tense environment, even minor incidents could quickly escalate, given the high stakes in this geopolitical arena.

### *Energy Politics: Competition for Oil and Gas Reserves*

The competition for oil and gas reserves in the Black Sea region is intensifying as rising global energy demands intersect with global conflicts and price dynamics. Rich in these vital resources, the region plays a strategic role, particularly due to the offshore gas reserves explored by littoral states such as Ukraine, Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria. These reserves are essential not only for regional economic integration but also for the prosperity of the nations involved.<sup>37</sup>

Russia, a key player in the Black Sea energy arena, has long leveraged energy as a tool of geopolitical influence. The construction of pipelines such as TurkStream, which transports Russian gas to Eastern Europe and Türkiye through the Black Sea, exemplifies this strategy. Inaugurated in 2018, TurkStream has two branches: one supplying gas to Türkiye and the other extending to European markets. This shift in gas routes, redirecting supplies away from Ukraine, reduces

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<sup>36</sup> Alison Bath, "US Navy and NATO Presence in the Black Sea Has Fallen since Russia Took Part of Ukraine, Figures Show," *Stars and Stripes*, January 28, 2022, [www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2022-01-28/sporadic-nato-patrols-in-black-sea-leaving-void-for-Russians-4443921.html](http://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2022-01-28/sporadic-nato-patrols-in-black-sea-leaving-void-for-Russians-4443921.html).

<sup>37</sup> Sabadus, "Why the Black Sea Could Emerge as the World's Next Great Energy Battleground."

Ukraine's role as a transit country, impacting its economy and driving it toward necessary energy sector reforms.<sup>38</sup>

Russia's energy policy in Europe often uses energy supplies as a lever or form of coercion, particularly evident during its conflicts with Ukraine. For instance, Russia's decision to curtail energy supplies to Europe prior to and during its 2022 invasion of Ukraine was viewed as an attempt to pressure Europe into distancing itself from Ukraine. However, this move inadvertently accelerated Europe's transition to green energy, which may, over time, diminish Russia's influence in the European energy market.<sup>39</sup>

The Black Sea region's energy resources are not only economically significant but also carry substantial geopolitical weight. Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria play central roles in this context, with Russia's strategies heavily influencing Europe's energy security and the broader political landscape. The development and control of these resources, along with the management of transit routes such as the TurkStream pipeline, are therefore critical components in the intricate landscape of regional and global energy politics.

### ***Cyber Threats and Hybrid Warfare***

The Black Sea region has emerged as an arena for cyberattacks and information warfare, often involving state-sponsored actors with geopolitical agendas. Russian military strategy, particularly under the Gerasimov Doctrine, emphasizes non-kinetic warfare methods, such as disinformation and propaganda. These tactics have been prominently employed in Eastern Europe—especially in Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania—to erode trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions while destabilizing regional cooperation.<sup>40</sup>

In its ongoing conflict with Russia, Ukraine has been a significant target of cyberattacks, particularly attacks on its power grid. A notable incident occurred in December 2015, when a Russian-based internet provider orchestrated an attack that resulted in the first known cyberattack-induced power outage. This sophisticated attack targeted three power distribution companies and was further compounded by a flood of fake calls intended to overwhelm customer service lines, highlighting the vulnerabilities of modern infrastructure to cyber warfare.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Nikos Tsafos, "The TurkStream Opportunity," Center for Strategic & International Studies, November 28, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkstream-opportunity>.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell Orenstein, "Putin the Green? The Unintended Consequences of Russia's Energy War on Europe," Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 15, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/putin-the-green-the-unintended-consequences-of-russias-energy-war-on-europe/>.

<sup>40</sup> Corina Rebegea, "The Black Sea as a Battleground for Information Warfare: A View from Bucharest," *Black Sea Strategy Papers Series*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 23, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/black-sea-battleground-information-warfare-view-bucharest/>.

<sup>41</sup> Pavel Polityuk, "Ukraine Sees Russian Hand in Cyber Attacks on Power Grid," *Reuters*, February 12, 2016, [www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-cybersecurity-idUSKCN0VL18E](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-cybersecurity-idUSKCN0VL18E).

The Black Sea region also confronts threats to its critical infrastructure, such as submarine communication cables. Concerns have risen over potential Russian cyber operations or physical sabotage targeting these cables, which are vital for regional communication and data security. This tactic is seen as a strategic maneuver by the Kremlin to cause disruption without direct military confrontation. The ongoing targeting of Ukraine's power grid and energy infrastructure, especially since Russia's invasion in 2022, exemplifies this strategy. Although direct evidence linking these cyberattacks to the Kremlin is elusive, many suspect they involve coordinated actions by Russian state actors and cybercriminals.<sup>42</sup>

These incidents underscore the evolving nature of conflict in the Black Sea region, where cyber and information warfare now complement traditional military tactics in achieving strategic objectives. The growing reliance on these modern methods marks a shift in warfare dynamics, emphasizing the urgent need for robust cybersecurity measures and the protection of information integrity against increasingly sophisticated threats.

### ***The Potential Implications for Regional Stability***

Hybrid warfare, which combines conventional military tactics with cyberattacks, propaganda, and covert operations, is increasingly prominent in the Black Sea region. This multifaceted approach can destabilize countries severely without direct military engagement by targeting critical infrastructure or spreading misinformation to weaken adversaries or sway political outcomes.

Russian attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure exemplify the use of hybrid warfare. This strategy allows states and non-state actors to destabilize the political systems of adversaries with minimal or no use of conventional military forces. Russia, in particular, has aggressively employed hybrid tactics, using cyberattacks and malign influence to achieve its political objectives. These tactics provide a low-cost means for states, terrorist groups, and criminal organizations to influence the politics, policies, and territorial control of other nations.<sup>43</sup>

An important facet of hybrid warfare is the ability to target and disrupt civilian infrastructure, particularly within the energy sector. Russia's persistent cyberattacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, such as the mentioned December 2015 attack using BlackPower malware, illustrate this strategy. Russia's cyber-military dominance represents a significant threat to smaller NATO states and countries within the Partnership for Peace program, many of which have limited resources and vulnerable energy infrastructures.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hotaka Nakamura, "Defending Submarine Cables in the Black Sea: A Challenge for NATO and the Region," Middle East Institute, March 2, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/defending-submarine-cables-black-sea-challenge-nato-and-region>.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold C. Dupuy, "How NATO Can Keep Pace with Hybrid Threats in the Black Sea Region and Beyond," Atlantic Council, January 4, 2023, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/how-nato-can-keep-pace-with-hybrid-threats-in-the-black-sea-region-and-beyond/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/how-nato-can-keep-pace-with-hybrid-threats-in-the-black-sea-region-and-beyond/).

<sup>44</sup> Dupuy, "How NATO Can Keep Pace with Hybrid Threats in the Black Sea Region and Beyond."

The Black Sea region is a focal point of competition between Russia and the West, with Russia employing a mix of nonmilitary and military tools to maintain influence. Countries in the region, including Bulgaria, Romania, Türkiye, Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, must navigate a complex balance between Russian influence and their integration or alliances with the West. Each country's approach varies based on its unique geopolitical situation, regional conflicts, and dependence on Russia for security or energy needs.<sup>45</sup>

To counter these hybrid threats, it is recommended that NATO and the European Union intensify their assistance to Black Sea countries in addressing Russian informational, cyber, economic, clandestine, and hybrid tactics. This should include ensuring compliance with international laws, developing a robust conventional deterrent posture, continuing security assistance to strengthen partner resilience and self-defense capabilities, and leveraging bilateral and multilateral partnerships to support mutual priorities and foster subregional cooperation.<sup>46</sup>

These findings highlight the critical need for countries in the Black Sea region to strengthen their cyber defenses and develop comprehensive strategies to counter propaganda and hybrid warfare tactics. This is crucial to prevent the digital realm from becoming the next major battleground and to preserve regional stability amidst historic rivalries and territorial disputes.

## Conclusion

This article underscores the Black Sea's enduring significance in global geopolitics, defined by its historical importance and strategic position. As a focal point of geopolitical strife, resource competition, and military maneuvering, it plays a crucial role in shaping international relations. The Black Sea transcends regional boundaries, influencing the broader global geopolitical narrative.

Recent events, particularly Russia's invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, have amplified the Black Sea's strategic importance. The tension between Russia's assertive actions and the West's responses now transcends regional concerns, becoming a critical element in the broader global power struggle. The Black Sea has thus transformed into both a symbolic and strategic battleground in the larger context of West-Russia relations.

Energy politics in the Black Sea, driven by the competition for oil and gas reserves and vital transit routes, add further complexity to its geopolitical landscape. The rise of hybrid threats, including cyber and information warfare, adds new layers to the region's security challenges. These modern forms of conflict, which merge traditional and innovative tactics, highlight the changing nature of warfare and underscore the need for comprehensive security strategies.

The Black Sea is a vital region in the ever-evolving global landscape. Addressing its challenges demands nuanced, collaborative, and forward-thinking approaches. The region's evolving dynamics will play a pivotal role in shaping the

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<sup>45</sup> Flanagan et al., "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security."

<sup>46</sup> Flanagan et al., "Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security."

future of global geopolitics, particularly in the aftermath of the Russo-Ukraine war.

### Disclaimer

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