

Chapter in Edited Volume on Greek Foreign Policy

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Greece's Foreign Policy Towards the Black Sea Region: Between Abstraction and Reality

Abstract

This chapter examines Greece's foreign policy towards the Black Sea region, arguing that the absence of a codified national strategy does not reflect neglect but a form of adaptive, small-state grand strategy shaped by structural constraints, domestic mediation, and identity-based considerations. In this regard, the purpose is to elaborate on why and how the Black Sea's limited institutionalisation, fragmented geopolitics, and competing external influences reduced incentives for an autonomous policy formulation, thus encouraging instead an indirect engagement through multilateral frameworks.

The analysis advances a theoretical framework that integrates neoclassical realism, small-state theory, and ontological security. Within this framework, Greek foreign policy is conceptualised as a form of constrained agency, emerging from the interaction between systemic pressures, domestic filtering mechanisms, and identity narratives. In empirical terms, the chapter demonstrates that Greece's behaviour is structured around three overlapping strategic logics: i) shelter-seeking through EU and NATO embedding, ii) niche diplomacy in areas such as maritime governance, energy transit, and connectivity, and iii) selective hedging in managing relations with competing powers, particularly Russia and China.

The war in Ukraine serves as a critical juncture in this context, revealing how systemic shocks restructured Greece's foreign policy behaviour while activating domestic and ideational mediating processes. Indeed, Greece's response combined strong alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions with diaspora-driven narratives centred on Mariupol and pragmatic adjustments to protect shipping and energy interests. whereas infrastructure diplomacy, manifested in pipelines, LNG terminals, ports, and transport corridors, demonstrates how Greece leverages geography and sectoral expertise to enhance its strategic relevance within EU frameworks. The expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative, particularly through Piraeus, further highlights the logic of selective

hedging, as Athens balances economic pragmatism with EU de-risking and transatlantic security commitments.

Overall, the argument advanced is that Greece's engagement with the Black Sea is patterned but non-codified and therefore needs to be understood as a flexible, issue-specific strategy that maximises benefits while limiting exposure in a contested geopolitical environment. By conceptualising this foreign policy as a case of constrained agency, the aim is to contribute to broader debates on small-state grand strategy and foreign policy adaptation **in fragmented regional orders**.

Keywords

Greek foreign policy; Black Sea region; small-state grand strategy; neoclassical realism; foreign policy analysis; ontological security; constrained agency; shelter-seeking; niche diplomacy; selective hedging; European Union; NATO; Belt and Road Initiative; infrastructure diplomacy; diaspora diplomacy; energy security; maritime governance

1. Introduction

The Black Sea holds a paradoxical position in European geopolitics. Historically a crucial crossroads of empire and commerce, it has nonetheless remained a site of contested regionness. Instead of consolidating into a coherent regional formation, it has endured as a liminal space/in-between area, characterised by fragmentation, rival external influences, weak institutionalisation, and a fragile sense of shared regional identity (Tsantoulis, 2021).

For Greece, the Black Sea has long been a recurring reference point in foreign policy. Byzantine naval dominance secured imperial control, Ottoman trade routes sustained commerce, and Greek diasporic communities in Odessa and Mariupol embedded a lasting cultural and economic presence (Ascherson, 1995). In the contemporary period, Greece's ties to the region have been reshaped by the end of the Cold War, EU enlargement, Russia's resurgence, and the war in Ukraine. These historical legacies and geopolitical transformations highlight both the contested regionness of the Black Sea and Greece's evolving role within it.

Yet despite these longstanding links, Greece has never articulated a fully autonomous "Black Sea strategy". Its engagement has instead been mediated through the EU, NATO, and targeted bilateral initiatives (Triantaphyllou, 2005; 2018). However, the absence of a codified doctrine does not reflect neglect, but the realities of small-state foreign policy. Indeed, with limited resources and competing theatres of concern in the Balkans, the Aegean, and the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece has prioritised embedding its interests within multilateral institutions while pursuing selective initiatives in the Black Sea basin.

This observation resonates with broader debates on grand strategy, understood as aligning long-term objectives with available means across military, economic, and diplomatic instruments (Luttwak, 1987; Posen, 2014). Balzacq and Krebs (2021) describe it as a "theory of victory" through which states navigate an unpredictable international environment. If for great powers, grand strategy implies global designs, for smaller states it entails allocating scarce resources, maximising influence through institutions, and safeguarding autonomy. Hence, in contrast to the neorealist bias towards the analysis of great powers' grand strategies, it can be argued that small states as well require grand strategy, perhaps even more due to survival concerns to use a

neorealist proposition, than great powers, since limited means demand careful prioritisation (Wivel, 2021; Balzacq & Krebs, 2021).

Greece exemplifies this logic. Although sometimes described as a medium-sized state within the EU and NATO, it is in global terms a small power¹. It has relied in this regard on three interrelated strategies: i) shelter-seeking, ii) niche diplomacy, and iii) selective hedging (Ingebritsen, 2002; Thorhallsson, 2018; Kuik, 2008). Shelter-seeking involves embedding in alliances for protection, evident in reliance on NATO and the EU, niche diplomacy entails specialisation in areas of comparative advantage, such as maritime expertise, energy transit, and diasporic ties, whereas selective hedging captures the balancing of ties with competing powers, including Russia and Turkey, while remaining aligned with EU and NATO policy (Kuik, 2008). Together these strategies suggest that even without a formal doctrine, Greece's actions reflect a patterned logic of small-state grand strategy.

The ambivalence of Greek foreign policy reinforces this perspective. As Triantaphyllou (2005, 2018) points out Athens has long oscillated between "exceptionalism" and "integration", thus reflecting a reflexive sense of Greek uniqueness rooted in history and ethnocentrism, and the pragmatic need to embed in Euro-Atlantic structures. The Black Sea exemplifies this duality. Although cultural and historical ties evoke narratives of exceptional connection, actual engagements have been mediated through EU instruments such as the Black Sea Synergy (BSS), the Eastern Partnership (EaP), and NATO's south-eastern flank initiatives.

Structural constraints further shape this mediation. Greece's exposure at the intersection of the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East produces a geographically broad and resource-intensive agenda. Decisions have often been driven more by political personalities than by long-term strategy, revealing institutional weaknesses in foreign policy planning (Tsakonas, 2005). This fragility limits sustained autonomous engagement in peripheral theatres like the Black Sea, producing a pragmatic and project-driven approach embedded in broader frameworks.

¹ Although Greece occasionally aspires to middle-power influence regionally, it is conventionally classified as a small power. With a territory of 132,000 km², a population of 10.1 million, and a GDP of c. USD 240 billion (World Bank, 2023; IMF, 2023), Greece lacks the demographic and economic weight of middle powers such as Italy. Militarily, despite spending above 2% of GDP on defence, it cannot project power globally and relies on NATO for deterrence (NATO, 2022). In IR theory, such indicators justify its small-state status (Thorhallsson, 2018), though Greece can "punch above its weight" through shipping, energy transit, and diaspora diplomacy, projecting influence closer to that of a regional middle power.

The timeliness of this analysis is underscored by recent developments. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 transformed the Black Sea into a theatre of great-power rivalry, drawing intensified NATO and EU attention. Grain corridors, energy transit routes, and naval security gained new importance. For Greece, these dynamics intersect with national interests as the Mariupol diaspora community suffered during the siege, Greek shipping companies were central to grain exports, and projects such as the Alexandroupoli LNG terminal gained strategic significance. At the same time, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), anchored in Greece through COSCO's investment in Piraeus, connects Athens to Black Sea infrastructure and places it at the crossroads of EU de-risking and economic pragmatism (Karagiannis, 2013). These shifts raise the question of whether Greece can continue relying on EU-mediated ad hoc engagement, or whether intensifying great-power competition will require a more formal strategy.

This chapter analyses Greece's approach to the Black Sea through the combined lens of small-state foreign policy and grand strategy. It advances three claims. First, although Greece lacks a formal Black Sea doctrine, its actions display patterned logics consistent with small-state grand strategy. Second, these logics are not unique to the Black Sea but reflect broader foreign policy orientations. Third, the war in Ukraine and evolving EU policy frameworks may act as external shocks prompting reassessment of Greece's flexible, issue-specific engagement.

In terms of structure, the chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines the conceptual ambiguities of the "Black Sea region" and its weak regionness. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, combining small-state grand strategy and foreign policy analysis with identity-based approaches such as ontological security. Section 4 traces tensions between Europeanisation, national interest, and exceptionalism, while Section 5 situates Greek engagement within EU-led frameworks such as BSEC, the Black Sea Synergy, and the Eastern Partnership. Section 6 explores Greece's response to the war in Ukraine, focusing on diaspora diplomacy and shipping-sector lobbying, while Section 7 turns to energy and connectivity. Section 8 assesses external actors, particularly China's investment in Piraeus and the interplay between BRI and Euro-Atlantic connectivity. Section 9 addresses broader security dimensions, including NATO posture, trilateral cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria, and cyber challenges. Section 10 concludes by synthesising the findings and considering future scenarios for Greek policy.

By situating Greece's Black Sea engagement within the broader logics of small-state grand strategy, the chapter contributes both empirically and theoretically. It expands scholarship on Greek foreign policy beyond the focus on Greek-Turkish relations to a peripheral but significant theatre, and contributes to comparative debates on how small states integrate peripheral regions into strategic visions, highlighting the adaptive pragmatism of small-state grand strategy in contested geopolitical spaces.

2. The Black Sea as a 'Region': conceptual ambiguities, empirical realities

The notion of the "Black Sea region" has been a contested and unstable notion in post-Cold War international politics. To refer to King's (2004: 13) question: Is the Black Sea a region? Indeed, unlike more institutionalised or identity-based regions such as the Baltic or the Mediterranean, the Black Sea has persistently struggled to acquire coherence as a geopolitical and socio-economic space. Although geographically identifiable, its regionness remains weak as political fragmentation, competing external influences, and limited institutionalisation have impeded its consolidation (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

2.1 Conceptual ambiguities: bringing a region into existence?

From the early 1990s, the establishment of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) under Turkish initiative symbolised an effort to frame the area as a distinct entity of cooperation. The 1992 Bosphorus Statement and Summit Declaration invoked "a common interest in the Black Sea area" and promised to strive for peace, stability, and development (BSEC, 1992). Subsequent declarations increasingly linked the region to Europe, framing it as an "integral part of the European economic process" (BSEC, 1995) and later as a "vital link" between Europe and Asia (BSEC, 2002).

Yet, as Tsantoulis (2021) argues, the concept of a 'Black Sea region' was never fixed as it remained fluid, contested, and subject to competing geopolitical imaginations and understandings of what region means and what it should entail. Different actors projected divergent visions. In particular, for Russia and Turkey, the Black Sea was primarily an intergovernmental arena to consolidate influence while for EU officials, it became part of an "extended neighbourhood" discourse, and lastly for US policymakers, it was reframed as a frontier of democracy promotion and energy security (Asmus, 2004; Baran & Smith, 2007). This multiplicity of voices produced an "empty signifier": a region

that meant “everything and nothing” at the same time, lacking a stable political or identity basis (Tsantoulis, 2021: 6).

2.2 Empirical realities: weak regionness

Empirically, the Black Sea fails to meet the rather loose criteria of “regionness” as defined by regional integration theorists. Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) stress that a region requires institutionalisation, shared identity, and a sense of belonging beyond geographical contiguity. The Black Sea, however, has remained fragmented. BSEC provided an early framework for cooperation in areas such as trade, environment, and transport, but it never developed into a robust security or political organisation due to resistance by key members, most notably Russia and Turkey, against upgrading its mandate (Tsantoulis, 2021: 120; Manoli, 2012).

Attempts at deeper integration repeatedly faltered. The EU’s 1997 Communication on regional cooperation recognised “promising synergies” with the Black Sea but produced little concrete follow-up (European Commission, 1997). The “first wave” of region-building in the 1990s thus remained low-profile, focused on economic projects rather than collective security or identity formation (Valinakis, 1999). Unlike the Baltic, which successfully constructed a regional identity and integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, the Black Sea never managed to overcome its peripheralisation (Ciută, 2007).

The limits of Black Sea regionalism became even clearer after the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Both events underscored the fragility of regional institutions and the dominance of great-power rivalries. As Blockmans (2015: 189) observed, the Black Sea emerged as a “key issue for recasting a new balance of power between Russia and the West”. In this *Realpolitik* environment, the conceptual promise of “region” as a space of cooperation was overshadowed by zero-sum geopolitical competition (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2015: 134).

2.3 Competing policy definitions

The definitional ambiguity of the Black Sea is also evident in competing policy frameworks. For the EU, it has been variously described as part of the “wider Europe,” the European Neighbourhood, or the Eastern Partnership (EaP) space. For NATO, it constitutes part of the “southeastern flank”, with strategic relevance tied to military

posture and deterrence (Aydin, 2005). For the BSEC itself, the region initially meant the territories of member states, later reframed as a “wider Black Sea area” linked to Europe’s expanding geography (BSEC, 1998; 2002; 2007).

To return to King’s question (2004: 11–17), although the area shares certain functional linkages (trade, energy pipelines, migration), it lacks the cohesive identity or institutional density necessary for strong regionhood. This scepticism is echoed in works that describe the Black Sea as a “Bermuda Triangle” of Western strategic studies portraying it as an area of intense interest but of little coherence (Asmus & Jackson, 2004: 26).

2.4 The implications for Greece

The ambiguous and weakly institutionalised character of the Black Sea has direct implications for Greece’s foreign policy. Unlike the Baltic Sea or the Mediterranean, the Black Sea has failed to consolidate as a coherent region with robust institutions, shared identity, or effective security frameworks (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). For Greece, this lack of “regionness” has translated into both constraints and opportunities.

On the constraint side, the absence of a strong regional architecture has reduced incentives for Athens to develop a stand-alone Black Sea strategy. As Tsantoulis (2021) notes, institutional frameworks such as the BSEC or policy initiatives such as the Black Sea Synergy have been inconsistent and politically contested. With Russia and Turkey dominating regional dynamics, and with the EU often relegating the Black Sea to the periphery of its neighbourhood policy, Greece perceives limited returns from unilateral activism in this theatre (Triantaphyllou, 2005; Manoli, 2012). Moreover, Greece’s foreign policy bandwidth is already stretched across the Balkans, the Aegean, and the Eastern Mediterranean, theatres that are perceived as more immediate to national security. The relative weakness of the Black Sea as a region thus reinforces Greece’s tendency to engage indirectly, through EU and NATO frameworks rather than autonomous strategies.

Yet this ambiguity also generates opportunities. Precisely because the Black Sea is weakly institutionalised, it allows room for smaller actors such as Greece to shape sectoral initiatives without facing the constraints of entrenched regional hierarchies. Athens has leveraged this “institutional fluidity” to carve out niches in areas like maritime safety, energy transit, and cultural diplomacy (Karagiannis, 2013). Through its

participation in EU cross-border cooperation programmes, Greece has been able to project influence into the Black Sea at relatively low cost, aligning national expertise with EU funding streams (European Commission, 2019). Similarly, Athens' strong shipping sector and its cultural-historical ties to Black Sea diasporas enable it to maintain visibility even in the absence of robust regional integration mechanisms.

The implications for Greece's strategic posture are therefore twofold. First, the weak regionness of the Black Sea makes Athens heavily reliant on shelter-seeking behaviour, embedding its involvement in EU and NATO structures to mitigate risks and amplify voice. Second, it opens limited but valuable spaces for niche diplomacy, where Greece can contribute expertise and pursue national priorities without the burden of sustaining an autonomous regional strategy. These dynamics explain why Greece consistently treats the Black Sea as a secondary but consequential theatre: it is not central enough to justify a codified doctrine, yet sufficiently important to warrant pragmatic engagement through multilateral and sectoral channels.

In this sense, the Black Sea exemplifies the broader dilemma of Greek foreign policy. Athens operates at the intersection of integration and exceptionalism: integration through EU- and NATO-led regional policies, exceptionalism through cultural narratives and diasporic diplomacy. The Black Sea's structural ambiguity reinforces this duality, compelling Greece to rely on its alliances while exploiting selective opportunities for influence where institutional gaps permit.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This chapter advances an integrated theoretical framework for analysing the foreign policy behaviour of non-great powers operating within complex and contested regional environments. Rather than juxtaposing multiple theoretical traditions in a descriptive manner, the framework synthesises insights from neoclassical realism, small state theory, middle power approaches, foreign policy analysis (FPA), and ontological security into a single, multi-level explanatory model. The central claim is that the external behaviour of such states is best understood as a form of constrained and context-dependent agency, produced through the interaction between systemic pressures, domestic filtering mechanisms, and identity-based processes of meaning-making.

3.1. Neoclassical Realism as the integrative foundation

At its core, the framework is anchored in neoclassical realism, which provides the most analytically coherent foundation for integrating structural and unit-level variables. Unlike structural realism, which privileges the distribution of material capabilities and assumes that states respond in broadly similar ways to systemic incentives, neoclassical realism argues that systemic pressures are mediated by domestic intervening variables, including elite perceptions, state capacity, and institutional configurations (Rose, 1998; Gvalia, Lebanidze and Siroky, 2019). This approach preserves the central realist insight that the international system constrains and shapes state behaviour, while simultaneously recognising that foreign policy outcomes cannot be deduced directly from structure alone.

In this sense, neoclassical realism operates as a theoretical bridge between International Relations theory and Foreign Policy Analysis. It allows for a conceptualisation of foreign policy as a process in which external stimuli are interpreted, translated, and sometimes distorted through domestic structures and cognitive filters (Kozub-Karkut, 2019). This is particularly important in the study of non-great powers, where variation in foreign policy behaviour is often substantial despite similar structural positions. By incorporating intervening variables, neoclassical realism moves beyond deterministic accounts and opens analytical space for understanding variation, inconsistency, and strategic ambiguity in foreign policy.

3.2. Grand Strategy and structural Constraints: small states and the logic of adaptation

Within this neoclassical realist architecture, the concept of grand strategy is reinterpreted as an adaptive rather than a fixed or fully coherent phenomenon. Traditional definitions portray grand strategy as the alignment of long-term ends with available means across military, economic, and diplomatic domains (Posen, 1984; Brands, 2014). However, recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that grand strategy necessarily takes the form of a clearly articulated and stable plan, emphasising instead its emergent and iterative character (Balzacq and Krebs, 2021). This re-conceptualisation is particularly relevant for states with limited resources and multiple external constraints, for whom strategic coherence is often aspirational rather than fully realised.

From this perspective, grand strategy becomes a discipline of prioritisation under constraint, rather than a blueprint for global ordering. It involves the continuous

adjustment of goals and instruments in response to shifting external conditions and internal limitations. Such an understanding aligns closely with neoclassical realism, as both emphasise the dynamic interaction between systemic pressures and domestic capacities. Grand strategy is thus not an independent explanatory variable but an expression of how states interpret and respond to structural constraints through domestic filters.

The relevance of this reconceptualisation becomes clearer when situated within the broader literature on small states, which provides a more precise account of the structural conditions under which such adaptive strategies emerge. Small state theory does not offer a single unified definition of “smallness,” but there is broad agreement that small states are characterised by limited material capabilities, restricted autonomy, and heightened vulnerability to external pressures (Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020). These constraints generate what has been described as a capability deficit, which limits the ability of small states to influence systemic outcomes independently and compels them to rely on external relationships and institutional frameworks (Wivel, 2016).

However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly challenged the notion that small states are merely reactive actors. Instead, it highlights their capacity to exercise agency through strategic adaptation, specialisation, and relational positioning (Galal, 2020). This shift reflects a broader transformation in the understanding of power, from a narrow focus on material capabilities to a more expansive conception that includes soft power, institutional influence, and ideational resources. Small states, while constrained, are not powerless; rather, they operate within a narrower range of options, which they navigate through carefully calibrated strategies.

To capture these strategies, the framework draws on three recurring patterns identified in the literature: shelter-seeking, niche diplomacy, and hedging (Ingebritsen, 2002; Thorhallsson, 2018; Kuik, 2008). These are conceptualised not as discrete or mutually exclusive strategies, but as interrelated logics of behaviour that emerge from the structural condition of smallness. Shelter-seeking refers to the embedding of states within alliances or institutional arrangements that provide security, legitimacy, and access to resources. Niche diplomacy involves the selective concentration of effort in areas where a state possesses comparative advantage, allowing it to amplify its influence despite limited capabilities. Hedging, finally, captures the practice of maintaining

relationships with multiple, and sometimes competing, actors in order to reduce risk and preserve flexibility.

3.3. Agency beyond material capability

Although these logics provide a robust account of how constrained states operate within the international system, they remain primarily material and institutional in orientation. To address this limitation, the framework incorporates insights from the middle power literature, which shifts attention towards patterns of behaviour, diplomatic practices, and ideational influence. Rather than defining middle powers solely in terms of material capabilities, behavioural approaches emphasise their propensity for multilateralism, coalition-building, and the pursuit of international stability (Efstathopoulos, 2018).

At the same time, the concept of middle power remains analytically contested. Its definitional ambiguity and expanding scope have led some scholars to question its utility as a classificatory category (Robertson, 2017; Chapnick, 1999). However, this ambiguity can also be seen as a strength, insofar as it allows for a more flexible and context-sensitive understanding of state behaviour. Rather than attempting to categorise states definitively, the framework treats middle power theory as a behavioural lens, which highlights specific diplomatic practices and strategies that may be adopted by states across different structural positions.

Recent developments in the literature further support this move towards flexibility, emphasising the fluid and evolving nature of middle power agency. In particular, the distinction between “conformist” and “reformist” middle powers has been criticised for oversimplifying the diversity of state behaviour and for failing to capture the dynamic ways in which states engage with the international order (Efstathopoulos, 2023). By recognising that states may simultaneously support, reshape, and selectively contest elements of the existing order, this approach aligns closely with the neoclassical realist emphasis on context-dependent behaviour.

The integration of small state and middle power perspectives thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of agency under constraint. In this context, emphasis is given to opening the “black box” of decision-making by examining the role of individuals, institutions, and domestic political dynamics (Snyder et al., 1962; Rosenau, 1966). Overall, the purpose is to provide a detailed account of the mechanisms through which

domestic variables mediate systemic influences, reinforcing the neoclassical realist emphasis on the importance of intervening variables in shaping foreign policy outcomes.

3.4. Ontological Security, identity, and the public sphere

However, even this expanded framework remains incomplete without accounting for the role of identity and meaning in foreign policy. To address this, the framework incorporates the concept of ontological security, which shifts the focus from physical survival to the maintenance of a stable sense of self (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). According to this perspective, states are not only concerned with material interests but also with preserving consistent narratives about who they are and how they relate to others. These narratives shape both the interpretation of external events and the justification of policy choices.

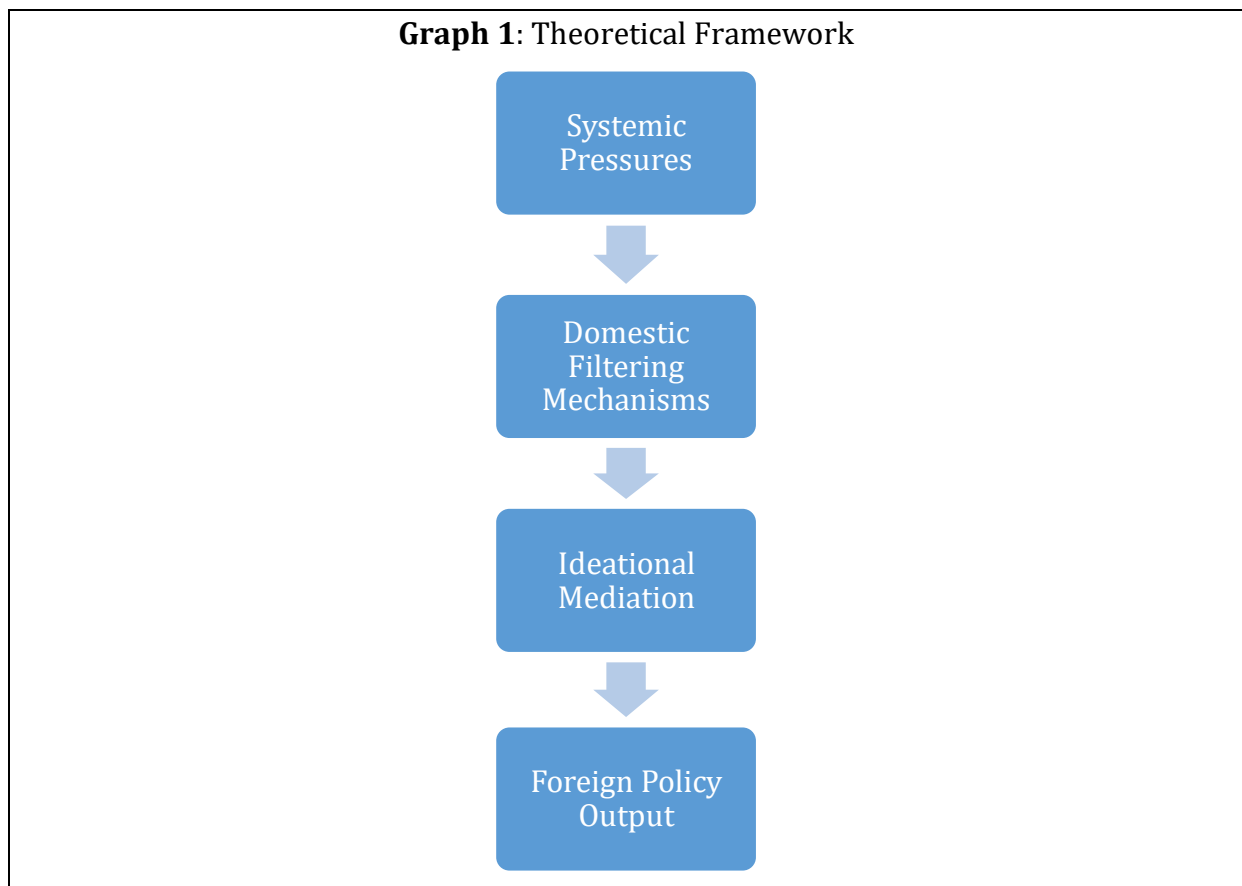
The role of identity is further mediated through the public sphere, where foreign policy is debated, contested, and legitimised. Drawing on Habermasian theory, the framework recognises that foreign policy is not solely the product of elite decision-making but is also shaped by the interaction between political actors and public opinion (Habermas, 1996). Public discourse provides the space in which competing narratives are articulated and evaluated, influencing both the constraints and opportunities faced by policymakers. This discursive dimension highlights how foreign policy is not only a matter of strategic calculation but also of narrative construction and legitimation, requiring policymakers to reconcile competing identities, values, and expectations.

3.5. Towards a Theory of Constrained Agency

Taken together, these theoretical components form a multi-level, integrative framework in which foreign policy is understood as the outcome of interactions across three interconnected domains. At the systemic level, the distribution of power defines the constraints and opportunities within which states operate. At the domestic level, institutional structures, elite perceptions, and decision-making processes filter and translate these constraints into policy choices. At the ideational level, identity narratives and public discourse shape the interpretation and legitimation of these choices.

This integrated approach allows for a re-conceptualisation of foreign policy as a form of constrained agency, in which states operate within limits but retain the capacity for strategic adaptation and innovation. It moves beyond binary distinctions between

structure and agency, or between material and ideational explanations, by showing how these dimensions interact in complex and dynamic ways. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how non-great powers navigate an increasingly fragmented and contested international order.



Lastly, in methodological terms, the chapter adopts a qualitative, interpretive strategy that operationalises the theoretical framework through structured, theory-guided empirical analysis. Rather than testing hypotheses in a positivist sense, the analysis proceeds through analytic interpretation, examining how systemic pressures are filtered through domestic mechanisms and articulated through ideational narratives across different policy domains. The empirical sections are organised thematically (i.e. EU engagement, crisis response, infrastructure diplomacy, external actors, and security cooperation) to capture variation while ensuring coherence with the underlying theoretical model. In doing so, the chapter applies the framework inductively, demonstrating how foreign policy behaviour emerges as a multi-level process consistent with the logic of constrained agency.

4. The EU Framework: Indirect Black Sea Policy via Brussels

This section examines how foreign policy behaviour is shaped by systemic constraints and institutional embedding, demonstrating how engagement with the Black Sea emerges not through autonomous strategy but through multilateral frameworks. In line with the theoretical framework, it highlights how structural pressures are mediated through institutional channels, producing patterns of shelter-seeking and selective agency.

Greece does not possess a fully autonomous strategy towards the Black Sea region. Instead, its engagement has largely been mediated through the European Union (EU), reflecting the small-state logic of shelter-seeking while simultaneously allowing Athens to project national priorities through European frameworks. The EU's own policies have oscillated between ambitious rhetoric and fragmented practice, yet for Greece they have provided indispensable platforms to pursue energy security, maritime governance, and cultural diplomacy in the wider Black Sea area (Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005; Triantaphyllou, 2018).

4.1 Black Sea Synergy: Multilateralism and Pragmatism

The EU's most consistent regional framework has been the *Black Sea Synergy* (BSS), launched in 2007 following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Conceived as a flexible, low-cost initiative, BSS emphasised bottom-up projects in seven thematic areas: environment, energy, transport, trade, education, research, and security (European Commission, 2007; European Commission, 2019). Its strength lay in sectoral pragmatism, supporting initiatives such as the Common Maritime Agenda (2018 Burgas Declaration) and the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda on blue growth (European Commission, 2019: 5–6).

This pattern reflects the logic of neoclassical realism, whereby systemic opportunities provided by EU frameworks are filtered through domestic capacity constraints, leading to indirect rather than autonomous regional engagement (Rose, 1998; Gvalia et al., 2019). For Greece, participation in BSS exemplified *shelter-seeking*: aligning with EU structures to engage in Black Sea affairs without bearing disproportionate political or financial costs. Athens' contribution to maritime safety projects and its involvement in the Black Sea Basin Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) programmes allowed it to translate national expertise into multilateral initiatives

(European Commission, 2019). Such sectoral cooperation also dovetailed with Greece's broader diplomatic priorities of promoting maritime governance and leveraging its shipping sector for strategic influence (Karagiannis, 2013).

4.2 The Eastern Partnership and Neighbourhood Policy

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched in 2009, extended EU policy to six states (i.e. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus) complementing BSS but overlapping with it (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). Although Athens has not been a leading actor in EaP, it has supported its integration into broader EU foreign policy, recognising the value of embedding Greek priorities, particularly regarding Ukraine and Moldova, within collective frameworks. For Greece, the EaP offered a way to reinforce its normative commitments (i.e. support for sovereignty and territorial integrity) while balancing historically sensitive relations with Russia (Triantaphyllou, 2005).

From a small-state perspective, this engagement can be understood as shelter-seeking behaviour, in which alignment with EU structures compensates for limited independent leverage while enabling selective projection of national priorities (Wivel, 2016; Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020). This alignment is consistent with the argument that Europeanisation enables small states like Greece to "upload" certain concerns onto the EU agenda, thereby magnifying their reach (Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005; Economides, 2005). Athens' interest in sustaining stability in Ukraine, for example, intersects with both diaspora concerns in Mariupol and shipping interests linked to grain exports through the Black Sea.

4.3 The Post-2022 Environment: Towards a Strategic EU Black Sea Policy

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has catalysed a significant redefinition of the EU's Black Sea approach. The 2025 *EU Strategic Approach to the Black Sea* identifies three pillars ((i) security and resilience, ii) sustainable growth and prosperity, and iii) environmental protection and climate resilience) and introduces flagship initiatives such as a *Black Sea Maritime Security Hub*, expanded connectivity projects, and blue economy innovation (European Commission & HR/VP, 2025). These measures reflect a marked securitisation of EU policy, blending traditional neighbourhood tools with maritime security, hybrid threat countermeasures, and critical infrastructure protection.

For Greece, the implications are significant. Athens has consistently prioritised energy security, maritime governance, and cultural diplomacy within EU frameworks. The Alexandroupoli LNG terminal, embedded in the EU's connectivity agenda, illustrates how national infrastructure can acquire regional significance when supported by European funding and political backing. Similarly, Greece's shipping expertise positions it as a contributor to EU-led maritime security initiatives, including mine clearance and naval exercises. In cultural terms, Athens has used CBC and Erasmus+ programmes to strengthen diasporic ties and promote its heritage links with Black Sea states (European Commission, 2019).

The increasing securitisation of EU policy further illustrates how systemic pressures restructure the strategic environment, compelling states to recalibrate their behaviour through existing institutional channels rather than through autonomous strategic innovation (Kozub-Karkut, 2019)

4.4 Greece's Priorities within the EU Framework

Within this evolving EU policy architecture, Greece has pursued three interlinked priorities:

- **Energy security:** Leveraging EU frameworks to support diversification projects such as TAP/TANAP pipelines, LNG infrastructure, and electricity interconnections. These initiatives serve both national interests and broader EU goals of reducing dependence on Russian hydrocarbons (Karagiannis, 2013; European Commission, 2019).
- **Maritime policy and governance:** Athens has emphasised maritime safety, port development, and environmental protection, aligning its own comparative advantage in shipping with EU projects under the Integrated Maritime Policy and Blue Growth agendas (European Commission, 2019; Triantaphyllou, 2018).
- **Cultural diplomacy and diaspora engagement:** Greece has sought to embed its historical and diasporic connections, especially in Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia, into EU programmes on education, cultural exchange, and civil society cooperation, thereby reinforcing its soft-power profile in the region (Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005).

These priorities demonstrate the symbiosis between national strategy and EU policy frameworks. By "uploading" its interests into Brussels, Greece has exemplified the small-

state logic of *shelter-seeking* while also practising *niche diplomacy* in energy and maritime governance. In addition, they are consistent with niche diplomacy, whereby constrained states leverage domain-specific expertise to amplify influence beyond their material capabilities (Ingebritsen, 2002; Thorhallsson, 2018).

4.5 Conclusion

The Greek case illustrates how small states can maximise strategic returns through multilateral leverage. By embedding its priorities within EU Black Sea frameworks, Athens has engaged the region indirectly, avoiding the risks of unilateral activism while retaining influence in sectors of comparative advantage. This alignment highlights the broader pattern of Greek foreign policy: strategic engagement through the EU as a mechanism of shelter-seeking, combined with selective niche diplomacy and hedging in relation to Russia and China.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how systemic opportunities provided by the EU are filtered through domestic capacity and strategic prioritisation, resulting in indirect but structured engagement. Rather than signalling the absence of strategy, this pattern reflects adaptive behaviour under constraint, consistent with neoclassical realist expectations (Rose, 1998; Gvalia et al., 2019). The EU thus functions simultaneously as a source of constraint and as a multiplier of agency, enabling states to project influence without assuming the costs of unilateral action.

5. The War in Ukraine and Greek Foreign Policy

This section analyses foreign policy behaviour under conditions of acute systemic shock, illustrating how external crises intensify structural pressures while activating domestic and ideational mediating mechanisms. It demonstrates how foreign policy responses emerge through the interaction between alliance commitments, domestic political considerations, and identity-based narratives.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represented a watershed moment for European security and for Greece's foreign policy. For Athens, the conflict was not a distant geopolitical crisis but one with immediate implications: it involved a fellow Black Sea state with which Greece shares longstanding historical, cultural, and diasporic ties; it tested EU and NATO solidarity, on which Greek security relies; and it intersected with Greece's own strategic environment in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Greece's response thus illustrates the dynamics of selective hedging by a small state: firmly embedded in Euro-Atlantic structures, yet shaped by the need to manage sensitive historical ties and protect vulnerable communities abroad.

5.1 Alignment with EU and NATO Sanctions

From the outset of the war, Greece aligned itself with EU sanctions against Russia, endorsing restrictive measures on finance, energy, transport, and individual actors (European Council, 2022). Athens also expelled Russian diplomats, restricted airspace, and supported the EU's decisions to suspend cooperation with Moscow under the Black Sea Synergy framework (European Commission, 2024). At NATO level, Greece has participated in strengthened deterrence and defence measures on the Alliance's southeastern flank, contributing to air policing missions and naval deployments in the Black Sea (NATO, 2022).

This alignment reflects what Triantaphyllou (2018) terms Greece's strategic realism as despite residual pro-Russian sentiment in Greek society, successive governments have recognised that national security is best safeguarded through EU and NATO solidarity. At the same time, alignment with sanctions has entailed economic costs, particularly in the energy sector and for Greek shipping firms long active in Russian trade (Karagiannis, 2013). This alignment reflects the predominance of systemic constraints in shaping foreign policy behaviour, yet its specific form showcases the mediating role of domestic strategic calculations, as emphasised by neoclassical realism (Gvalia et al., 2019).

5.2 Military and Humanitarian Assistance

Beyond sanctions, Greece has contributed both military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. In March 2022, Athens dispatched Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and ammunition, followed by further supplies of armoured vehicles in coordination with Germany (Hellenic MFA, 2022). Humanitarian convoys, including medical equipment and food, were organised by the Hellenic Red Cross and supported by government initiatives. Parliamentary debates over these measures revealed domestic divisions, with opposition parties criticising the government for risking escalation and undermining Greece's traditionally cautious stance towards Russia (Kathimerini, 2022). Nevertheless, the government framed its support as consistent with Greece's normative commitments to

sovereignty and territorial integrity that are principles central to its own disputes with Turkey in the Aegean (Triantaphyllou, 2005). The variation in domestic responses highlights the relevance of Foreign Policy Analysis, particularly the role of domestic political contestation and elite interpretation in shaping policy outcomes (Putnam, 1988; Jervis, 1976).

5.3 The Mariupol Diaspora and Diplomatic Fallout

Perhaps the most direct and emotive impact of the war on Greece has been the humanitarian crisis in Mariupol, home to one of the largest Greek communities outside Greece that was estimated at 70,000–100,000 before 2022. The community traces its roots to the 18th century, when Catherine the Great resettled Greek Orthodox families from Crimea, creating a deep reservoir of cultural memory and identity narratives.

The siege and near-destruction of Mariupol in March–April 2022 reverberated strongly in Greek domestic politics. Parliamentary debates consistently referred to Mariupol as a “Greek city” in symbolic terms, highlighting its role as an extension of the national self (Kathimerini, 2022). Both government and opposition framed the plight of the diaspora not only as a humanitarian tragedy but as a direct assault on Greece’s extended community of Hellenism. The evacuation of ethnic Greeks, coordinated by the Hellenic MFA, was presented as a moral duty and reaffirmation of Greece’s role as a protector of its diaspora (Hellenic MFA, 2022).

From an ontological security perspective, Mariupol became a crucial narrative device as it allowed Athens to maintain a consistent sense of self as a guardian of Hellenism abroad (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Aligning with EU/NATO sanctions and supporting Ukraine could thus be narrated domestically not only in terms of strategic realism but also as a fulfilment of identity obligations. The diaspora narrative bridged the gap between Euro-Atlantic solidarity and exceptionalist traditions, embedding material policy in identity continuity.

The public sphere played a decisive role in legitimising this turn. While large segments of Greek society had historically displayed pro-Russian sympathies, rooted in Orthodox affinity and shared resentment of Western double standards (Triantaphyllou, 2018), the suffering of Mariupol Greeks provided a counter-narrative that enabled public acceptance of sanctions and even military assistance to Ukraine. Media coverage and parliamentary rhetoric invoked not just international law but “kinship” with Mariupol

Greeks, ensuring resonance with national audiences. In Habermasian terms, elite discourse aligned with a transnational narrative of solidarity, but domesticated it by anchoring it in Greek historical and cultural identity (Habermas, 1996; Eder & Kantner, 2000).

Symbolically, Greece elevated Mariupol in its diplomacy. The Prime Minister described the city as a “martyr of Hellenism”, and Athens pledged support for post-war reconstruction of Greek schools and cultural institutions. Such initiatives show how diaspora protection functioned as symbolic diplomacy: simultaneously reaffirming Greek self-identity, responding to domestic expectations, and signalling to allies that Greece’s contribution was grounded in both solidarity and national ethos.

Alongside diaspora-driven narratives, the Greek shipping sector shaped Athens’ response to sanctions. Greek-owned firms control almost 20% of global shipping tonnage and dominate tanker fleets carrying Russian oil (Karagiannis, 2013). When the EU debated restrictions on maritime transport of Russian hydrocarbons, ship-owners lobbied to mitigate the scope and pace of sanctions. Their influence was visible in transitional measures, such as grace periods for existing contracts and limited exemptions for certain categories of cargo, ensuring the industry could adapt without catastrophic losses (European Council, 2022).

Here too, ontological security and the public sphere intersected with material interests. Government officials framed Greece’s positions not as special pleading but as responsible stewardship of global maritime stability, presenting shipping as part of Greece’s “national vocation” and identity as a seafaring nation. Thus, the shipping sector lobbied pragmatically, but its interests were discursively justified within broader identity narratives of Greece as a maritime power and indispensable EU partner. This demonstrates how ideational factors function as a mediating layer, shaping not only policy justification but also the range of politically viable foreign policy choices (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008).

5.4 The Grain Corridor and Greek Shipping

The war has also underscored the critical role of the Black Sea in global trade, particularly grain exports from Ukraine. Greek-owned shipping companies have been central in transporting Ukrainian grain under the UN- and Turkey-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative (July 2022–July 2023), highlighting the intersection of Greece’s maritime niche

with global food security (UN, 2023). Even after Russia withdrew from the agreement, Greek firms continued to play a role in alternative routes, including EU-supported “Solidarity Lanes” via the Danube and overland corridors (European Commission, 2023). For Athens, the shipping dimension reinforced both the risks and opportunities of the Black Sea war economy. On one hand, it exposed Greek vessels to security threats, including naval mines. On the other, it showcased Greece’s global shipping leadership, giving Athens additional leverage within EU debates on sanctions exemptions and maritime regulation.

5.5 Conclusion: Selective Hedging in Practice

Greece’s response to the war in Ukraine encapsulates the logic of *selective hedging* as a small-state strategy. On the one hand, Athens has unequivocally aligned with EU and NATO measures, demonstrating shelter-seeking behaviour and reinforcing its Western orientation. On the other, its policies have been shaped by distinctive national concerns: protecting the Mariupol diaspora, mitigating shipping sector exposure, and leveraging energy infrastructure to enhance national influence. The war has thus both narrowed Greece’s room for manoeuvre forcing a break with Russia and expanded its regional significance within EU and NATO frameworks.

The empirical evidence confirms that foreign policy responses cannot be understood solely in terms of systemic alignment, but must be analysed as the product of domestic filtering and ideational mediation. The interaction between alliance obligations, economic interests, and identity narratives illustrates the multi-level nature of constrained agency (Mitzen, 2006; Putnam, 1988). Taken together, these dynamics illustrate foreign policy as a multi-level process in which systemic pressures, domestic filters, and identity narratives interact to produce context-dependent strategic behaviour. In this sense, crisis does not eliminate agency but restructures it, narrowing options while intensifying the need for strategic calibration.

6. Energy, Trade, and Connectivity

This section examines how material capabilities and structural positioning are translated into strategic influence through sectoral engagement. It highlights the role of infrastructure, geography, and economic capacity as mediating variables that enable states to operationalise niche diplomacy within broader systemic constraints. Energy,

trade, and connectivity form some of the most tangible avenues through which Greece engages with the Black Sea region. These domains highlight the dual logics of niche diplomacy by capitalising on maritime expertise and geographic position and shelter-seeking *by* embedding national priorities into EU-wide strategies. Greece's energy transit projects, port developments, and global shipping sector demonstrate how a small state can amplify its strategic relevance indirectly through infrastructure diplomacy.

6.1 Greece as an Energy Transit Hub

The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), operational since 2020, has become a cornerstone of Europe's energy diversification. With an initial capacity of 10 billion cubic metres (bcm) per year and plans for expansion to 20 bcm, TAP has already delivered more than 45 bcm of Caspian gas into Europe as of March 2025 (DHA Press, 2025; Global Energy Monitor, 2025). Greece also benefits directly, receiving part of its domestic gas supplies through TAP, while facilitating flows to Italy and Bulgaria.

Parallel to this, the Alexandroupoli Floating Storage and Regasification Unit (FSRU) began operations in late 2024, with a regasification capacity of 5.5 bcm per year and storage capacity of 153,500 m³ (Enerdata, 2024). Although the facility was briefly offline in 2025, it resumed operations at around 25% capacity, equivalent to 1.4 bcm annually, by mid-year (S&P Global, 2025). Capacity has already been booked by 14 companies until 2030, with U.S. importer Venture Global securing roughly 25% of throughput for five years (Reuters, 2024). For Athens, these infrastructures not only diversify its own energy mix but anchor Greece as a southern gateway for European energy security, particularly for Bulgaria, Romania, and other Central European markets (Triantaphyllou, 2018). This reflects the strategic logic of niche diplomacy, whereby infrastructure and geography are mobilised as instruments of influence within a broader framework of structural constraint (Thorhallsson, 2018).

6.2 Port Infrastructure and Trade Corridors

Greek ports have steadily expanded their role in Black Sea connectivity, with Thessaloniki and Alexandroupoli emerging as pivotal nodes. Thessaloniki has become a vital hub linking the Aegean to the Balkans, with EU-backed upgrades to railway corridors extending to Burgas in Bulgaria and Constanța in Romania. These developments are not stand-alone but part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), the EU's

flagship connectivity framework designed to integrate transport, energy, and digital corridors across the Union and its neighbourhood (European Commission, 2019). For Greece, inclusion in TEN-T core corridors—most notably the Orient/East-Med corridor—provides not only financial support for infrastructure upgrades but also political leverage, situating Athens as a southern entry point for EU connectivity with the Black Sea basin.

The Alexandroupoli port has gained particular prominence, supported by both TEN-T funding and NATO military mobility programmes. Its dual-use role, as an LNG hub and as a logistics gateway for U.S./NATO deployments into Romania and Bulgaria, demonstrates how EU infrastructure financing converges with security imperatives. Upgrades to Alexandroupoli's road and rail links have been prioritised under TEN-T's military mobility agenda, ensuring interoperability of civilian and defence infrastructure (European Commission, 2023).

Beyond TEN-T, the EU's Global Gateway initiative, launched in 2021 as a response to China's Belt and Road, has opened new opportunities for Greece to position itself as a connectivity facilitator. The initiative emphasises sustainable infrastructure, digitalisation, and energy diversification, with a focus on linking the EU to neighbouring regions including the Black Sea. Athens has actively sought to frame Thessaloniki and Alexandroupoli as nodes in Global Gateway corridors, especially in projects aimed at enhancing energy interconnectivity (gas pipelines, electricity grids) and resilient supply chains linking the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and Central Europe.

By aligning with TEN-T and Global Gateway, Greece not only secures financing for critical infrastructure but also embeds its national connectivity priorities into EU strategic narratives. This reflects classic shelter-seeking: leveraging EU funds and frameworks to amplify national projects. But it also reflects niche diplomacy: Greece positions itself as a logistics and energy bridge between the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Black Sea, carving out a role that exceeds its material size. Such developments illustrate how domestic capacities interact with systemic opportunities, enabling states to translate structural positioning into strategic leverage (Rose, 1998).

6.3 Greek Shipping and Black Sea Trade

Greek-owned shipping remains a global leader, controlling nearly 20% of world tonnage. The war in Ukraine reinforced its pivotal role: Greek firms were central to transporting Ukrainian grain exports under the UN–Turkey brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative (2022–

23) and later through the EU’s “Solidarity Lanes” via Danube and overland corridors (UN, 2023; European Commission, 2023). This role not only sustained global food security but also underscored the strategic importance of Greece’s shipping sector to EU debates on sanctions, maritime regulation, and port safety (Karagiannis, 2013).

Infrastructure/Corridor	Capacity / Status	Strategic Implication
TAP	10 bcm/year (expandable to 20 bcm)	Central energy corridor, delivered 45.3 bcm to date
Alexandroupolis FSRU	5.5 bcm/year (current output ~25%)	Mediterranean gas entry-point; diversification gateway
Thessaloniki & Alexandroupoli Ports	Enhanced rail & sea connectivity	Balkan-Black Sea trade conduits
Greek Shipping (Black Sea)	~20% global tonnage	Crucial for food corridor logistics and maritime leverage

Source: compiled by the authors from European Commission (2019; 2023), DHA Press (2025), Enerdata (2024), Reuters (2024), S&P Global (2025)

6.4 Conclusion: Infrastructure Diplomacy as Niche Diplomacy

The intersection of pipelines, LNG terminals, port upgrades, and shipping illustrates how Greece’s Black Sea engagement is less about a codified regional doctrine and more about infrastructure diplomacy. By embedding its transport and energy projects within EU frameworks such as the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and the Global Gateway, Athens exemplifies two overlapping logics of small-state grand strategy.

First, these initiatives embody shelter-seeking. Greece uses EU financing and strategic branding to “upload” its own infrastructure priorities into Brussels’ connectivity agenda, thereby securing funding, legitimacy, and political support (Economides, 2005). The designation of Thessaloniki and Alexandroupoli as nodes within the TEN-T Orient/East-Med corridor, and their inclusion in Global Gateway projects aimed at strengthening energy and transport resilience, illustrate how Athens mitigates the risks

of unilateral investment while amplifying its influence through EU leverage (European Commission, 2021; 2023).

Second, they highlight niche diplomacy. By specialising in connectivity—maritime transport, LNG regasification, and port–rail interlinkages—Greece cultivates a strategic identity as a bridge state between the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Black Sea. This specialisation aligns with its comparative advantages in shipping and geography, enabling Athens to contribute disproportionately to EU and NATO strategic goals despite its limited material power (Karagiannis, 2013; Thorhallsson, 2018).

In this sense, TEN-T and Global Gateway act as both Europeanisation mechanisms and strategic multipliers. They allow Greece to frame its Black Sea engagement not as unilateral activism but as part of Europe’s collective connectivity agenda. The result is a hybrid model: Athens protects national interests by anchoring them in EU shelter, while projecting regional influence through niche leadership in logistics and energy corridors. This dual logic reinforces the argument that Greece’s Black Sea strategy is patterned but non-codified.

These developments demonstrate how structural position alone does not determine influence. Rather, it is the capacity to mobilise that position strategically that shapes outcomes. Infrastructure diplomacy thus reflects the interaction between systemic opportunities and domestic capabilities, consistent with neoclassical realist expectations. In this context, niche diplomacy emerges as a key mechanism through which constrained states convert material limitations into selective strategic advantage (Thorhallsson, 2018). Infrastructure diplomacy thus exemplifies constrained agency, combining systemic embedding with selective initiative-taking.

7. Connectivity, External Actors, and the BRI

This section explores how foreign policy behaviour is shaped in environments characterised by competing external powers, highlighting the role of strategic balancing and hedging. It demonstrates how the presence of multiple systemic actors increases complexity and requires states to navigate overlapping and sometimes contradictory alignments.

The Black Sea has increasingly become a theatre not only of European and Russian contestation but also of Chinese engagement. Since 2013, BRI has extended its reach into the Black Sea through infrastructure investment, port development, and trade

connectivity, thereby adding a new layer of complexity to the region's geopolitics (Sanders, 2021). For Greece, this expansion raises strategic dilemmas: how to balance its role as a European Union (EU) and NATO member aligned with de-risking strategies, while also extracting economic benefits from Chinese investments in ports, shipping, and infrastructure.

7.1 China's Expanding Black Sea Footprint

China has sought to develop the Black Sea as a logistics and transit hub linking Asia to Europe. Its investments in ports, railways, and terminals illustrate a long-term plan to embed itself in the region's connectivity infrastructure. In Georgia, Chinese firms have invested in Poti and Batumi ports, while financing the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway that significantly reduces transit times from China to Europe (Sanders, 2021: 417–418). In Ukraine, China's COFCO established a grain terminal in Mykolaiv and engaged in port development in Mariupol and Odessa, securing a foothold in agricultural exports (Sanders, 2021: 418). Bulgaria and Turkey have similarly welcomed Chinese investment: in Varna, firms have promoted logistics hubs, while COSCO's stake in Kumport Terminal in Istanbul tied Turkey into the Maritime Silk Road (Sanders, 2021: 419–420). These projects highlight Beijing's ambition to shape Eurasian connectivity and, by embedding itself in Black Sea infrastructure, limit Western and Russian exclusivity in the region (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Cai, 2017). The presence of multiple external actors reinforces the complexity of the systemic environment, increasing incentives for hedging strategies among non-great powers (Kuik, 2008).

7.2 Greece and the Piraeus Nexus: Linking the Mediterranean to the Black Sea

Greece represents a pivotal link in China's Mediterranean–Black Sea strategy through the transformation of Piraeus Port into a flagship of the Maritime Silk Road. The acquisition of a controlling stake by COSCO Shipping in 2016, building on its initial 2009 concession, has propelled Piraeus into one of Europe's busiest container ports, surpassing rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean and ranking among the top four in Europe by throughput in 2021 (Papadimitriou, Pegasiou & Zartaloudis, 2019). This development is not merely commercial but strategic, positioning Greece as a critical node in China's connectivity architecture and embedding Athens into the geopolitical competition between the EU, the U.S., and Beijing.

The significance of Piraeus for Greece's Black Sea policy lies in its connectivity. COSCO's investment is not an isolated asset but part of a logistics chain extending northwards via rail and road corridors through Thessaloniki, Sofia, and onward to Varna and Constanța (Manoli, 2012). In effect, Piraeus operates as the southern gateway of a Mediterranean–Balkan–Black Sea corridor, integrating Greek ports into wider Eurasian supply chains. For Athens, this infrastructure multiplier effect enhances its leverage in both EU and regional debates: by aligning Piraeus with Black Sea connectivity, Greece positions itself as indispensable to both European transport planning and Chinese trade routes (Sanders, 2021).

Economically, the COSCO investment has revitalised Piraeus, turning it into Greece's most dynamic logistics hub and boosting employment and ancillary services. Politically, however, it has generated dilemmas. Within both the EU and the US, concerns have grown over Chinese control of critical infrastructure, prompting the adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation (2020). Piraeus was frequently cited as a catalyst for this shift, with European policymakers questioning whether COSCO's influence undermined EU strategic autonomy (European Commission, 2019). Greece has had to navigate this tension: while eager to protect Chinese investment and secure further funding for infrastructure, Athens has also aligned itself with EU initiatives on de-risking and screening, signalling that its integration within European structures remains paramount (Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005).

The transatlantic dimension adds further complexity. U.S. officials have expressed unease at COSCO's dominance in Piraeus, warning that Chinese control could complicate NATO logistics and intelligence flows in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea (Sanders, 2021: 425–426). This concern is sharpened by Greece's role as a logistical hub for NATO deployments into Romania and Bulgaria through Alexandroupoli. In this sense, the COSCO stake in Piraeus is interpreted in Washington not only as an economic matter but as a potential vulnerability on NATO's south-eastern flank.

For Athens, these dilemmas crystallise the logic of selective hedging. On one hand, Piraeus exemplifies the benefits of embracing Chinese capital and integrating into the Belt and Road Initiative: it provides economic gains, enhances Greece's profile as a logistics hub, and links national infrastructure to the Black Sea corridor. On the other hand, it compels Athens to demonstrate loyalty to EU and NATO partners by adopting investment screening, diversifying connectivity through EU programmes like TEN-T and

Global Gateway, and highlighting Alexandroupoli's role as a NATO-compatible alternative (European Commission, 2021; 2023).

In sum, Piraeus is more than a port: it is both a symbol and an instrument of Greece's broader Black Sea engagement. By anchoring Chinese capital at its southern gateway, Athens gains connectivity into the Black Sea but also exposes itself to alliance dilemmas. The port thus encapsulates Greece's patterned but non-codified strategy: shelter-seeking within the EU/NATO, niche diplomacy as a logistics hub, and hedging between Western allies and Beijing.

Case Study Box 1: Piraeus as Greece's Black Sea Gateway

COSCO's majority stake in Piraeus transformed the port into a Mediterranean hub but also linked Greece directly to the Black Sea region. Container flows from China now move via Piraeus to Thessaloniki and onward to Varna and Constanța, creating a Mediterranean–Balkan–Black Sea corridor. For Greece, this connectivity represents both an economic opportunity and a diplomatic lever: Athens can use its infrastructure to influence EU debates on trade, security, and maritime regulation concerning the Black Sea. In this sense, Piraeus is both an economic project and a strategic asset in Greece's foreign policy towards the Black Sea.

Lastly, in comparative terms, the Piraeus–Alexandroupoli dyad symbolises Greece's dual orientation in Black Sea connectivity. Piraeus, under COSCO's control, is embedded in the Maritime Silk Road and extends into Black Sea corridors via Thessaloniki–Sofia–Varna/Constanța, showcasing Greece's openness to Chinese capital and its willingness to hedge by integrating into BRI logistics chains (Papadimitriou, Pegasiou & Zartaloudis, 2019). By contrast, Alexandroupoli has emerged as a NATO- and EU-compatible hub, supported by TEN-T military mobility funding and used extensively by the United States for deployments into Romania and Bulgaria (European Commission, 2023). Together, these two ports capture Athens' strategic balancing: leveraging Chinese investment for economic gain while simultaneously anchoring itself in Euro-Atlantic security frameworks. For Greece, the coexistence of Piraeus and Alexandroupoli is not contradictory but emblematic of selective hedging, where economic pragmatism and alliance commitments are pursued in parallel to maximise flexibility in the evolving Black Sea security environment (Sanders, 2021; Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005).

The coexistence of competing alignments illustrates the logic of hedging as a response to systemic uncertainty, where states seek to maximise benefits while minimising risks (Kuik, 2008). This behaviour reflects neither incoherence nor indecision, but strategic adaptation within a structurally competitive environment. The interaction between economic pragmatism and alliance commitments further confirms that foreign policy outcomes emerge from the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic priorities. This dynamic reflects the core tension identified in neoclassical realism between systemic alignment and domestic economic imperatives (Kozub-Karkut, 2019).

7.3 U.S. Perceptions and the Transatlantic Dimension

The United States has consistently expressed concern about Chinese investments in Greece, particularly COSCO's majority stake in Piraeus Port, given its strategic proximity to NATO's south-eastern flank. For Washington, the issue extends beyond economics: Piraeus and Alexandroupoli are key logistical nodes for NATO operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea. Since 2017, the U.S.–Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) has enabled expanded U.S. use of Alexandroupoli as a staging ground for NATO deployments towards Romania and Bulgaria. Piraeus, though not directly under NATO management, forms part of the broader logistics chain, connecting maritime resupply with Balkan rail corridors leading to the Black Sea (Sanders, 2021).

American policymakers fear that Chinese control over Piraeus' terminals could, in theory, give Beijing leverage over port access, operational timelines, or critical data flows, thereby complicating NATO logistics in a region already destabilised by Russia's war in Ukraine (ibid: 425–426). U.S. analysts view this as a potential vulnerability in NATO's rear logistics, especially as the Black Sea has become a contested operational theatre after 2022.

Washington's unease is compounded by Greece's earlier record of accommodating Chinese interests within the EU. For instance, one could refer to the blocking or softening EU statements critical of Beijing in 2017. Although Athens has since aligned more closely with EU de-risking strategies, the transatlantic perception of COSCO's presence in Piraeus remains ambivalent: while Greece is seen as a reliable NATO ally, Chinese ownership in strategic infrastructure is regarded as a "grey zone" vulnerability for Alliance logistics.

From a transatlantic perspective, therefore, COSCO’s role in Piraeus is directly tied to the Black Sea operational theatre. NATO relies on Greek ports and corridors to sustain deployments on its south-eastern flank, and any perception of Chinese influence over these nodes is treated as a matter of strategic risk. This has led Washington to encourage Athens to diversify partnerships and reinforce NATO-compatible infrastructure in Alexandroupoli and Thessaloniki, thereby reducing reliance on Piraeus for sensitive military or dual-use logistics (Triantaphyllou, 2018; European Commission, 2019).

Actor	Rationale	Implications for Black Sea Policy
Greece	COSCO’s investment as an economic lifeline: modernising Piraeus, boosting shipping capacity, creating jobs, and strengthening Greece’s position as a logistics hub (Papadimitriou et al., 2019).	Piraeus acts as a gateway to Black Sea corridors (via Thessaloniki–Sofia–Varna/Constanța), enabling Athens to project influence into the region through connectivity and trade.
EU	China as a “systemic rival” (European Commission, 2019). Supports FDI screening and de-risking to prevent strategic dependencies. Concerned about Chinese leverage in critical infrastructure.	COSCO’s stake in Piraeus is tolerated but monitored. EU emphasises embedding Greece’s infrastructure in TEN-T corridors and connectivity agendas to reduce vulnerability.
United States	COSCO’s role as a strategic vulnerability: potential for Chinese influence over port access, timelines, and data flows relevant to NATO logistics.	Piraeus linked to NATO’s southeastern flank; reliance on Greek ports for Black Sea deployments heightens U.S. pressure to reinforce Alexandroupoli and Thessaloniki as NATO-compatible hubs.

7.4 Conclusion: BRI and Greek Small-State Strategy

China’s presence in the Black Sea adds an external dimension that Greece cannot ignore. EU and NATO frameworks provide shelter-seeking, while pipelines and shipping highlight niche diplomacy; Chinese investments, however, necessitate hedging. By leveraging Piraeus as a Mediterranean–Black Sea gateway, Greece gains influence but also exposes itself to alliance dilemmas. Greece’s stance towards China exemplifies selective hedging. Athens has welcomed Chinese capital, most visibly through Piraeus, but also increasingly supports EU investment screening and de-risking. This reflects the

logic of small-state grand strategy: maximising economic opportunities while avoiding overdependence on any single external actor (Kuik, 2008; Wivel, 2021). The BRI therefore crystallises the structural pressures and opportunities that define small-state grand strategy. The coexistence of competing alignments illustrates hedging as a strategy of managing uncertainty in a structurally competitive environment (Kuik, 2008).

8. Security Dimensions Beyond Ukraine

This section broadens the analysis beyond conventional conflict to examine how security engagement operates across multiple domains, including alliances, regional cooperation, and hybrid threats. It highlights how security behaviour reflects layered interactions between systemic constraints, institutional frameworks, and emerging non-traditional challenges.

Although the war in Ukraine has dominated security discourse in the Black Sea, Greece's engagement with the region cannot be reduced to this single conflict. A broader set of security dynamics, spanning NATO posture, bilateral cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria, hybrid and non-traditional threats such as migration, environmental degradation, and maritime cybersecurity, also shape Athens' involvement. These dimensions illustrate how Greece combines *shelter-seeking* within NATO with *niche diplomacy* in maritime security, reinforcing the argument that its Black Sea engagement forms part of a wider alliance-driven strategy rather than a stand-alone policy.

8.1 NATO Posture and Greece's Role

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO has reinforced its posture on the Black Sea's southeastern flank. Measures include enhanced naval patrols, rotational deployments, and air policing missions in Romania and Bulgaria (NATO, 2022). Greece has contributed through naval participation in Operation Sea Guardian, joint exercises in the Black Sea, and provision of Souda Bay as a logistical hub (Triantaphyllou, 2018). This reflects shelter-seeking behaviour by securing deterrence guarantees while also deploying niche naval expertise. This behaviour aligns with shelter-seeking, whereby alliance participation compensates for limited autonomous security capabilities (Wivel, 2016).

8.2 Bilateral Cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria

Beyond NATO's collective posture, Greece has steadily deepened bilateral and trilateral cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria, the two other EU and NATO member states on the Black Sea's western littoral. This cooperation has taken both symbolic and operational forms. Since 2015, defence ministers of the three countries have held regular trilateral meetings to coordinate positions on Black Sea security, military mobility, and interoperability within NATO frameworks (Akgül Açıkmeşe & Triantaphyllou, 2014). Joint naval exercises in the Aegean and the Black Sea, such as Sea Breeze and Poseidon, have featured Greek participation alongside Romanian and Bulgarian naval forces, reinforcing maritime domain awareness and enhancing coordination in mine countermeasures, air defence, and search-and-rescue operations (NATO, 2023).

Infrastructure cooperation has also been significant. Greece has supported cross-border transport and energy projects, including road and rail corridors connecting Thessaloniki and Alexandroupoli to Varna and Constanța. These corridors serve a dual purpose: improving civilian connectivity under EU TEN-T and Global Gateway frameworks while simultaneously doubling as NATO military mobility routes. In this way, bilateral and trilateral cooperation illustrates Greece's role as a logistical bridge between the Aegean and Black Sea.

A newer frontier of cooperation lies in cybersecurity and hybrid threats. Following repeated cyber incidents in the Black Sea region, Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria have engaged in EU-supported dialogues on protecting critical infrastructure, particularly ports, LNG terminals, and undersea cables. Greece plays a distinctive role here as host to the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), headquartered in Heraklion, Crete. ENISA has become central to the EU's Cybersecurity Strategy and the Cyber Defence Policy Framework, focusing on resilience of both civilian and defence-related digital systems (European Commission, 2020). By linking its Black Sea cooperation with its institutional role in ENISA, Greece underscores its capacity to add value not only in traditional naval operations but also in emerging domains of hybrid security.

Taken together, these bilateral and trilateral initiatives show that Greece's engagement with Romania and Bulgaria goes beyond ad hoc coordination. It has evolved into a subregional security partnership, embedded in EU and NATO frameworks, combining traditional naval cooperation with cyber and infrastructure resilience. This adds a concrete layer of niche diplomacy to Greece's shelter-seeking posture, allowing Athens to influence Black Sea security through regional coalitions while leveraging its EU-

based institutional assets. Such regional cooperation illustrates how constrained states operationalise agency through coalition-building, a behaviour commonly associated with middle power diplomacy (Efstathopoulos, 2018).

8.3 Non-Traditional Threats: Migration, Environment, and Fisheries

Greece's experience in managing Aegean migration flows informs its support for EU monitoring of irregular routes in the Black Sea, particularly Turkey–Romania crossings (Triantaphyllou, 2005). Environmental threats, such as oil spills, naval mines, and overfishing, have also drawn Greek contributions to regional safety regimes, including the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (Manoli, 2012).

Case Study Box 2: Greek Navy in Black Sea Mine Clearance

In 2022–2023, following Russia's use of sea mines around Ukraine's ports, NATO launched coordinated mine-countermeasure operations. Greece deployed naval units to assist in mine detection and clearance in cooperation with Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. This involvement served two functions: i) operationally, it ensured safe grain exports and maritime trade and, ii) politically, it showcased Greece's ability to project stability into the Black Sea, reinforcing its profile as a reliable NATO ally. Mine clearance thus illustrates Greece's dual-track role: leveraging niche expertise in naval operations while embedding its contribution in collective NATO security frameworks.

8.4 Maritime Cybersecurity: An Emerging Challenge

An often-overlooked dimension of Black Sea security is cybersecurity in the maritime domain. As Todorov (2024) argues, ports, shipping lanes, and naval assets in the Black Sea are increasingly vulnerable to cyber intrusions, ranging from ransomware and GPS spoofing to state-sponsored espionage. Russian groups such as APT28 (Fancy Bear) and Sandworm have repeatedly targeted maritime systems, while cyber spillover from the Russia–Ukraine conflict has disrupted logistics and trade across the region (Todorov, 2024: 118–120).

For Greece, as one of the world's largest shipping nations and a contributor of naval assets, such vulnerabilities pose acute risks. Cyberattacks on vessels, ports, or navigation systems could disrupt not only regional security operations but also Greek shipping interests active in the Black Sea. As Todorov (2024: 126–128) emphasises,

hybrid warfare in the Black Sea increasingly integrates cyber operations with traditional military tactics, meaning that Greek participation in NATO naval missions must now also account for digital resilience.

Athens has thus aligned with EU and NATO efforts to harden maritime infrastructure against cyberattacks, drawing on ENISA guidelines for ports and naval logistics. This reflects a growing recognition that maritime cybersecurity, like mine clearance, is central to Greece's contribution to Black Sea stability. The emergence of hybrid threats further underscores the need for adaptive strategies, reinforcing the importance of domestic capacity and institutional resilience as mediating variables (Gvalia et al., 2019).

8.5 Conclusion: Shelter-Seeking, Niche Diplomacy, and Hybrid Threats

Greece's engagement in Black Sea security beyond Ukraine demonstrates the layered nature of small-state grand strategy. Shelter-seeking is evident in NATO integration; niche diplomacy appears in naval operations, fisheries, and environmental governance; and hybrid threats, including cyber, highlight the need for adaptive resilience. By embedding its security contributions in alliance frameworks while also investing in emerging domains like cyber defence, Greece exemplifies a pragmatic, multi-dimensional approach to regional security.

These patterns confirm that security engagement is not a singular or uniform process, but a multi-dimensional response shaped by both traditional and emerging threats. The combination of alliance integration, regional cooperation, and hybrid threat adaptation illustrates how constrained states diversify their strategic responses. In doing so, they reinforce the central argument that foreign policy behaviour reflects the interaction of systemic pressures, domestic filters, and evolving security environments. These patterns collectively demonstrate how systemic pressures and emerging threats are translated into differentiated strategic responses through domestic and institutional filters.

9. Conclusion

This chapter has examined Greece's foreign policy towards the Black Sea region through the combined lens of foreign policy analysis and small-state grand strategy. The analysis began by questioning the very coherence of the "Black Sea" as a region, noting its weak

“regionness,” low institutionalisation, and persistent fragmentation (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Against this backdrop, the chapter demonstrated that Athens has never articulated a fully autonomous Black Sea strategy. Instead, its engagements are mediated primarily through EU and NATO frameworks, supplemented by targeted bilateral cooperation, energy transit projects, and selective linkages to external actors such as China.

The empirical sections showed that Greece’s approach to the Black Sea is best understood as patterned but non-codified strategy. It is patterned in the sense that clear strategic logics recur:

- Shelter-seeking, evident in Athens’ reliance on EU instruments (Black Sea Synergy, Eastern Partnership, connectivity projects) and NATO’s southeastern flank posture for security guarantees (Triantaphyllou, 2005; Triantaphyllou, 2018).
- Niche diplomacy, reflected in the use of Greece’s maritime expertise, energy transit geography, and historical-cultural ties with Black Sea diasporas to project influence (Karagiannis, 2013).
- Selective hedging, visible in balancing relations with Russia (until 2022), supporting Ukraine while protecting diaspora communities, and managing the economic opportunities and risks of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Kuik, 2008; Wivel, 2021).

At the same time, the absence of a codified doctrine underscores the constraints of small-state foreign policy: limited resources, competing theatres of concern in the Eastern Mediterranean and Balkans, and dependence on alliances for protection and leverage.

Furthermore, the chapter highlighted how Black Sea engagement is interlinked with Greece’s wider strategic environment. The war in Ukraine illustrated this vividly as Greek alignment with EU sanctions and NATO deterrence intersected with the humanitarian crisis in Mariupol and the role of Greek shipping in global grain exports (European Council, 2022; UN, 2023). Energy transit projects such as TAP and the Alexandroupoli LNG terminal demonstrated how Greece positions itself as a southern gateway for European diversification strategies (Enerdata, 2024). COSCO’s investment in Piraeus linked Mediterranean infrastructure to Black Sea corridors, forcing Athens to balance economic pragmatism with EU de-risking and U.S./NATO security concerns (Papadimitriou et al., 2019; Sanders, 2021). Security contributions beyond Ukraine (e.g.

mine clearance, fisheries governance, and cyber resilience) further illustrated Greece's dual track of alliance shelter-seeking and sectoral niche diplomacy (Todorov, 2024).

These interlinkages confirm that the Black Sea cannot be understood in isolation from Greece's other theatres. Rather, Athens approaches the region as a peripheral but consequential space, engaging opportunistically where national expertise or alliance commitments provide incentives, but avoiding overstretch.

Looking ahead, three scenarios may shape Greece's role in the Black Sea. The first entails a continuation of EU-mediated engagement where Athens sustains its reliance on EU and NATO structures, embedding its priorities (energy, maritime governance, diaspora protection) within Brussels' and NATO's strategic frameworks. This reflects continuity with existing shelter-seeking behaviour. The second refers to the adoption of niche leadership as Greece leverages its comparative advantages in shipping, energy transit, and maritime governance to assume a more visible leadership role within EU Black Sea initiatives. This would align with Greece's middle-power ambitions while still reflecting small-state pragmatism. Lastly, the third is based on a coordinated national approach. The intensification of geopolitical competition may prompt Athens to codify a more formal strategy. This would involve balancing alliance commitments with a clearer articulation of national priorities in the region.

The overarching finding of this chapter is that Greece's Black Sea engagement illustrates the paradox of a small state with middle-power aspirations. On the one hand, Athens' behaviour conforms to classic small-state logics as: i) it relies on shelter-seeking through NATO and the EU to secure deterrence and political voice; ii) it practices niche diplomacy in areas of comparative advantage such as shipping, maritime safety, and energy transit; and iii) it engages in selective hedging to balance economic benefits from China or historical ties with Russia against its Euro-Atlantic commitments (Wivel, 2021; Thorhallsson, 2018). These patterns reveal a pragmatic and adaptive strategy that minimises risk, avoids overstretch, and ensures Greece remains embedded in collective frameworks rather than exposed to unilateral pressures.

Yet this pragmatism coexists with a recurrent aspiration to act as more than a small state. Greek elites frequently articulate an image of Greece as a bridge state between the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Black Sea; a role that resonates with its historical identity as both a maritime power and a guardian of Hellenism abroad. The investment of COSCO in Piraeus, the promotion of Alexandroupoli as a NATO hub, and

Athens' active references to diaspora protection in Mariupol all point to efforts to amplify influence beyond what material capabilities alone would suggest (Papadimitriou, Pegasiou & Zartaloudis, 2019; Triantaphyllou, 2018). In these cases, Greece presents itself less as a passive small state and more as a middle power, using its geography, maritime capacity, and cultural narratives to shape regional dynamics.

The tension between these two roles is not unique to the Black Sea but is particularly visible there. The region's weak institutionalisation and contested geopolitics leave space for Greece to exercise selective leadership in EU connectivity projects or in niche domains like maritime cybersecurity while simultaneously reminding Athens of its structural dependence on alliances. Pragmatism therefore dictates reliance on NATO and the EU for hard security, but aspiration drives Greece to claim a bridging function between Europe and its eastern neighbourhood, positioning itself as indispensable in Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean linkages.

This duality has both advantages and risks. The advantage is that it allows Greece to "punch above its weight" by leveraging niche strengths within broader multilateral frameworks, thereby cultivating the perception of middle-power agency. The risk, however, lies in overextension as by projecting itself as a regional bridge and security provider, Athens may set expectations that exceed its material capacity to deliver. This could expose contradictions between rhetoric and capability, potentially undermining credibility if Greece cannot sustain the leadership role it seeks to perform. The empirical analysis confirms the theoretical expectation that foreign policy behaviour cannot be reduced to structural constraints alone but must be understood as the product of their interaction with domestic and ideational factors.

In conclusion, Greece's Black Sea engagement reflects an unresolved balance between small-state pragmatism and middle-power aspiration. It remains patterned but non-codified, grounded in alliance shelter yet infused with a narrative of broader regional importance. Whether Athens will consolidate this role into a more coherent middle-power strategy will depend not only on its own choices but also on the evolution of EU Black Sea policy, NATO posture, and the dynamics of great-power rivalry in the region. For now, Greece navigates this tension by blending prudence with ambition, ensuring relevance in a contested space while avoiding the perils of strategic overreach. Overall, Greek Foreign policy should be therefore be understood as the outcome of constrained

agency, where systemic pressures define the boundaries of action, domestic structures filter strategic choices, and identity narratives shape their meaning and legitimation.

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