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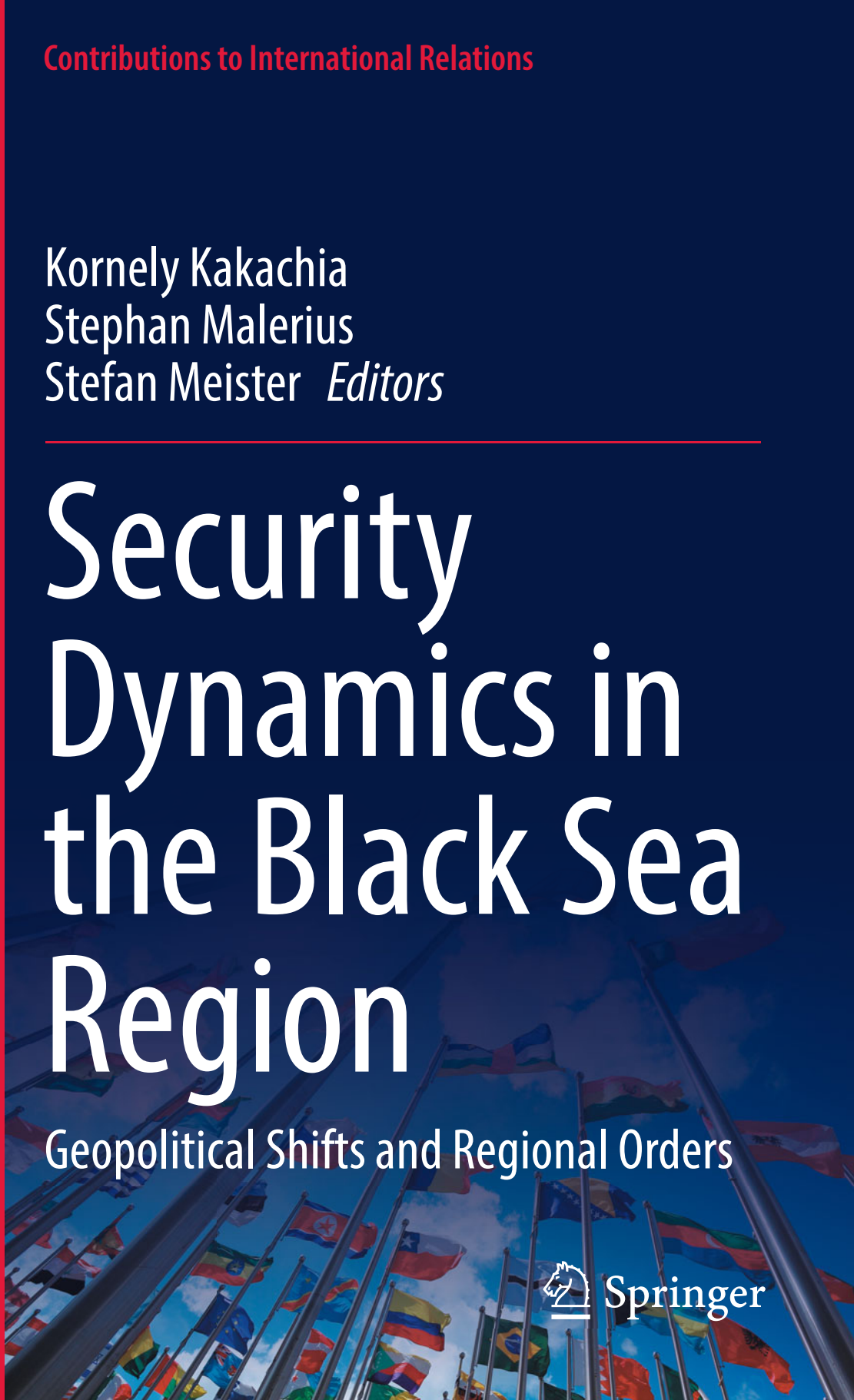
Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region

Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders



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Contents

Abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
BLACKSEAFOR	Black Sea Naval Force
BRI	The Belt and Road Initiative
BSEC	The Black Sea Economic Cooperation
BSGI	Black Sea Grain Initiative
BSP	The Bulgarian Socialist Party
BSR	Black Sea Region
BSSA	The Black Sea Security Act
BTC	Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan Oil Pipeline
CIS	The Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	The Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCFTA	The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EFP	Enhanced Forward Presence
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
G7	The Group of Seven
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOP	The Grand Old Party a.k.a. the Republican Party
GUAM	Georgia Ukraine Azerbaijan and Moldova Organization for Democracy and Economic Development
LOE	Level of Effort
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MENA	The Middle East and North Africa
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NK	Nagorno-Karabakh
NSC	The National Security Council
NSS	National Security Strategy
OAE	Operation Active Endeavour
OSCE	The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PAS	The Party of Action and Solidarity
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PP	Partiya Prodalzhavame Promyanata
PRC	The People's Republic of China
SCP	The South Caucasus Gas Pipeline
SDSR	The Strategic Defence and Security Review
SEDM	The Southeastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process
SEEBRIG	The South-Eastern Europe Brigade
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UK	The United Kingdom
UN	The United Nations
US	The United States

Introduction

Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister

For centuries, the Black Sea has been a melting pot and a place of meetings, serving as a bridge between Europe and Asia, a centre of trade and commerce and a hub for cultural exchange. The Black Sea has been a natural border and battleground between Great Powers. For a long time, it rested on the fault lines of the Russian and Ottoman empires until becoming a "Soviet Lake". After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea gradually transformed into a "European Lake", holding the promise of stability, ecologic sustainability and economic prosperity for the littoral states and beyond. However, Russia maintained the perception that the Black Sea belonged in its "sphere of influence" and sought to retain a fault line between the EU and Russia and between East and West.

There is a great diversity of interests and concerns involving the Black Sea, ranging from connectivity, energy networks and digital linkages to finances, industrial capacities, high-tech weapons and security. It is primarily a transit corridor and a critical link in the global trade network. The surrounding countries produce and trade goods, such as grain, petroleum and natural gas throughout Europe, Asia and the Middle East, amounting to nearly $3 trillion in combined GDP. While the Black Sea provides tremendous economic growth opportunities, its potential benefits were far from fully realised even before Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The Black Sea has been one of Europe's most undervalued and ignored regions. The EU does not have an elaborated strategic approach toward the Black Sea, unlike

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toward other regions (e.g. the Northern Dimension or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership). This is partly because, looking from Brussels, Paris, Berlin or even Warsaw, the Black Sea seems far away and peripheral. Whereas the two other "European Lakes"—the Baltic and Mediterranean—are dominated mainly by the EU and NATO, particularly after Finland and Sweden joined NATO, the Black Sea is highly contested. The EU's Black Sea coastal footprints are so far limited to the Western shore, while two more littoral states, Ukraine and Georgia, have EU and NATO membership ambitions.

Turkey owns the whole southern coastline and functions as the gatekeeper of the sea. It is a NATO member having periodic strained relations with the West and close ties with Russia, at least in some areas like energy. Turkey is a dominant power in the Black Sea and a key player in the South Caucasus. Its role should not be underestimated. It can contain Russia by limiting military vessels through the Turkish Straits, and it helped Ukraine open a Black Sea export corridor with the assistance of Romania and Bulgaria.

Most importantly, the Black Sea is a theatre: Russia wages its war against Ukraine to an important degree from its Black Sea fleet and uses the waters for supplying its military. This makes the Black Sea decisive for Europe's future from security to economics to culture. When we enter the post-war period, we will see in the Black Sea, unlike anywhere else, how Europe defines its relations with emerging or declining regional powers, namely Ukraine, Russia and Turkey. What is more, the Black Sea will likely be the region where the new European security order will be negotiated.

1 New Security and Trade Dynamics

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly altered security and trade dynamics across the Black Sea with serious repercussions for individual countries as well as for the whole region. While the political aspects, particularly if we look at the wider Black Sea region, were always full of tensions, Russia's war has notably increased the vulnerability of smaller countries like Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. They all have unresolved territorial conflicts in which Russia is involved or is de-facto occupying territory (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh) and have concerns about conflict spillovers and potential Russian aggressions toward them, depending on the course of the war.

Black Sea NATO members like Romania are directly affected by the war, as the attacks on Danube port infrastructure vis-à-vis the Romanian border or the repeated violation of Romanian airspace by Russian drones in 2023 have shown. At the same time, we witness how Ukraine is conducting an effective campaign against Russia's navy, forcing it to look for harbors further east, such as at Novorossiysk or Tuapse, which impacts regional security. Most notably, Russia's plan to reactivate a small port in Ochamchire in Abkhazia, close to the Georgian port of Poti, might threaten

the viability of important trade routes across the Black Sea. Moscow has been preoccupied with its war on Ukraine, letting some issues irregularly fade. However, the war has undoubtedly reinvigorated NATO, drawing attention to the strategic importance of the Black Sea, even if it lacks internal consensus on its best posture for the region.

NATO-member Turkey sees the Black Sea as its historical backyard and has tried to reduce destabilisation. For example, it launched *Operation Black Sea Harmony* in 2004 in the aftermath of 9/11 to perform surveillance and deter threats across the entire Black Sea. For eight decades, Turkey has carefully implemented the Montreux Convention that governs the transit of merchant vessels and warships through the Dardanelles and Bosporus Strait—a formidable responsibility during a period of war. At the same time, Turkish-Russian relations are complex due to historical realities and regional dynamics. Seeming contradictions need to be managed, and Turkey is trying to do that by pursuing a balanced transactional policy.

2 Impacts in the Wider Region

Zooming out, we see the Black Sea as an exit or entry point for the Middle Corridor linking Europe with Central Asia (and China) via the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. A Caspian-Black Sea connection could potentially provide Europe with more energy resources, particularly Azerbaijani and Caspian natural gas, metals and rare earths, in addition to increased trade and transit for emerging markets in the broader region. The Middle Corridor, especially for Central and Eastern European states, sounds like the promise of an alternative conduit to the decades-long dependency on Russian resources and infrastructure. For Central Asian states, the route, running from Kazakhstan through Azerbaijan and Georgia to Turkey's Mediterranean ports, allows for bypassing the Russian Northern Corridor that is likely to remain geopolitically unstable due to the war in Ukraine.

The importance of the Middle Corridor has risen since February 2022, notwithstanding several bottlenecks and unclarities regarding its viability. In any case, the Corridor, and the Black Sea as part of it, bears immense political significance for the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus and their relations with the EU. Two Georgian infrastructure projects exemplify this significance: building a deep-sea port in Anaklia and facilitating a Black Sea submarine electricity cable connecting the grids of the South Caucasus and the EU. Turkey is part of the Middle Corridor, exploring connectivity with an eye on its indigenous natural gas extraction activities in a region that is described as the "next hydrogen hub".

3 Security and Geopolitical Consequences Beyond Russia and Ukraine

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are the latest efforts to change borders and challenge the international order. It is an attempt to transform the Black Sea region into a territory with a new Iron Curtain, re-creating Western and Eastern divisional spheres. The Black Sea is vital for the Kremlin's geoeconomic strategy, for projecting power and influence beyond its near abroad and across the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and the Middle East. Its instruments are well known: challenging territorial integrity, creating and leveraging vulnerabilities, increasing its military presence, weaponising energy and trade dependencies and disrupting connectivity. One of Russia's initial war objectives in 2022 was to cut Ukraine completely off from the Black Sea coast to dominate maritime trade and energy routes. The plan backfired, accelerating the region's integration into Western political ecosystems, with the EU-membership applications of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova as the most vivid examples.

The geopolitical competition in and around the Black Sea reveals how the regional security systems are interlinked from the South Caucasus, with its evolving security architecture, to the Eastern Mediterranean, which is increasingly merging with the Black Sea region geopolitically. From this perspective, China and Iran play a role in the Black Sea. The former sees it as part of its Belt and Road Initiative and has been investing in the region's infrastructure. To the south, Iran would like to establish a Persian Gulf-Black Sea connectivity route via the Caucasus, seeing this as another option to engage with the outside world due to economic sanctions. These realities, though, necessitate greater NATO involvement in the wider Black Sea region. The visit of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to all three countries of the South Caucasus in March 2024—just as Vladimir Putin was prolonging his own presidency for another six years—can only be the start of this.

This book represents an essential but challenging exercise. Twelve authors instigate and inseminate a policy discourse on a region that has so far been largely under the radar of Western experts and decision-makers. They seek to raise awareness of the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for the future of Europe. Topics include Ukrainian perspectives, Russian Black Sea logic, US, NATO and EU approaches and Georgian and Turkish policies. We have contemporary views from the UK, Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova and delineate connections with China, the Caucasus and Caspian. The book is a snapshot of an extremely volatile region offering a holistic view of Black Sea security with adjacent regional security structures. It is "not just a place but a pattern of relationships", Neal Asherson wrote in his book *Black Sea* (1996), "a personality which is not caught by some adjective like 'unpredictable' or phrase like 'friendly to strangers' and which—because it is not made up of traits or epithets but of the interplay of circumstances—cannot be described in detail at all."

Analytical Overview: A Comprehensive Approach to Black Sea Security

Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister

Russia's unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally changed geopolitical and security paradigms in the Black Sea region. It has increased security challenges and insecurity for the countries in this region. Successful resistance by the Ukrainian armed forces and society, comprehensive economic sanctions as well as military and financial support by the Western allies have weakened Russia's economy and its military capabilities. At the same time, in the 3rd year of the war, Russia has adapted to the new reality and is preparing for a longer war, while in Western countries and Ukraine, there is a growing interest in ending the war. Nevertheless, this war, however it will end, accelerates the decline of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet space and will result in new regional orders in the Black Sea region, South Caucasus and Central Asia. A new European security order will emerge with this war in Europe, and the Black Sea will be at the core of it. These developments are going to have direct implications for not only the countries located in the wider Black Sea area, but also for the EU, NATO and, indirectly, the US, as the region is vital in the context of counterbalancing the rising influence of illiberal powers across the globe. The Black Sea region has become a new security hot spot in Europe, where security, trade, connectivity and human security in Europe will be redefined.

The largest war on the European continent since the end of World War II takes place in this region, showing that the Black Sea remains a battlefield of contestation between regional and great powers. The latest developments have put the region at the epicentre of the continent's new security architecture that is still in the making.

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Therefore, the EU, US and its Western allies need to reengage with the countries in the region and develop new strategic visions on tackling the challenges these states face. The role of the EU and NATO must grow in providing stability and security in this region. This will happen in a framework where Russia can no longer act as a regional hegemon that provides authoritarian stability or dominates regional security but rather is becoming a disruptive power and a major security risk for all littoral states.

When Russia changed the military balance in the region with its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and military buildup, projecting power into Syria and the Middle East, NATO and the EU were slow to respond to the major shifts (Kuimova & Wezemann, 2018). The securitisation of the Black Sea region and issues like energy transit, trade and connectivity will have a strong impact on the littoral states and on neighbouring regions. However, as some scholars have noted, systemic security cooperation has been rather challenging in the Black Sea region. Oksana Antoneko, following Barry Buzan's definition of cooperative security,[1] argues that despite economic and political ties, there are several major obstacles to the development of cooperative security in the region (Antoneko, 2009, pp. 260–262). These factors include overlapping identities, existing unresolved territorial conflicts, geostrategic asymmetry and cultural perceptions and attitudes of the post-Soviet and post-conflict elites (ibid). Yet, the whole sequence of events leads to the need to redefine the approach to security paradigms. The Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by a war in Eastern Ukraine as well as the Russian large-scale invasion since 2022 have illustrated the need for a more comprehensive approach to the security of the (wider) Black Sea region. But there was a lack of a vision and strategy by all littoral states except Russia (and partly Turkey), which wanted to become the dominant security actor, projecting power through the region into the Middle East and keeping the US and NATO out. In many ways, Ankara wanted to be the only NATO member and a key factor in the region. Nonetheless, it was only after the Russian full-scale military assault on Ukraine in February 2022 that this region became part of a discussion about a new European security architecture in the making.

Until now, it was, first of all, Russia and Turkey that shaped the security situation in the region. When the war ends, Russia will be weaker, Turkey might be strengthened, and Ukraine will probably become a key security player in the region. But if Russia wins the war, it will have dramatic consequences for European security and the Black Sea region. NATO's role in European security has only been growing with the war, and a key question will be how NATO, the US and the EU will define their future security roles in the region. The new European security order will have both soft and hard security elements. Therefore, a new strategy needs to take into consideration a comprehensive security approach.

[1] Buzan and his co-authors define it as "a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonable be analyzed and resolved apart from one another" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 12).

1 Comprehensive Security

Comprehensive security as a concept was coined in Japan in the 1970s. The idea behind this approach was to broaden the concept of security and go beyond a state-centric traditional military understanding of security to include food, economic, military and political elements (Dewitt, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, comprehensive security also identified domestic, bilateral, regional and global levels of security policy areas (ibid, p. 3). In other words, a comprehensive approach to security goes beyond simple elements of military power projection and includes crisis management or conflict prevention and also elements of human security (Rieker, 2006, p. 510). It gained even more prominence in security studies after the end of the Cold War as Western military and political alliances pivoted toward incorporating crisis management as an addition to collective security and toward more focus on coordination between civilian and military components of it (ibid, p. 6). This was also the result of the West winning the Cold War and the perception that classical wars are over and other challenges to security like climate change, migration or the role of non-state actors will increase.

Hence, this book conceptualises and applies the concept of comprehensive security as something that goes beyond state and military-centric approaches and includes political, societal, connectivity, economic, environmental and other sectors. It follows Buzan's definition of security as a more holistic approach that includes political, military, economic and societal sectors that are closely interlinked and form a complex web (Buzan, 1991; Buzan, 1997, p.8; Stone, 2009, p. 3). According to Buzan:

> Security is taken to be about the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile. The bottom line of security is survival, but it also reasonably includes a substantial range of concerns about the conditions of existence. Quite where this range of concerns ceases to merit the urgency of the "security" label (which identifies threats as significant enough to warrant emergency action and exceptional measures including the use of force) and becomes part of everyday uncertainties of life is one of the difficulties of the concept. (Buzan, 1991, pp. 432–433)

An important aspect of this approach is a shifting focus on post-positivist epistemology—it assumes that security is not (only) an objective condition but is socially constructed through discursive practices and processes. From this angle, the Securitisation School shares its epistemology with the approaches of ontological security as both underline the importance of the social construction of reality. As Jennifer Mitzen notes, "[I]n addition to physical security, states also seek ontological security, or security of the self. Ontological security is achieved by routinising relationships with significant others, and actors therefore become attached to those relationships" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 341).

While securitisation theory focuses on how issues are framed as existential threats to justify extraordinary measures (such as enhanced border controls or surveillance), ontological security operates at a deeper level, exploring why states and other actors feel the need to secure their identity and existence in the first place (Flockhart, 2020; Mitzen, 2006). For instance, states might engage in practices that reinforce

their narrative consistency and self-identity, which can include adhering to certain international roles or routines, even if these practices do not contribute directly to physical security (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological security can help us understand why states sometimes act in an inconsistent way when dealing with security issues and defy the image of rational actorness.

The approach of the Securitisation School to security, on its part, has sidelined the role of the state as the exclusive referent object of security (Buzan, 1997, p. 11). Along the state, new objects of reference or sources of threat have appeared. Thus, what the Copenhagen School and the critical security studies framework argue is that threats can arise in any area, but in order to be a matter of security, it must meet certain criteria—being represented as an existential threat by the political actors and endorsing emergency measures. This leads to the understanding of referent objects to be secured/defended as collectively constructed (ibid, pp. 13–14).

As the existential threat becomes the centrepiece of this approach to security studies, each sector outlined above has its own reference object. While for the military sector, the reference object is usually the state, the political sector focuses on the constituting principles: the sovereignty of the state and political entity, and the personal security of citizens. For the economic sector, the reference object of security is the national economy, the societal sector focuses on the survival of the nation, religion or other collective identities that function independently of the state, and finally, the environmental sector of security refers to securitising the issues related to environment and ecology (ibid, p. 17). We add here also questions of connectivity and energy security which have become more important in the last years. The definition of comprehensive security by the OSCE also includes these three elements: (1) political-military dimension, (2) economic and environmental dimension and (3) human dimension that includes rule of law, democratisation and elections (OSCE, 2009).

Key aspects of the politico-military dimension of comprehensive security may include issues related to conflict prevention and crisis management, security sector governance, border security and non-proliferation. The economic and environmental dimension may explore aspects related to environmental awareness and climate-friendly policies, management of natural resources, economic security and good governance. The human dimension of comprehensive security focuses on political rights and civil liberties, such as democratic elections, freedom of speech and association, media freedoms, checks and balances, diversity, accountability and transparency.

The definition offered by Buzan that is applied in this book includes broadening security not only by inclusion of more sectors but also by introducing three levels of analysis (individual, state, and international system). Such an approach implies accepting the neorealist paradigm defining the international system as anarchy while, at the same time, favouring constructivism by abandoning the power-struggle-centric approach to security (Stone, 2009, p. 3). This book, therefore analyses Black Sea security from a three-level analysis, examining the challenges and changes in regional security paradigms through a multilayered prism as well as structurally and geographically.

From the perspective of the first image, several of the book chapters analyse the impact of individual leaders and political groups on the evolving security dynamics in the region. These analyses include the roles of ideas, belief systems, perceptions and misperceptions, as well as other socio-psychological and cognitive factors held by key individuals with regional and global influence.

The second image perspective focuses on the impact of state-level actors and factors on the security dynamics in the Black Sea region. These actors include political elites and coalitions, population preferences, liberal and illiberal civil society actors, political parties and grassroots movements, military and security actors and economic actors. The analysis here is on how these actors and the multilayered interactions among them construct, shape and redefine various aspects of security policy in the countries of the Black Sea region. Several authors in this volume explore how these actors approach the ontological security of their own and their countries and societies and how and why they securitise different policy issue areas.

Scrutinising these factors is crucial for understanding the formation of state policies in response to the complex security dynamics in the region. The book aims to provide a comprehensive examination of these issues. To achieve this, we delve into how various state and non-state actors influence their governments' foreign and security policy-making. This exploration draws on new liberalism approaches, including the two-level game theory and its variations (Moravcsik, 1997; Putnam, 1988).

Finally, we use the third image of analysis to incorporate systemic and global actors and factors, examining their roles in the security dynamics of the region as well as in shaping the perceptions and opportunity structures of local and regional actors. These may include global actors such as the US, China and the EU, along with international regimes, norms, institutions, international organisations, transnational corporations and international non-governmental human rights movements. This level of analysis also covers global processes and dynamics that can have unintended consequences for the security dynamics of the Black Sea region. These processes include environmental degradation, weather variability, climate change, irregular migration, brain drain, demographic decline and many others.

2 Comprehensive Security and the Black Sea Region

The Black Sea region remains one of the most geopolitically contested areas in the world. This could be explained by its peculiar geography, as the only access to the ocean goes through the Turkish straits; control of these pathways has been the subject of military conflicts between larger players of the region for centuries. This region has been the central focus of the competition between Russia and the West, as the Black Sea has strategic importance for Russia in defending its territories and maintaining its sphere of influence, as well as projecting power into other regions and defining the future of security in Europe (Flanagan, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, after 2014, Moscow has used the region as a springboard to the Middle East through its military campaign in Syria. Russia's aim was to become the dominant security actor

in the region and to keep the West out. Additionally, it wanted to strangle Ukraine economically while blocking its Black Sea ports as the most important access for the country to the global market.

The wider Black Sea region is also of critical importance for the security and connectivity of Western allies and NATO. Some of the countries in the region are members of the alliance (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) or aspiring to become one (Georgia and Ukraine). Access to the sea allows European countries to diversify transit corridors and routes as well as reduce energy dependency on Russia (Cross, 2015, p. 14).

In this book we focus on the country approach. The case studies analysed offer an in-depth view of how the perception of security has changed against the backdrop of the large-scale war in Ukraine among the countries in the wider Black Sea region. What are the effects and implications of the war on the Black Sea region and bordering countries? How will the significant actors' strategies change in the coming years? Here, a three-dimensional approach with a military, economic and human dimension is at the centre of the analysis. Moreover, how has military security changed in the Black Sea region, and what does it mean for the balance of power in the region and the future European security order? What kind of new regional security order will emerge in the wider Black Sea region? How are connectivity, energy security and human security being shaped by the war? Finally, what are the impacts on governance models, rule of law and human security? Only through a multidimensional lens is it possible to understand the factors and actors shaping security in a region experiencing geopolitical re-balancing and where states and multilateral Western institutions are acquiring deeper roles.

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The EU, Comprehensive Security and the Changing Geopolitics of the Black Sea

Sinikukka Saari

1 Introduction

This chapter studies the EU's evolving approach to comprehensive security in the wider Black Sea region from 2007 until today, focusing on the time after 2014 and especially 2022. It contrasts the regional developments in the Black Sea region with the EU's changing role and self-perception in regional security matters. The chapter thus analyses how prevailing notions of security and regional developments have interacted and shaped each other and how the EU's regional policies have changed as a result. The key argument is that the regional developments in the Black Sea have posed major challenges to European security narratives and self-perception as a security actor, and these events have led not only to the transformation of the EU's Black Sea policies but also to the EU's self-perception as an actor. In more theoretical terms, Russia's policies in the Black Sea region have changed the EU's "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991; Mitzen, 2006).

These 17 years can be divided into three distinctive sub-periods: the first period under study stretches from the EU's enlargement of 2007 until Russia's 2014 military invasion of Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea. The second sub-period starts in mid-2014 and ends with the start of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Finally, the third sub-period starts with the Russian full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

During the entire 17-year period, one can observe how European understanding of security moved from a comprehensive, cooperative and indivisible frame (Waever, 1995; Buzan, 1997) toward a more traditional balance-of-power type of framing that highlights the importance of credible hard-security deterrence. However, the chapter argues that cooperative security has not evaporated from the Black Sea region altogether. Internally and through future enlargement processes, the EU still frames

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security through a cooperative paradigm, but externally, given Russia's and, to a certain extent, Turkey's power projection in the region and beyond, geopolitical rivalry is clearly back (Bergmann, 2020).

The chapter emphasises that changes in the EU's external security ontology are legitimate and prudent responses to Russia's use of military force and revisionism in the Black Sea region starting in 2008. In the coming years, the EU will pursue its comprehensive and cooperative security framework primarily through the accession negotiations with Moldova, Ukraine and possibly Georgia. The tougher geopolitical approach will be used toward regional great power Russia—for instance, through European Peace Facility contributions to hard security of the EU's Eastern neighbours and through economic sanctions against Russia. Importantly, these two distinctive approaches to security are intertwined: if the EU, its member states and NATO are not able to project power and set up credible deterrence against Russia's aggression, the credibility of the security community within the EU will also erode, if not altogether evaporate.

2 First Cracks in the Cooperative Security Framework (2007–2014)

In the 1990s and in the early 2000s, the Black Sea coastal states were actively developing regional cooperation arrangements in the field of maritime security, reflecting the prevailing optimistic comprehensive security paradigm of the early post-Cold War era.

Some of these activities included search and rescue missions, clearing of sea mines, environmental protection measures as well as joint efforts to tackle transnational security challenges such as smuggling and human trafficking. Turkey—a rising regional power—initiated the establishment of a joint Naval Force in 1996 and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group in 2001. In 2004, operation Black Sea Harmony, which included all littoral states, was established.

The Black Sea was not a central region for the EU in the early 2000s. It advanced to its shores only in 2007 when Bulgaria and Romania became EU members.[1] After the EU accession of these littoral states, the EU wished to contribute more substantially to regional affairs but did not have a clear vision or strategy quite how to do it. Instead of a comprehensive strategy, it came up with "Black Sea Synergy", an inclusive cooperation initiative launched in 2007. The framework aimed to build on earlier regional efforts. It included all the Black Sea countries and beyond: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Romania, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine.

[1] Turkey has been a candidate state since 1999 but the accession process has stalled and there seems to be little appetite for advancing the accession option on both sides. Croatia is the latest EU member and it joined in 2013.

The Synergy document did take up several important soft security issues: democracy, rule of law, border and crisis management, common action against organised crime, regional confidence-building measures, energy security and diversification, transport and environment, fisheries and maritime cooperation, as well as education. It dealt explicitly with security issues and framed them in terms of cooperative, positive-sum security: increasing security and stability in one country increases security in all of the countries around the Black Sea.

Overlapping with the Black Sea Synergy drafting process, the EU was also preparing a more comprehensive but exclusive policy framework, the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Out of the six EaP states, five were also Black Sea synergy states, namely Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. For at least Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia the more substantial and exclusive EaP framework was a political priority over the more inclusive and open-ended Black Sea Synergy framework.

However, when the cooperative regional Black Sea synergy was being drafted, the security dynamics were already shifting toward a harsher geopolitical environment. After the Georgian army attempted to take control of separatist South Ossetia, Russia seized the opportunity and invaded Georgia in August 2008 (Tagliavini et al., 2009). The military operation had been preceded by a variety of Russian coercive measures against Georgia: gas pipeline sabotage, mass expulsion of Georgians living in Russia, boycotts of Georgian exports and "passportisation" of people living in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

During and in the immediate aftermath of the military operation, the Russian army destroyed key military installations in Tbilisi-administered Georgia, harbour infrastructure in Poti, established a permanent military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and formally recognised the independence of these Georgian regions. As a result, Russia's military presence on the shores of the Black Sea was significantly strengthened. In the following years, the statelets became increasingly dependent on Russia politically and economically, and they were gradually—although with differences in degree—integrated more deeply into the "Russkiy mir" (Coyle, 2017).

The cooperative security framework was served a major blow. Russia refused to engage with more traditional regional security actors such as the UN and the OSCE on the topic of conflict management in Georgia. Hence, the EU needed to step in. The EU mediated between the parties, brokered a six-point agreement and established an EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia to monitor its implementation. Russia's recognition of the "independence" of these increasingly dependent statelets violated the 6-point agreement, and the monitoring was never in practice established in Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

Thus, The EU became an explicit security actor in the Black Sea region that had several complex security challenges—not because it actively wanted to have such a role, but because other actors could not act. Also, within the EU, positions varied: the Baltic states were the most vocal supporters of Georgia's Europeanisation path, while most EU states—including Germany and France—were more hesitant. In effect, NATO's 2008 promise to advance Georgia's membership toward NATO was pushed to the sidelines and all but forgotten.

From the start, Russia conducted a two-pronged communication strategy. On the one hand, it stated its willingness to engage in dialogue to find solutions to regional security issues; on the other hand, it deepened its hold on the separatist regions and beefed up its military presence in the regions (Remler, 2019; Coyle, 2017).

The EU had a hard time interpreting Russia's two-pronged communication. A typical way to interpret these mixed signals in Brussels was to attempt to avoid "provoking" Russia further and highlight the need for better communication and cooperation with Russia.

Although the Monitoring Mission in Georgia brought an explicit security role for the EU in Georgia, the Eastern Partnership framework (approved in 2009) avoided security issues and any analysis of the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region (Secrieru & Saari, 2019). Reflecting on the discord between the emerging geopolitical reality and European political aspirations, the EaP documents framed regional security issues exclusively in terms of stability, energy security and border security.

The EaP framework is formulated as if the Russian armed invasion into Georgia had not taken place. This "casting defect" of EaP grew worse over the years as Russia started to invest in and modernise its armed forces, and its foreign policy grew increasingly revisionist and assertive. (Secrieru & Saari, 2019) Instead of addressing these fundamentally important issues, the EU avoided the whole topic as far as possible to avoid irritating Russia.

Furthermore, the effects of "casting defect" were amplified by changing US priorities in the region. A pivot to Asia replaced the "war on terror" and enthusiasm about colour revolutions. The new US government negotiated a "reset" with Russia already in 2009. Similarly, the EU announced a Partnership for Modernisation with Russia in 2010 (Barysch & Valasek, 2010). On both sides of the Atlantic, the signs of increasing Russian aggression in the post-Soviet space were effectively ignored, and the regional cooperative security frame was resurrected.

From an ontological security perspective, it appears that the EU's security narratives in the region were contested by Russian military intervention into Georgia. The European self-perception of a normative, compromise-seeking, cooperative security actor prevailed. Since Russia was offering recognisable cooperative security talking points, there was no willingness to challenge that despite its action on the ground contradicting the narrative. The EU's inability to admit these contradictions in Russia's policies, let alone prepare for future regional escalation, effectively left regional states in an increasingly vulnerable position against revisionist Russia (Secrieru & Saari, 2019).

3 In Search of a New Approach Through Contestation (2014–2022)

However, soon enough, the development took a dramatic turn for the worse. Russia seized the momentum opened by the Ukrainian political crisis stirred by President Viktor Yanukovych's sudden Russian-sponsored refusal to sign an AA and DCFTA with the EU. It carried out a masked offensive, illegally annexed Crimea and militarily invaded parts of Eastern Ukraine. Russia initially attempted to grab an even larger territory, which echoed Catharine the Great's "Novorossiya" concept, along the coast of the Azov Sea all the way to Transnistria, but this attempt failed. Russia nevertheless gained control of Crimea, which it illegally annexed, and took hold of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The Russian grab of Crimea changed the military and geopolitical balance around the Black Sea dramatically. Russia's Black Sea Fleet developed significant offensive capabilities that weakened the relative position of other Black Sea states. Russia's enhanced military presence in the Black Sea also enabled Russia's power projection and military operations in Syria, Libya and elsewhere in the MENA region. Ukrainian territorial and economic losses were massive: Ukraine lost control of some 100,000 nautical miles, its access to its harbours along the Azov Sea became restricted and Russia significantly increased its military capabilities and installations in Crimea, posing a significant and constant threat to the national security of Ukraine (Åtland, 2021; Delanoe, 2014; Kabanenko, 2019).

There was general shock and disbelief among the EU member states: Russia had taken enormous political and economic risks that few Western leaders believed it would be willing to take. However, the EU's primary drive was to stabilise the situation as soon as possible, regardless of Russia's violation of basic principles of international law and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission was established in March 2014. In June 2014, Germany and France called their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts to form a Normandy Group to find a peaceful solution in Ukraine. The meetings were aimed at helping progress in the OSCE-led peace negotiations that produced the first Minsk protocol in September 2014.

Prompted by these developments, the EU adopted its first economic sanctions against Russia and the EU refrained from far-reaching political cooperation with Russia. Also, security cooperation with NATO was strengthened considerably and "hybrid war" entered the vocabulary in most European states.

In the Black Sea region, the EU's and NATO's response was clearly inadequate and cooperation between them in the region was inadequate. The weak response resulted partly from different, competing perspectives of Black Sea states on what needed to be done. Regardless of the fact that Russia's military interventions had mainly taken place in the Black Sea region since 2008 and that Russia's military upgrades and other indicators suggested that the region would remain the main theatre of Russia's military activity, NATO transformed its posture first and foremost in the Baltic Sea region (Potočňák & Mares 2022; Romanyshyn, 2023). The decision reflected the

Baltic states' stronger political advocacy and political consensus on the Russian threat. The NATO member states around the Black Sea did not advocate a single line of action. Turkey, in particular, wanted to keep NATO's presence restricted by emphasising the strict interpretation of the Montreaux Convention. Nevertheless, in 2016, NATO states agreed to establish a non-continuous and modest Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea.

In many instances, the EU and NATO failed to deliver an adequate response to Russia's unlawful behaviour. When, in 2018, Russia started stopping the Ukrainian navy and commercial vessels from entering the Sea of Azov and the Ukrainian port of Mariupol, the reaction from the West was remarkably muted (Wintour, 2019). Russian detentions were met with usually with de-escalation calls and occasionally with restrictive measures by the EU targeting Russian individuals involved in the incidents.

Furthermore, the EU's regional toolbox remained siloed: the Normandy Format meetings, the Trans-European network and connectivity strategy, Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership each followed their own logic and processes separately without a comprehensive strategy or clearly set political priorities for the region. The formats are not mutually exclusive but they have not been well coordinated either.

Although it was evident that European regional policies had failed to take into account Russia's low threshold of using military force, the EU was politically unable to revise its policies to address the root causes of regional instability. Aiming for "recovery, resilience and reform" (Commission, 2020) as soon as possible, regardless of also indirectly confirming gains Russia had achieved militarily, was misplaced. Freezing the conflict sent the message that Russia's risk-taking had paid off.

Most importantly, the EU failed to recognise the different components of the Russian comprehensive strategy that Stefan Meister has called "denial and coercion" in the Black Sea region (Meister, 2021, 2022). Unlike the EU's own approach to the Black Sea, Russia's strategy was comprehensive and linked to other regional strategies, such as the Middle East (Gvosdev, 2019). It is comprehensive also with regard to policy tools. The strategy did not only consist of utilising economic dependencies, hard security and military operations but also opening never-ending international peace negotiations, legitimising proxy actors through them, consolidating "Russkiy mir"[2] and dependency on Russia in unrecognised quasi-states. Through these different instruments, Russia was able to keep post-Soviet states away from Western institutions and coerce them to accept Russian security dominance in the region.

Overall, the EU member states' reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 was bifurcated. Many eastern member states and the UK advocated for tougher policies toward Russia and insisted that failing to deter Moscow, Russia's aggression would continue (e.g., Rõivas, 2014). In other words, these countries actively called for a new security-related ontology for the EU: they called for outright acknowledgement

[2] The Russian world denotes an elusive yet all-compassing political doctrine of broad, transnational Russian civilisation that in practice often means sphere of Russian cultural, political and military domination in its neighbouring states and beyond.

that Russia was the only existential threat to European security. The EU's old security paradigm was actively contested, but the momentum passed with other looming challenges, such as Brexit (which also diluted the UK's ability to influence the EU's strategy for the region).

Most importantly, several states—including France and Germany—were more hesitant to take measures that were thought to provoke Russia. However, their positions differed somewhat from each other. Germany still supported the cooperative security frame with Russia despite its contradictory results (Merkel, 2015). President Macron contested the EU's cooperative security framework in his speeches but from a different perspective than the frontline states. He called for "great-power-like" strategic autonomy and security actorness for the EU, but—unlike the Eastern voices—he did not brand Russia as a fundamental military threat to the EU. Rather, his emphasis was on the EU's autonomy of action in global affairs, international deal-making and interest-based negotiations (also with Russia) more autonomously from the US (Macron, 2020). According to this view, continuing and even enhancing selective cooperation with Russia could benefit the EU vis-à-vis other global actors and settings. Interestingly, both of these competing security ontologies effectively challenged the EU's traditional normative and cooperative security frame, but their practical implications for the Black Sea region were very different.

With years passing, many Europeans were, in practical terms, ready to accept Crimean annexation and Russia's control over parts of Donbas as *fait accompli*—although, of course, not formally. Although the EU's economic sanctions were kept in place, bilateral cooperation and business ties between Russia and many member states grew year by year. Alas, Moscow was likely to have interpreted its foreign and security policy in the Black Sea region as a major success and an efficient way to gain international recognition as a great power. Many significant fields of trade and cooperation remained outside the restrictive measures, and in those issues, relations continued between EU states and Russia. Massive energy infrastructure projects such as Nord Stream progressed between Russia and EU member states.

The EU's approach toward the regional risks posed by Russia was partial and lacked a clear vision of what was at stake. Although cooperative, normative ontological security started to be seen as outdated, there was still no consensus on how to approach Russia's growing challenge in the Black Sea region and the result of uneasy compromises and continuation of the siloed approach to the region. The cooperative, comprehensive security paradigm was contested from various competing perspectives, but there was no consensus on the new security narrative and the EU's own role in it. To paraphrase Antonio Gramchi, the old paradigm was dead, but the new one was not yet born—and in this interregnum, morbid symptoms appear.

Furthermore, it was not only in Ukraine where the EU's inability to deal with hard security challenges was evident. In 2020, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict sparked a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh also exposed the EU's irrelevance in security-related issues in the region (Delcour, 2023). EaP does not have a security—even confidence-building—dimension. While the war ended with a Russia-mediated ceasefire, more long-term changes in geopolitical balance indicated that that was hardly a sustainable or long-lasting solution to the conflict.

4 How to Deal with the Geopolitically Divided and Unstable Black Sea? (2022 Onwards)

In July 2021, President Vladimir Putin published an article entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" that claimed modern-day Ukraine to be an artificial fabrication resulting from wild Soviet social experimentation (Putin, 2021). This article is often seen as a harbinger of what was to come: in December 2021, Russia sent the US, NATO and the OSCE ultimatum on Western "security guarantees" for Russia, including a ban on further NATO enlargement to the east (Roth, 2021). Troops taking part in the autumn Zapad military exercise never left and were accompanied by more troops, and these were eventually employed in a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine that started on 24 February 2022.

Although Russia has not been able to take over Kyiv as it initially intended, Russia has been able to enlarge the occupation of regions under its control in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv regions and significantly reduce the Black Sea shoreline under Ukraine's control. It has been able to deny Ukraine's access to the Sea of Azov and establish a land bridge to Crimea. So far, it has not been able to get control of all the territories of the four Ukrainian regions it claims to have annexed to Russian Federation.

Again, many EU leaders were taken by surprise by Russia's moves in the region although all signs indicated that Russia's power projection in the Black Sea was likely to be a persistent fixture for mid-to-long-term future (Nettles, 2022). They were now faced with the fact that there was already a series of Russian military offensives of growing scale in the Black Sea region.

This has already led to significant changes within the EU as well as NATO. Finland and Sweden applied for and joined NATO, and the alliance recognised its imbalanced defence posture and established a stronger allied presence along the eastern flank. The allies agreed to set up four new multinational battlegroups, including in Bulgaria and Romania. It adopted a new Strategic Concept in 2022 that confirmed a return to a collective, deterrence-based posture in Europe and acknowledged the Black Sea region's strategic importance to the alliance (Romanyshyn, 2023). Across Europe, states pledged to increase their defence spending and defence industrial production (Lancaster, 2023).

The whole geopolitical balance in Europe and in the Black Sea region is undergoing massive and partly unforeseen changes. Russia has continued its war of aggression in Ukraine causing massive destruction and suffering. Russia's presence and posture have weakened elsewhere in the Black Sea region. Reflecting Russia's weakened role and limited capabilities due to the war—and correspondingly Azerbaijan's and its ally Turkey's increased relative position regionally, Azerbaijan took militarily over Nagorno-Karabakh and, as a result, over 100,000 refugees have escaped into Armenia (UNHCR, 2023). As before, the EU had an insignificant role to play in the prevention of the conflict. Since then, the EU has increased its security presence first by establishing a European Monitoring Capacity (Council of the EU, 2022) and later by deploying a one-hundred-person-strong civilian monitoring mission to Armenia

(European External Action Service, 2023). These post-factum deployments reflect the EU's traditional reactive response to regional security issues. However, some indications of a more active approach exist.

As instability in the Black Sea continues, the EU's thinking about the region is transforming. There is time pressure to act fast and determinately. Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia applied for EU membership after the start of the war, and the European Commission has recommended to open membership negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine, and confirmed a candidate status of Georgia. There is a widening realisation that the only way to effectively pursue comprehensive cooperative security policy in the region was through the integration of these states into the EU. An effective Black Sea strategy needs to address the root causes of instability (Hooker et al., 2023).

It is now plainly clear how ill-fitted many European instruments and projects are to the environment prevailing in the Black Sea. For instance, environmental protection projects may seem out of place when there is a dire need for naval demining. Enhancing the region's Blue Economy is secondary when major harbours are under siege. As the regional track record demonstrates, with aggressive and revisionist Russia, cooperative security policy was misplaced and potentially even dangerous. More clear-cut, hard security tools of deterrence are needed with Russia, and this is the question that will determine the direction of development for the whole Black Sea region. Integration of EU and NATO Black Sea policies into a strategically coherent and closely coordinated whole will be essential.

The ontological security frames seem to be bifurcating: internally, within the EU, the same cooperative positive-sum security thinking is still prevailing, but externally, toward Russia, a more traditional understanding of the prevalence of hard security dilemmas has become the dominating one. This has been a reaction to prevailing circumstances: the cooperative framework was misplaced, as Russia was willing to exploit it and use its military capabilities against neighbouring states.

The dynamics of this rethinking taking place in Europe have progressed with the phases of the war. After the initial shock, horror and disbelief, fears of an escalation of the war and debates about military assistance and the structure of sanction packages to Ukraine took hold. In autumn of 2022 there was strong optimism that Ukraine could push Russia further east but more recently the line of contact has not moved significantly. Now, after more than two years of heavy fighting, the European vision of the future seems to be gradually, and with some resistance, emerging.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron have come to support the idea of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and the countries in the Black Sea region. Enlargement is hoped to stabilise the continent by reducing vulnerability of the states 'in between' from Russian constant and systematic interference (Calcutt, 2023). This means, however, also that the EU itself is changing—it will become again a more geopolitical project, a bit like what it was during the Cold War. Going forward, the EU cannot rely on unhinged and permanent US support for its security, but the EU needs to mature as an international actor and take responsibility over the security of the continent. For this to happen, it needs to revise its decision-making rules to allow more strategic policy-making.

The future rounds of enlargement in the Western Balkans, as well as in Eastern Europe, will include countries with complex conflicts and security issues that need to be addressed within the enlargement process one way or the other. Defence cooperation and assistance are likely to be integral part of this process. However, the longer Russia's war of aggression continues in Ukraine, the greater the chance that support for Ukraine will diminish at some point. Such as scenario is likely to result in a protracted conflict, continued instability, and it would increase the prospect of further aggression by Russia down the line (Saari, 2023). A protracted war that would ebb and flow would complicate and prolong the EU integration processes of the Black Sea states.

On the other hand, if Western states are capable of providing the assistance needed to push Russian forces out of Ukraine, or at least significantly weaken Russia's position in Ukraine, the regional balance would change, too. Russian defeat would significantly improve the chances of solving other protracted conflicts in the region and create better conditions for long-term stability. That would, however, require strengthened EU and NATO presence and policy coordination and integration of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia into Western structures and, most importantly, credible deterrence against Russia in the future.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the significant changes that have taken place in the EU's comprehensive security policy toward the Black Sea region since 2007. It argues that while the EU's cooperative and comprehensive security approach is valuable, it has been misplaced in the predatory security environment dominated by Russia. The cooperative positive-sum security frame is far from dead and buried, though. It will continue as a frame for the EU's internal security cooperation and its cooperation with NATO. It will inform the EU's future enlargement rounds that is likely to include also states in the Black Sea region—Moldova, Ukraine and potentially also Georgia.

Despite its foundational goal to bring peace and security to Europe, the EU has had difficulties coming to terms with having an explicit role in security issues in and outside the Union. At the start of the new Millennium, many Europeans believed that the Union was a different kind of international actor—dull and technocratic in internal governance, and externally a civic power rather than a traditional geopolitical one (Manners, 2002). The 2003 European Security Strategy identified a series of external security challenges to the Union, such as terrorism, organised crime, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts and state failure in the EU's neighbourhood. The biggest threat was seen as under-development, marginalisation and corruption in the neighbouring states undergoing "transition".

It took a long time before the EU could see its security environment, including in the Black Sea, for what it *actually* was. The lack of credible regional deterrence against Russia allowed Russia to take advantage of this situation at the expense of states in its neighbourhood that were outside of Western institutions. Russia military

interventions were cynical but also in practice an efficient tactic to keep the EU's eastern neighbours out of Euro-Atlantic frameworks.

After rounds of Russian military interventions in its neighbourhood that have grown bolder by each round, the EU has finally come to terms with the idea that its regional strategy needs a comprehensive update. There is a growing realisation that the EU's postmodernist spatial and security-related interpretation has had negative results in the region. The taboos that enabled Russia's "denial and coercion" regional strategy have finally been broken (Meister, 2021). EU's change of strategy toward Russia and European return to more realist deterrence thinking is a legitimate and necessary response to Russia's aggressive power projection and coercion (cf. Browning, 2020).

Comprehensive cooperative security frameworks continue to have distinct value as an internal European strategy, but their credibility depends critically on the EU's and NATO's ability to create and maintain credible deterrence against Russia's continuous aggression in wider Europe, including the Black Sea region. To be able to nurture cooperative and comprehensive security within wider Europe, Europe needs to be able to defend itself from external aggression. Hence, cooperative and realist security frameworks are both integral and valuable parts of the European security landscape: unlike in theoretical debatesy in real international relations—and around the Black Sea—they are not mutually exclusive frameworks.

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The US Approach to Security in the Black Sea Region

Robert Hamilton

1 Introduction

The Black Sea Region (BSR) has risen in importance for US foreign policy since the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. US support was a key factor in the establishment of NATO battle groups in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and the US Congress has directed the White House to publish a strategy for the region. Increased US attention to the BSR was long in coming: since the first Obama administration, the US had been focused on its rebalance to Asia. Within Europe—even after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and 2014 seizure of Crimea—the US remained focused on Central Europe and the Baltic regions. Only in 2022 did the US foreign policy establishment fully wake up to the acute threat Russia posed to the BSR. However, it is not guaranteed that the region will remain an area of US strategic focus. First, US engagement in the region has become Ukraine-centric, so an erosion of support for Ukraine could portend an erosion of focus on the region more generally. Second, over the long term, the US remains committed to shifting its attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific region. It is unclear whether the US can make that shift and retain enough focus on the BSR to play a meaningful role in its security.

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2 The Black Sea Region in US National Security Policy: Pre- and Post-Ukraine

Since the end of World War II, Eurasia has been the focal point of US national security policy. Within Eurasia, however, the Black Sea Region (BSR) was often a sideshow. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has altered this. If—and given its competing priorities and notoriously short geopolitical attention span, this is a big "if"—the US can maintain its current focus on the BSR, the near future portends significantly greater US presence and engagement in the region.

Two core principles have animated US national security policy since the end of World War II. First, given Eurasia's size, population and concentration of resources, the emergence of a hegemonic power there would threaten vital US national security interests. Second, Eurasia has not been "dependably self-regulating" in preventing the emergence of such a hegemonic power, and therefore US engagement was necessary (O'Rourke, 2023, p. 1).

The type of US engagement and its geographic focal point have varied. Throughout the Cold War, the US engaged in militarised containment of the Soviet Union in Eurasia, focusing on Central Europe. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, US goals shifted to the political, economic, and security integration of former Warsaw Pact states into a wider Euro-Atlantic community. In this period, the geographic focus moved steadily east with the inclusion of ever more former Warsaw Pact states into NATO and the EU. After Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine, the US approach to advancing its interests in Eurasia once again became more militarised. In this period, the geographic focus shifted to defending Poland and the Baltic republics, where NATO deployed multinational battlegroups, one of which the US-led.

In all these periods, one consistent feature of the US approach to Eurasian security was the relegation of the BSR to a peripheral role. During the Cold War, there was good reason for this: six of the current seven Black Sea littoral states are former Soviet republics or Warsaw Pact members, making the Black Sea essentially a Soviet lake. After the Cold War, although the BSR garnered some attention from the US, this attention focused mostly on the western littoral states of Romania and Bulgaria, which gained NATO membership with US support in 2004. The US pushed for Georgia and Ukraine to be granted a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2008. But when stymied by German and French-led resistance, the Bush administration agreed to a compromise: NATO would promise eventual membership to Tbilisi and Kyiv, but with no timeline and no MAP. In August, four months after NATO announced this compromise, Russia invaded Georgia. Five months after this, the Obama administration took office and began pursuing its "reset" with Russia (US White House, 2010).

When push came to shove with the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine, including the crucial annexation of Crimea, which followed Russia's invasion of Georgia by six years, the US and NATO still resisted the idea that the BSR was where Russia intended to challenge US leadership and the rules-based order. Instead, they concluded that Poland and the Baltic states were vulnerable and bolstered

NATO forces there. On one hand, this makes sense: the Baltics are small, militarily vulnerable NATO members that border Russia. In the BSR, NATO members Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania are larger, more militarily capable, and share no land borders with Russia.

But the US reaction in 2014 also belied a misreading of Russia and its intentions. All uses of Russian military power in this century—Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, and Ukraine since 2022—have been in the BSR or Eastern Mediterranean, with which it is connected. Even in the 1990s, when Russia was unstable internally and weak externally, it used its limited power to intervene in Georgia and Moldova. As Maximilian Hess notes, "an astonishing ten wars have taken place on or near the Black Sea littoral since the end of the Cold War, more than any other maritime space in the world" (Hess, 2022). The question is why it took the US so long to understand that Russia saw the BSR as the key arena of its strategic competition with the US and to react accordingly. The answer is that the US has long seen the post-Soviet states of the BSR—Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova—as less critical to US national security than the states of northern and central Europe. So, the US (and NATO) response to Russia's interventions in the BSR prior to 2022 was to shore up security in the Baltics and Poland, where the US saw the Russian threat to vulnerable NATO members as more immediately tied to US security.

It was the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine that may have finally convinced US policymakers that Russia was the prime cause of the violence and instability in the region. It was only after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, not the 2008 invasion of Georgia or the 2014 intervention in Ukraine, that NATO—with US prompting—deployed battlegroups to the BSR to match those it deployed to Poland and the Baltic republics in 2017. US national security policy documents also began to take a more assertive tone toward Russia in 2022. Compared to its predecessors from the Trump and Obama administrations, the Biden administration National Security Strategy (NSS) published in October 2022 focuses on Russia and makes the case that the US must confront its aggression and contain its expansionist tendencies. The 2017 Trump NSS mentioned Russia 25 times, and ten of those times, it mentioned it together with China. By comparison, the Biden NSS mentions Russia 71 times, and only eleven of those times is it mentioned together with China. Language in the 2022 NSS is also far more confrontational toward Russia than the language of its predecessors. For Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, Russia was a disruptive state, but one with which the US needed to maintain a dialogue. The Biden NSS calls Russia a "profoundly dangerous" state posing "an immediate threat to the free and open international system" and sets the US policy goal as constraining it (Biden, 2022, pp. 8, 23).

3 US Priorities for the Region and the Potential for US Black Sea Policy and Strategy

Congressional attention on the BSR has increased markedly since the start of the war in Ukraine. If Congress sustains this attention a coherent US policy and strategy will emerge. If Congress fails to sustain its focus on the region, US policy and strategy will focus on bringing the war in Ukraine to an acceptable end, after which Washington will shift its focus to Asia, as it has been trying to do since 2011.

Although Congress failed to pass the Black Sea Security Act (BSSA), elements of it have found their way into other legislation. Language in the 2023 Foreign Operations Act, which was enacted in December 2022 and governs the operations of the Department of State, directed the department to submit a regional strategy to Congress, which it did in the summer of 2023. The strategy declares an enduring US interest in a BSR that is "secure, prosperous, interconnected, and free from threats to the territorial integrity of states, economic coercion, and malign influence posed by Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC)" (US Department of State, 2023). The strategy focuses on five Lines of Effort (LOEs).

- The first of which is to "Promote Political Engagement". Here, the focus is diplomatic activity. The report promises more frequent high-level visits to regional partners, messaging that conveys the importance of the region to the US and continued support for NATO and EU membership for BSR states.
- LOE 2 is "Strengthening Regional Security Cooperation", by which the US means strengthening air and maritime domain awareness: prioritising defence modernisation and interoperability, bolstering NATO's regional presence and defending freedom of navigation and use of international airspace.
- LOE 3 focuses on "Enhancing Regional Economic Cooperation", which includes investing in interconnectivity, ensuring fair and open trade and investment practices and supporting the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI).
- LOE 4 focuses on "Energy Security and Clean Energy". Focus areas here include energy interconnectivity/Western integration and energy sector decarbonisation.
- Finally, LOE 5 focuses on "Democratic Resilience". Here, the US goals are to strengthen rule of law, promote respect for human rights, combat corruption and counter disinformation.

Taken as a whole, the State Department report can be seen as promoting the concept of "Comprehensive Security" in the BSR. As the introduction to this book notes, comprehensive security goes beyond traditional military security to encompass political, economic, and food security. The State Department's report also explicitly identifies energy security—sometimes seen as a component of economic security—as a Line of Effort, highlighting the BSR's critical role in energy security for Europe. Comprehensive security also extends beyond traditional state-to-state interactions to include the domestic, regional and global levels of interaction. In these areas, the report also aligns with the main ideas of comprehensive security. LOEs 1–4 strongly focus on the regional level of interaction, and strongly support regional organisations

like NATO and the EU. LOE 5 is explicitly focused on the domestic level, arguing that resilience at that level is a key to regional security and stability.

The report has several notable aspects outside of its formal LOEs and focus areas within them. First, it highlights China's malign role in the BSR. This has as much to do with bureaucratic politics as with strategy: in US government budget battles, focusing on China gets attention and resources. Next, although Congress explicitly directed the State Department to produce a strategy, the department titled its publication a "Report to Congress on a Strategy for Working with NATO Allies to Deepen Ties with Black Sea Countries". This is not an oversight but an admission that the document is not a strategy because it does not discuss the means required to implement US objectives in the region. In fact, the report calls this issue out directly, noting that the strategy to be developed relies on "the availability of adequate personnel and resources" (US Department of State, 2023).

The 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) went a step further in implementing the intent of the original BSSA by requiring the National Security Council to develop an interagency strategy for the BSR. The law outlines the following objectives for the strategy: (1) to increase coordination with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union; (2) to deepen economic ties; (3) to strengthen energy security; (4) to support efforts to bolster their democratic resilience; and (5) to enhance security assistance with regional partners in accordance with the values and interests of the United States.

While this might appear to be a duplicate of the strategy the State Department is required to write by the 2023 Foreign Operations Act, it is not. The language in the NDAA locates the strategy in the National Security Council, not the State Department. This matters for two reasons. First, the NSC is an interagency body, meaning the strategy it produces will represent the views and leverage the capabilities of all relevant federal agencies. The Foreign Operations Act directs a single agency strategy written by the State Department, which does not have the authority to task other federal agencies. Next, locating the Black Sea strategy in the NSC gives it presidential attention it would not otherwise have.

4 US Perceptions of the Region and Regional States

US views of BSR regional states are variable and dynamic. Among the non-Russian Black Sea littoral states, all of whom are either NATO allies or candidates for membership, Ukraine and Romania are rising in importance to the US relative to the others. Bulgaria and Georgia have slipped in their prominence to the US since the start of the war in Ukraine. Turkey occupies its own position: a volatile and sometimes troublesome ally, it nevertheless is a major military power occupying a geostrategic position in the region. As frustrated as the US and Turkey might get with each other, each seems to recognise the "no fail" nature of their relationship for regional security and stability.

4.1 Ukraine

Ukraine is obviously the current military centre of gravity for the US in the BSR and will remain so as long as the war there continues. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, the US has provided more than $44.9 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, as of late December 2023 (US Department of Defence, 2023). This assistance has included over 2,000 Stinger anti-aircraft systems, over 10,000 Javelin anti-tank systems, 39 HIMARS artillery systems, one Patriot air defence battery, 12 NASAMS air defence systems and other equipment. The US Department of Defence is leading the effort to assist Ukraine, and articulates the US strategy this way (US Department of Defence, 2023, pp. 5–8):

> To enable Ukraine to counter Russia's unprovoked war of aggression, our strategy continues to focus on working closely with Ukraine and our international allies and partners to provide the Ukrainians with their most urgent security assistance needs.
>
> This includes providing the Ukrainian Armed Forces with vital training and crucial capabilities like air defence, armoured vehicles, artillery, ammunition and other essential requirements intended to help Ukraine protect its people while achieving meaningful gains on the battlefield.
>
> Ultimately, Ukraine will determine what victory looks like.
>
> Our job is to keep supporting Ukraine on the battlefield, so they are in the best position at the negotiating table whenever that happens.
>
> DoD is also committed to supporting Ukraine's medium- to long-term capability needs to ensure it has the capacity to defend itself and deter future Russia aggression.
>
> As President Biden has said, the US will stand by Ukraine in their fight for freedom for as long as it takes.

Whether this amounts to a strategy is questionable. A strategy normally contains a statement of ends or objectives, means or resources to be committed to achieving those ends, and a discussion of the ways the actor will employ those means to achieve stated ends. The US Army War College defines strategy as "the alignment of ends (aims, objectives), ways (concepts), and means (resources)—informed by risk—to attain goals" (Whitt, 2022). The US strategy articulated for Ukraine struggles to balance ends, ways, means and risks.

Formally, Ukraine appears to be in charge of the ends, thus the statement, "Ultimately, Ukraine will determine what victory looks like." This statement does not align with the actual US approach to the war. Ukraine insists that its definition of victory is the liberation of all territory occupied by Russia since 2014. Kyiv has long been arguing that to achieve that, it needs more means (weapons and equipment) and needs them more quickly than the US and other partners have been providing them. The reason Kyiv has not gotten what it wants has to do with ways and risk. The US is concerned that if it gives Ukraine its most potent weapons, Ukraine might use these to attack targets inside Russia, raising the risk of escalation and expansion of the war.

While the US rhetorically supports Ukraine's definition of victory, it has not provided the means for Kyiv to achieve it (assuming it is even possible) due to

concerns about the risk of doing so. What is the true objective in the US strategy? The key phrase, and the true end/objective in the US DOD strategy for Ukraine, is: "Our job is to keep supporting Ukraine on the battlefield, so they are in the best position at the negotiating table whenever that happens." The war in Ukraine, like almost every war, will end in a negotiated settlement. US assistance to Ukraine is designed to put Ukraine in the most militarily advantageous situation possible when negotiations begin while not running a substantial risk of the war escalating and expanding outside the borders of Ukraine and Russia. In short, US and Ukrainian ends are not fully aligned: Ukraine insists on the liberation of all territory inside its internationally recognised borders, while the overriding US goal is that the conflict not escalate. Achieving both of these will be exceptionally difficult. The US strategy also makes two assumptions that might not be borne out. First, Russia will eventually be interested in negotiations to end the war. An ongoing war might benefit the Kremlin, which has framed the war to the Russian people as a war not against Ukraine but against the West. Presenting the West as an aggressive, existential threat to Russia—something Ukraine could never be—helps justify the Kremlin repression of dissent and the sacrifices it asks of the Russian people. Next, the US strategy assumes that Russia will abide by any agreement that ends active fighting, an assumption the historical record falsifies.

The longer-term US strategy for Ukraine and vision of its role in the BSR is less clear. This is especially true because the US public is becoming more sceptical of supporting Ukraine. For example, an August 2023 poll showed that 55% of Americans oppose more aid (Agiesta, 2023). US President Joe Biden declared at the July 2023 NATO Summit that "Ukraine's future lies at NATO", and NATO Allies agreed at the summit to eliminate the requirement for Ukraine to meet Membership Action Plan (MAP) conditions prior to being admitted (Garamone, 2023). But the Alliance also failed to offer Ukraine a clear path to membership, saying only that NATO will offer membership "when allies agree that conditions are met" (Garamone, 2023). Those conditions appear to be the end of the war with Russia, which gives Russia an effective veto over Ukraine's membership. If ever there was a country that nailed its military audition for NATO, it is Ukraine. Its performance against the Russian military should end any talk of the country being a military liability to the Alliance. Whether and when that will merit a membership invitation remains to be seen.

4.2 Romania

In terms of military priority for the US in the BSR, Romania has been rising in importance and trails only Ukraine. Bucharest is also becoming a diplomatic heavyweight and has been a key proponent of greater regional integration and US engagement. Although the US has only recently taken notice, Romania has for decades been a main driver of strategic debates on the BSR and a proponent of its importance to NATO. Finally, Romania and the US have the same view of the threat Russia poses to the region, another factor driving them together.

Romania's military importance for the US derives from a combination of its modernisation efforts and its potential to host NATO forces. Bucharest has acquired 17 F-16 fighters from Portugal and plans to buy 32 more from Norway. For its ground forces, it has invested in almost 400 armoured personnel carriers, along with Patriot surface-to-air missiles and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 16). Romanian officials admit that naval development has lagged due to COVID and legal issues, but the government is building four new corvettes and plans to modernise the Navy's two frigates. After hovering between 1.7 and 2.0% of GDP for six years, Romania's defence spending increased to 2.44% for 2023, putting it online to meet the NATO target if it remains at that level (Statista, 2023).

Romania's location, infrastructure and willingness to host NATO forces make it an attractive basing location. It already hosts a NATO battle group of approximately 800 soldiers and has indicated a willingness to host more. Romanian government officials hope the US will consider stationing a full brigade of about 4,500 soldiers, which is seen as an "important deterrence signal" (Romanian Official, 2023). To make itself a more attractive basing location, Romania has invested some $3.5 billion into military infrastructure (Romanian Official, 2023). As Seth Cropsey notes, "Romania provides the best basing for any NATO Black Sea forces and, through the Danube-Black Sea canal network, enables efficient transfer of forces that would circumvent limitations on naval movements under Montreux convention" (Cropsey, 2023).

US Congressional staffers and Romanian diplomats both say the Romanian Embassy in Washington, DC, is actively pushing Congress to adopt the Black Sea Security Act and is remarkably aligned with the Act's major focus areas (US Officials, 2023a, 2023b). Romania has, in many ways, been out in front of the US in its perception of the threat Russia poses to the region. The Romanian National Defence Strategy identifies the BSR as of "paramount strategic interest" and Russia as an "aggressive" threat" (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 15). Whereas the major inflection point in the US view of Russia came in 2022, many Romanian officials saw the 2008 war in Georgia as the wake-up call and viewed with scepticism and frustration the Obama administration's attempt to "reset" relations with Russia. For Bucharest, Russia's annexation of Crimea provided further evidence of Moscow's aggressive intent in the BSR, but NATO responded by reinforcing its position in the Baltics (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 17). The 2022 Biden Administration NSS brought US views on Russia into alignment with those Romania had held for years. As a result, Bucharest and Washington now share a close partnership in the BSR region. Seth Cropsey concludes, "On NATO's eastern flank, the US has two pillars: Poland in the Baltic region and Romania in the Black Sea region" (Cropsey et al., 2023).

4.3 Bulgaria

Bulgaria has historically sought to preserve an amicable relationship with Russia. Russia has exploited that goodwill and Bulgaria's dependence on Russian energy

to strengthen its influence there and undermine Bulgaria's democratic institutions (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 17). Despite its Black Sea coastline, Bulgaria has not historically seen itself as a maritime state and has played little role in Black Sea security (Aronsson & Mankoff, p. 17). Instead, it looked west. Sofia sees the European integration of the Western Balkans as a "vital national interest" (Panayatov, 2023).

Bulgaria's weak democratic institutions, Russian influence and westward focus have historically limited its contribution to Black Sea security, but this may be changing. Bulgaria rejected Romania's proposal for a Black Sea regional fleet and gave little priority to modernising its defence forces prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. But since then, it has signed on to EU sanctions against Russia, expelled several Russian diplomats and offered to repair damaged Ukrainian military equipment (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 18). Despite the pro-Russian stance of some figures in its government, Bulgaria was also a critical lifeline to Ukraine in the early stages of the war, providing fuel and up to one-third of the munitions Ukraine received in those critical first months (Wolkmann-Schluck, 2023). After electing a new, more pro-Western government in 2023, Bulgaria released more aid to Ukraine (RFE/RL Bulgarian Service, 2023).

Russia's naval blockage of maritime movement has also concentrated minds in Sofia, bringing about a new willingness for cooperation with Bulgaria's historical foe Turkey as well as a renewed appetite for defence modernisation (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 20). In the summer of 2023, after pulling out of the deal that allowed Ukraine to export grain through the Black Sea, Russia altered its naval posture there, a move the British Ministry of Defence said could signal preparation for imposing a full naval blockade of Ukraine (Mongilio, 2023). It also declared a maritime warning within Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone, which NATO said "has created new risks for miscalculation and escalation, as well as serious impediments to freedom of navigation" (NATO, 2023). Spurred at least in part by these events, Bulgaria has increased its focus on maritime security and indicated an appetite for more NATO force structure on its territory, where a NATO battle group is already stationed (Panayatov, 2023).

Whether the US will respond to Sofia's increased outreach is uncertain. For the moment, Washington appears to be focused on Romania as its key regional partner and on managing its fractious but critical relationship with Turkey. This might leave little bandwidth for the US to pay Bulgaria increased attention.

4.4 Georgia

Georgia, once seen as a star performer in terms of its drive for Euro-Atlantic integration, political and economic reforms and contributions to US and NATO-led military operations, has declined in importance to the US. Although US concern about oligarchic state capture, rollback of reforms, and democratic backsliding in Georgia had been rising for several years before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it

was that event that brought Georgia's decline into stark relief. Politicians and surrogates from the ruling Georgian Dream party have accused the US of trying to "drag" Georgia into a war with Russia (Gabritchidze, 2022). The Georgian government has refused to participate in Western sanctions against Russia, has obstructed the delivery of military aid to Ukraine, and has welcomed large numbers of Russian expatriates to the country (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 14.)

Former Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili even appeared to blame NATO for the war, saying in May 2023 that a main reason for the war "was NATO expansion … the desire of Ukraine to become a member of NATO" (Gavin, 2023). The strategic partnership agreement Georgia signed with China in the summer of 2023 has also raised eyebrows and concern in Washington. To be fair, at least one reason for the shift in Tbilisi's geopolitical trajectory has been "Euro-Atlantic fatigue". In the Georgian government's view, it did everything NATO and the EU asked for years: it was a top contributor to NATO-led military operations and a star in its region in political and economic reforms. Despite this, NATO and EU membership remained elusive.

The US has also become concerned about the domestic political environment in Georgia. The arrest of former President Mikheil Saakashvili in October of 2021 caused concern, and that concern has intensified over the deterioration of his health since, spurring the US and other countries to call for his immediate release (Radford, 2023). Finally, the US and other Western states saw an attempt by the government to pass a Russian-style foreign agent registration law—aborted for now after massive public protests—as an attempt to stifle dissent, hinder the activities of Western non-governmental organisations, and curtail media freedom (Megrelidze, 2023). In October 2023, the Georgian government went even further, accusing USAID of plotting a violent coup in the country. Finally, the Georgian government's 2024 adoption of a Russian-style "foreign agents" law seems directly aimed at gutting civil society organizations and independent media, moving Tbilisi further in an authoritarian, pro-Russian direction and therefore off the US radar.

Despite these developments, there has been little formal shift in US policy toward Georgia—yet. However, informally, US officials express frustration and dismay at Georgia's trajectory, making a formal policy shift possible, even likely. Although they have deep concerns about the trajectory of the Georgian government, US officials express confidence in the instincts of the Georgian people. Senator Shaheen, one of the closest followers of Georgia in the US Congress, said, "As we look at countries like Georgia where I'm disappointed by some backsliding in the government but where the people are very clearly committed to looking towards Europe, to looking at NATO, we need to think about how we can better support them" (Blinken, 2023). This understanding that the Georgian people are strongly committed to Western integration may keep Georgia on the map until a government that shares this commitment comes to power. In a sign of this, despite its backsliding, Georgia was awarded EU candidate status in December 2023.

4.5 Turkey

Turkey occupies a category of its own for the US in the BSR. A prickly and sometimes unpredictable ally, it is also a key state for US national security interests in Eurasia. Lisa Aronsson and Jeffrey Mankoff describe Turkey's importance this way, "With NATO's second-largest military, control of the Bosporus and Dardanelles Straits, and a political elite committed to bolstering the country's strategic autonomy, Turkey remains the linchpin for US and NATO strategy in the BSR" (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 10). The US and Turkey have different views of key issues in their bilateral relationship, but each understands the importance of the relationship for security and stability in Eurasia. Since both Ankara and Washington see this security as a vital national interest, both have an incentive to keep the relationship on stable ground.

There are several aspects of Turkish foreign policy that cause concern in Washington, DC. First is Turkey's relationship with Russia. US officials complain that Russia supplies 40% of Turkey's gas and is building a nuclear power plant in the country, tying Turkey's energy sector more closely to Russia's (US Officials, 2023a, 2023b). The US also accuses Turkish firms of assisting Russia in evading sanctions and has sanctioned at least four of them for helping Russia procure defence equipment and electronics and ship prohibited items (Hagedorn, 2023). The most serious US complaint about Turkey's relationship with Russia is Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence missile system. US officials are so concerned about the system's ability to observe the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter in all its flight profiles and thereby identify weak spots in its stealth capability that the US has ejected Turkey from the F-35 program and refused to sell the aircraft to Ankara (Tucker, 2023).

Despite these friction points, the US works to maintain a constructive relationship with Turkey, not only because of its military capacity and geopolitically critical location. US officials note that Turkey is emerging as a competitor to China in some key areas (US Officials, 2023a, 2023b). Africa is one of these. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa grew from 12 in 2009 to 43 in 2022; Turkish Airlines serviced four African cities in 2004 (it now flies to more than 40); and trade has expanded almost eight-fold since 2003, standing at $29 billion in 2021 (The Economist, 2022). In Africa and other regions where the US presence is not robust, especially in Central Asia, Turkey competes effectively with China in the field of construction and telecommunications. Turkish Foreign Ministry officials express views of China like those of their US counterparts. They say Turkey is trying to have a constructive relationship with China but "can't stay indifferent to the plight of the Uighur Turks". They also express the need for "restraint and calm" over Taiwan. Finally, they say they are following China's cyber activities closely and must be vigilant to the threat China poses in this area (Turkish Officials, 2023a, 2023b).

Despite Washington's misgivings over the role of Turkish firms in helping Russia evade sanctions, Turkey has been helpful against Russia in other ways. The Turkish firm Baykar sold Ukraine some 50 of its Bayraktar TB-2 drones, which were highly effective in the early months after Russia's full-scale invasion. Turkey has also granted Ukraine a license to produce the drone domestically, and Baykar has already started

building a factory there (Khalid, 2023). Turkish officials argue to their US counterparts that Turkey is "the only country fighting Russia", noting that Ankara and Moscow have different objectives in Libya, Syria, and Azerbaijan. They also characterise Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a "grave violation of international law" (Turkish Officials, 2023a, 2023b). For these reasons, despite US misgivings about Turkey—and Turkish misgivings about US policy in Syria and on what it calls the "Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization"—Turkey will remain a key US partner in the BSR.

5 Conclusion: Future of the US Approach to the Region

The long-term US approach to the BSR will depend on the duration and intensity of US Congressional interest. If Congress maintains its focus long enough to incentivise the White House to institutionalise its approach to the region by producing formal policy and strategy documents, the US will remain engaged for the long term.

Without long-term and intense Congressional interest, there are strong factors mitigating against a sustained US focus on the region. The Biden NSS, despite its determination to stop Russia, does not mention the Black Sea as a region. It does mention regional states—primarily Ukraine, for obvious reasons—but contains no indication the US sees regional security and integration as important interests. Similarly, the National Defence Strategy (NDS) does not prioritise the BSR and leaves US strategic objectives there unspecified (Aronsson & Mankoff, 2023, p. 3). Within Europe, the BSR will compete for attention with NATO's new northern flank. Before 2022, Poland and the Baltics eclipsed the BSR as the focal point of NATO's deterrence efforts. After the war in Ukraine ends, this pattern may reassert itself, especially since the northern flank has now been extended by over 1300 kms with Finland's accession to the Alliance.

US officials often claim significant US interest in the BSR in their public remarks. Mara Karlin, the Assistant Secretary of Defence for Strategy, Plans and Capabilities, said in May 2023 (Garamone, 2023):

> First and foremost, the Black Sea region is an area of critical geostrategic importance. It links Europe to the Middle East and beyond, and it is a key node for transit infrastructure and energy resources.

Karlin added that the region is "a key front line for transatlantic security". But unless these words translate into a document that sets out clear objectives for the US role in the region, and dedicates resources toward achieving those objectives, they remain statements of aspiration, not policy or strategy.

Even if the BSR becomes a priority for the US in Eurasia, Eurasia itself will not continue to enjoy the pre-eminence in US national security policy it has enjoyed since the end of World War II. Since the Obama administration announced the US rebalance to Asia in 2011, the US has been trying to focus more on that region. Ironically, Russia's aggressive behaviour has prevented the rebalance from advancing as far as

successive US administrations since 2011 have hoped. But the Biden NSS is clear that while Russia is the acute threat, China is the long-term threat and therefore—eventually—Eurasia may cease to be the focus of US national security planning and resourcing. The threat from Russia will still matter, especially if the US concludes that the Beijing-Moscow axis is a true strategic partnership, but the balance of resources is likely to shift east from its current point. If a Republican administration takes over in 2024, sustaining support for the BSR will become even more difficult, as GOP foreign policy has placed more emphasis on confronting China, supporting Israel and resourcing border security than it has on resisting Russia.

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NATO and Black Sea Security

S. Neil MacFarlane

1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the history and role of NATO on the Black Sea littoral in changing geopolitical contexts. Particular attention will be paid to NATO's reaction to Russia's war with Ukraine. Very little has been published in the academic literature on NATO and the Black Sea. It is a new issue. Consequently, this analysis relies primarily on primary documents, historical accounts and online journalism.

This chapter is an "odd-man-out" in this volume since the structure of the book is country-based. NATO, in contrast, is a multilateral military/security organisation. It currently has 31 national perspectives of varying degrees of influence over alliance policy.

Nonetheless, it is useful to include NATO since many national foreign and security policies toward Black Sea security are channelled through, and to an extent influenced by, the alliance and its evolving strategies. The institution itself provides a forum for discussing and coordinating state positions on security matters. It is also an arena for consensus building. NATO's leadership and professional staff provide professional input into NATO Council decisions.

NATO has never had a specific strategic emphasis on the Black Sea region. The principal focus of NATO during the Cold War was deterrence of, and defence against, the Soviet military threat to Europe. That focus disappeared with the weakening and then collapse of the USSR. In response, the alliance's understanding of security widened and shifted towards the challenges associated with the emergence of a group of post-communist states on the alliance's eastern border. NATO's strategy then evolved to embrace crisis prevention and crisis management, peace operations in countries affected by ethnic civil violence, stabilisation, democratisation and security

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sector reform with regard to non-members, and, in due course, enlargement of its membership.

Concerning the Black Sea area, Turkey became a member of the alliance in 1952. In 2004, NATO enlargement brought in Romania and Bulgaria. In 2008, NATO recognised Georgia and Ukraine as eventual members.[1] Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 brought a heightened focus on the Black Sea region and involved the deployment of alliance personnel to member states on the western littoral of the Black Sea.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 pushed the alliance to return to its foundational purpose, the pursuit of stability and security in Europe through deterrence and denial. It had also enlarged to 31 members, with the accession of Finland in 2022, followed by Sweden in 2024.

The essential characteristics of NATO, as well as NATO strategy from its founding until 2014, are discussed in the first section. The discussion then proceeds to the redefinition of NATO, its strategy in 2014–2023, and the geopolitical underpinnings of this shift. The chapter then addresses implications for the Black Sea region and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the alliance there. The bottom line is that since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014, there has been an activation of NATO thinking about the Black Sea, a fundamental reconsideration of the Alliance's benign view of Russia, and an acceleration of partnership and the enlargement process on the Black Sea littoral. That said, numerous institutional weaknesses complicate NATO's enlarged role in the Black Sea region.

2 The NATO Background

Understanding the historical context is important to set the scene for the rest of the analysis.

NATO was founded in April 1949 to address an emerging Soviet threat. The core mission was to deter external threats and to defend members when deterrence failed, as specified in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the security guarantee (NATO, 1949).[2]

This "deter and defend" mission had several elements. One was an expansion of the alliance to front-line states (Turkey in 1952, bringing the alliance to the southern littoral of the Black Sea, and West Germany in 1955). A second was the strengthening of forward-deployed combat capability. Throughout the Cold War, the alliance focused on central Europe and Germany.

During the last half of the 1980s, the warming of relations with the USSR brought significant changes in NATO's threat assessment and the deployments of NATO forces, evident in the London Declaration in 1990. The Soviet threat was no longer

[1] NATO declared that both states would become members (without any timeline) in the Bucharest Summit Declaration (2008).

[2] For an excellent recent article on security guarantees, see Tertrais (2023).

deemed a viable basis for NATO. A "new and promising era" was emerging, with Eastern Europe "liberating itself" and the Soviet Union embarking "on a long journey toward a free society" (NATO, 1990). This optimism was seemingly confirmed by the collapse of the USSR in December 1991.

In short, the disappearance of the strategic threat drew into question the alliance's fundamental purpose and, for some, the very survival of the Alliance. However, international organisations seldom disband because of lingering bureaucratic interests and the possibility that they might be needed again as conditions evolve. NATO survived and, in July 1991 (before the Soviet collapse), adopted a somewhat unfocused new strategic concept (NATO, 1991) defining a plethora of new threats and uncertainties in the context of a more comprehensive notion of security. The proposed "strategy" emphasised dialogue, cooperation, collective defence, crisis management and conflict prevention. The core objective of collective deterrence and defence was retained but was marginalised, given the absence of any credible conventional threat to the alliance. The alliance also dabbled with democratisation and security sector reform in the context of outreach to the East. With the terrorist attack on the US in 2001, the alliance strengthened its focus on countering terrorism. In 2003, NATO went global by taking control of the counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan.

One significant element of this revised approach was multifaceted outreach to the East, providing an institutional basis for dialogue and cooperation with states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This resulted in growing engagement with the Black Sea region, notably through the Partnership for Peace, which focussed on military cooperation and was a means for sharing training and tactics and strengthening interoperability between NATO and partner states, as well as for promoting security reform.

Partnership was closely related to the enlargement process. The NATO study on enlargement (NATO, 1995), provided a pathway to membership for aspiring states. The first group of three states was admitted to NATO in 1999, and the second group of seven states entered in 2004, including Romania and Bulgaria.

In short, at the end of the Cold War and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO lost its original raison d'être. It broadened its understanding of security while searching for new priorities in a fundamentally transformed strategic environment.

Member states, meanwhile, took the "peace dividend". Defence spending among NATO members went into a secular decline, leading to dramatic shrinkage in the size of national force complements in Europe, reduction in military procurement, and shrinkage of defence budgets and the defence industrial base. As former senior NATO official Camille Grand put it:

> During the Cold War, defence spending for NATO Allies (even putting the United States aside) routinely averaged more than 3% of GDP, with some significant variation over time, but rarely falling below 2%. In the post-Cold War era, there was a first significant drop in the early 1990s and a further 20% decrease roughly 20 years later (including a reduction of the NATO command structure) following the global financial crisis of 2008. This led to

> a significant decrease in both the volumes and the readiness of the armed forces of most Allies. (Grand, 2022).[3]

This is not to say that NATO became irrelevant; NATO enlarged its membership substantially in an eastward and southeastern direction between 1999 and 2007, following the democracy-security and "one Europe whole and free" logic. The addition of the Baltic states in 2004 expanded the alliance into the territory of the former Soviet Union. The addition of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia brought the alliance to the borders of Ukraine. In the context of Black Sea security, Romanian and Bulgarian membership brought the number of NATO members on the Black Sea littoral to three.

3 Geopolitical Change and NATO Strategy in the Black Sea

Many analysts take the view that NATO's interest in the Black Sea region was a direct reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 was the starting point of a new phase in regional geopolitics. After a lengthy critique of unipolarity and American interventionism, he turned to NATO, focusing on the destabilising effect of NATO expansion:

> I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? (Putin, 2007)

The statement was a warning concerning further NATO enlargement eastward.

At its summit in Bucharest in April 2008, NATO nonetheless declared that Georgia and Ukraine (two Black Sea states) would become members of NATO (NATO, 2008). This agreement left an unfortunate situation for the two countries: it was an assurance that Russia would lose these two states to NATO, but it left a window of opportunity for Russia to pre-empt this outcome.

In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, taking full control of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and then recognising the two territories as sovereign states. NATO did not respond. In 2013, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and his government abandoned their negotiations on EU association, the Ukrainian people forced Yanukovych out of office, and Ukraine resumed the negotiating process, leading to a

[3] It is worth noting that as NATO defence spending continued to drop in the early 2000s, the Russian government was dramatically increasing defence spending, professionalising its armed forces, reorienting operational art and tactics to combined arms operations, and re-equipping its forces with state-of-the-art weaponry. According to Grand, Russian defence spending grew by 227% from 2000 to 2022. See Grand (2022). 'Defence spending: sustaining the effort in the long-term', *NATO Review*, 3 July. Available at: https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/07/03/defence-spending-sustaining-the-effort-in-the-long-term/index.html.

formal association. Russia responded by occupying and annexing Crimea and intervening in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces halted Russia's advance, leading to a protracted low-intensity conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The annexation of Crimea entrenched Russia's maritime control over the northern Black Sea. It also effectively closed the Azov Sea, the narrow exit from which was now controlled on both sides by Russia. This had important economic consequences for Ukraine in the event of war since it allowed Russia to cut off exports from Ukraine's Azov Sea ports, notably Mariupol. This time, the US, EU and other allied states imposed modest sanctions on the occupied territories and also on Russia itself.

Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine caused a significant shift in NATO's perception of its strategic environment. In 2014, at the Wales Summit, Russia reappeared as a "challenge" on the alliance's eastern edge "with strategic implications". The declaration specifically condemned Russia for aggression and demanded that Russia cease and desist from this illegal behaviour. NATO also rejected Russia's annexation of parts of Ukraine. Signifying a return to a more military-centric approach, the Alliance established a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), "a new Allied joint force that will be able to deploy within a few days to respond to challenges that arise, particularly at the periphery of NATO's territory and deployable anywhere along NATO's periphery at short notice". The allies also agreed to reverse the decline in the allies' defence spending (NATO, 2014).

Given the enlargement of the alliance (and the Article 5 security guarantee) to the Black Sea littoral, the VJTF mission implied a possible Black Sea role. This inference was also clear in the alliance's assertion that it would support regional efforts of Black Sea states to ensure "security and stability" in the region. In practical terms, the declaration envisaged continuous NATO rotational deployments in Eastern Europe, which includes the Black Sea littoral. In other words, the Black Sea had entered NATO's strategic framework. In addition, the alliance emphasised its support for EU and G7 sanctions on Russia. Finally, it suspended all civilian and military cooperation with Russia put in place by the NATO-Russia Founding Act.

At subsequent summits, NATO refined and strengthened these directions in NATO policy. For example, at the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, the alliance established the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) programme to station multinational battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The allies also agreed to create a multinational divisional command structure in Romania (MND Southeast) and to preposition equipment for rapid reinforcement. It also stressed the deterioration of the security situation in the Black Sea and committed to the exploration of possible responses in cooperation with Black Sea littoral states, emphasising the need to deepen relations with NATO partner states Georgia and Ukraine (NATO, 2016).

In more practical terms, NATO allies such as Canada, the UK, and the US mounted substantial training programmes for Ukrainian military personnel. These proved to be of significant value to Ukraine in the 2022–3 war. By that time, thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and officers had had exposure to NATO systems, as well as the experience of working with NATO soldiers on the ground.

To summarise, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 provoked a major change in NATO's perceptions of the geopolitical environment of Eastern Europe in

general and the Black Sea region in particular. Russia came to be seen as a significant source of insecurity in the region, and NATO shifted its strategic focus from dialogue and cooperation to deterrence and defence, re-emphasising the alliance's original mission. This perceptual and policy shift was accompanied by the forward deployment of NATO forces, the adjustment of command structures, and a slow and uneven increase in defence spending by NATO allies. More specifically, the Ukraine war accelerated the developing awareness of the Black Sea region as strategically significant for the alliance.

However, the increases in member-state defence spending targets were quite small, and there were no means to enforce this commitment on laggard members. By 2022, only about seven members had attained the 2% of GDP spending target. It remained to be seen whether the VJTF concept would be fleshed out with member-state force commitments. In addition, the 2014 round of sanctions had little tangible effect on the Russian economy or military.

Why did NATO not react more forcefully to Russia's aggression against Ukraine? Most simply, the commitment to collective defence did not apply to Ukraine since it was not a member. Second, NATO and its member states were not prepared for intervention in a large-scale conventional war against a well-armed and (seemingly) well-trained adversary. Many alliance members had taken the peace dividend, reducing defence expenditure and downsizing their conventional forces. American, British and French combat-ready forces in Central Europe had been drawn down. Third, the North Atlantic Treaty's consensus rule for action had an immobilising effect. The possibility of a more robust alliance response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine was a hostage to member state preferences and to their (often-dissonant) domestic political processes. Some (e.g., Poland and the Baltic states) wanted more direct action. Others (e.g., Germany and the US) were reluctant. For Germany, direct action was inconsistent with a longstanding policy of binding Russia to the West through economic and institutional cooperation. The US was preoccupied with their "pivot to Asia" and mired in Iraq and Afghanistan. The mess in Iraq and Afghanistan also fostered a domestic political reluctance to engage in further foreign wars.

The "pivot to Asia" trope suggests a deeper cognitive problem. Many members of NATO believed that the systemic threat in Eastern Europe had been removed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. They therefore discounted the renewed Russian threat to European security. Retrospectively, it appears that Russia was re-emerging as a significant power in Europe. Rapidly rising Russian military spending is striking when compared to declines in NATO member state spending trends. It was equally clear that Putin's Russia was unhappy with the regional status quo. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 was a significant marker of its challenge. Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 indicated an escalation of the challenge. Despite the resolute tone of its official pronouncements, NATO's and the West's response consistently underestimated the dimensions of the threat. One could be forgiven for the conclusion that NATO talked the talk but did not walk the walk.

4 Russia's War Against Ukraine Since 2022

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. NATO reacted quickly at its Brussels Summit in March 2022 when it extended the EFP to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, putting NATO ground and air forces directly on the Black Sea littoral. In June 2022, the alliance issued a new strategic concept at its Madrid Summit. The alliance concluded that the Russian Federation was "the most significant and direct threat to allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" and promised a significant strengthening of its deterrence and defence capability to deny any adversary "any possibilities for aggression". In a point specifically relevant to the Black Sea, the concept promised to enhance its maritime posture "to deter and defend against all threats in the maritime domain, uphold freedom of navigation, secure maritime trade routes and protect our main lines of communications" (NATO, 2022a, 2022b).

The alliance also decided to upgrade the four EFPs in Eastern Europe from battalion size to brigade size, quadrupling the size of land forces commitment in the Baltics, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia (NATO, 2023a, 2023b). In addition, NATO played a supporting role in coordinating member-state military assistance to Ukraine.

This transformation continued in the leadup to the Vilnius Summit in July 2023. Finland and Sweden applied to join the alliance.[4] In July 2023, the Vilnius summit strengthened the Madrid conclusions, stressing its commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and promising to support Ukraine's defence for "as long as it takes" (NATO, 2023b).

The alliance committed itself to accelerated membership for Ukraine "when Allies agree and conditions are met". The prospect of Ukrainian membership in NATO has profound implications for the Black Sea since it would leave only two countries (Georgia and Russia) outside the alliance. Georgia has been promised membership when conditions permit. If that occurred, Russia would be alone on the Black Sea littoral.[5]

The declaratory record is clear, but the reality is again somewhat murky. In practice, "unwavering solidarity" runs into concerns about potential escalation of the conflict. This concern has delayed the delivery of key weapons (armoured personnel carriers and tanks, F-16 fighters, and long-range missile systems). NATO member weapons stockpiles are low (a consequence of the post-Cold War shrinkage of defence industries), and consequently, it is challenging to keep up with Ukrainian consumption of crucial weapons (artillery shells and air defence missiles).

The Vilnius Summit Communiqué did commit to the acceleration of Ukraine's membership application, but the phrase "when Allies agree and conditions are met" raises several red flags. What conditions are we talking about? The open-endedness of this formulation is reminiscent of the 2008 Bucharest declaration on Ukrainian (and

[4] Final admission was delayed by Turkish and Hungarian opposition. Finland, however, has since been admitted, and the objections to Sweden's membership have been withdrawn.

[5] See the map in Avdaliani (2023) for the disposition of NATO facilities on the Black Sea.

Georgian) membership. There will also be problems in achieving a full membership agreement on Ukrainian accession. Some members (e.g., Hungary and now Slovakia) are unenthusiastic about Ukrainian membership in principle. Others would resist accession in current conditions (e.g., the US and Germany) because it would involve the Article 5 security guarantee since Ukraine is an active war zone. If that guarantee were honoured, the alliance could be involved in a war with Russia, a war many European allies are not ready for. And is NATO really capable of defending all Ukrainian territory? Does it have sufficient equipment and troops? We are even running out of ammunition.

5 NATO's Geopolitical Challenge in the Black Sea

There is an evolving transformation in NATO's perspectives on both Russia and the Black Sea. The Black Sea region has moved from peripherality to being a significant strategic concern of the alliance. That shift reflects a number of factors. One is the basic purpose of the alliance, which is to foster security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. That purpose is directly challenged by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and by Russia's grotesque violation of international law concerning sovereignty and territorial integrity and also of international humanitarian law.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine also puts the collective defence mission at risk. A Russian victory in Ukraine would affect the security of the eastern members of NATO, notably the Baltic republics and Poland, but also Romania and Bulgaria. The Russian missile attacks on the Ukrainian ports of Reni and Izmail on the Danube River, some 400 metres from Romanian territory, raise the possibility of an accidental attack on alliance territory.[6]

In the political arena, the alliance is committed to supporting and strengthening the "rules-based international order", which is put at risk by Russia's aggressive use of force and by its interference with free maritime navigation.

NATO's focus is essentially politico-military. However, NATO member states also have economic interests in the Black Sea region. Two examples suffice. The first is the fitful Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports. In 2022, the blockade of Ukrainian grain exports had a significant impact on global grain prices, fuelling very rapid rises in global food prices, as well as worsening the crisis in food supply in Middle Eastern and African countries dependent on Ukrainian grain exports (e.g., Egypt, Lebanon and Somalia). This emerging crisis was mitigated in part by an agreement between Russia and Ukraine, mediated by Turkey and the UN, to allow Ukrainian food exports across the Black Sea, exiting through the Bosphorus (UN, 2022).

In July 2023, Russia abandoned the agreement and resumed the blockade. This action, coupled with the heavy Russian bombing of Ukraine's ports themselves, roiled global grain markets, particularly the wheat market, while again creating significant food supply challenges for poorer grain-importing states in the Mediterranean and

[6] See *Deutsche Welle* (2023) for an incident in the vicinity of Izmail, for example.

African regions. Russia's threat against civilian ships going to and from Ukraine has resulted in a discussion of the possibility that NATO might provide naval vessels to protect these ships.[7] In the meantime, in view of the weakening of Russian control over the northwestern Black Sea (Dickinson, 2023), Ukraine has established an alternative maritime route for grain export, hugging the coast of Romania and Bulgaria to sustain the flow of grains.

There is a direct correlation between food prices and political and economic stability in much of the Global South. One of NATO's many purposes is strengthening stability and security among partners in the Mediterranean region, notably in North Africa.

The final point here relates to energy security. Since 1995, natural gas and oil have flowed from Azerbaijan through Georgia to ports on the Black Sea and Mediterranean coasts, providing a modest alternative to Russian oil and gas export to Europe. The EU decision to reduce reliance on Russian energy resources, combined with the entry into production of substantial additional natural gas reserves, has enhanced the significance of these exports to European NATO states.[8] Recently, the EU and Azerbaijan agreed to double natural gas export to the EU to 20 bcm annually, making Azerbaijan a major gas supplier to southern Europe (EU, 2023a; Reuters, 2022). In addition, the EU has recently committed significant resources to exploring the development of an undersea large-volume cable to export electricity from the Caucasus to Europe (EU, 2023b).

In other words, as with most international institutions, NATO has a number of priorities (political, normative, military and economic) as defined by its member states. NATO is part of a constellation of regional institutions, notably the Council of Europe, the EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, that address parts of the European comprehensive security agenda. Each plays to its comparative advantage. NATO is at the "hard security" end of this institutional cluster. It provides one particular aspect of "comprehensive security".

[7] NATO's capacity to do so is limited by two factors. One is that direct military action between NATO vessels and Russian ones raises the possibility of direct conflict between Russia and NATO. Many NATO members are not enthusiastic about that prospect. The second is the Montreux Convention's stipulations on non-Black Sea naval presence in the Black Sea. These rules affect vessel size (tonnage) and the duration of their presence in the Black Sea. See: *1936 Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits*. Available at (cil.nus.edu.sg): file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits-1.pdf. For a recent analysis of NATO naval issues, see: Bergeron (2023). 'Reflecting on One Year of War: A Transformational Year in Maritime NATO', Center for Maritime Strategy, 17 February. Available at: https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/reflecting-on-one-year-of-war-a-transformational-year-in-maritime-nato/.

[8] For a good analysis of Azerbaijan's growing energy production capacity see Krivosheev (2023).

6 Strengths and Weaknesses

NATO's greatest strength lies in its potential to provide force to enhance security through the provision of deterrence and defence of NATO allies and their interests. The war in Ukraine has broadened the alliance's focus to draw in Black Sea security for all the reasons just discussed.

Here, the war in Ukraine has produced a second related advantage. Russian aggression against Ukraine has forged a strong collective view (minus Hungary, Slovakia and Turkey) that Russia is the principal threat to NATO. That will not change until the war is over and Putin goes.

In addition, in the Russian context, NATO states are technologically dominant in weapons quality, particularly in air power and precision-guided munitions launched from maritime, land, and aerial platforms.

Third, NATO has attractive power; non-member states in the region (e.g., Ukraine and Georgia) want to be members. If these two join and Russia loses its naval facilities on the Crimean Peninsula, its maritime dominance over the Black Sea will be dramatically weakened. In a more general sense, the partnership programme and partner participation in NATO out-of-area operations have enlarged NATO's epistemic community while forging close relations between some partners and NATO militaries.

Turning to weaknesses, the rule of decision by consensus is problematic. A formal consensus exists for now on Ukraine, but differences of opinion among member states make it a minimal consensus.

If the war in Ukraine ends, those divisions will likely intensify. One longstanding unresolved tension is the transatlantic link itself. The notion of an autonomous European (EU) defence structure has not disappeared. Although this has been papered over by NATO's support for a European Security and Defence Identity within NATO and by embracing EU efforts to pursue a Common Foreign and Security Policy, this does not overcome the preference of some EU members (e.g., France) for an EU defence structure, as one element in the strengthening of the EU identity as an autonomous great power. Others (e.g., Germany, Poland, the Baltics and the UK) express a strong commitment to the transatlantic link while having reservations about the viability of the EU security alternative.

Another potential bone of contention is that prior to the war in Ukraine, there was a longstanding division within the alliance about the direction of external threats, with eastern nations focusing eastward and Mediterranean members (e.g., Spain and Italy) preferring a southern focus. These issues may re-emerge if the threat from Russia dissipates.

Third, although there is agreement that the Black Sea is strategically more important to NATO than it once was, there is no alliance Black Sea strategy. The need for such a strategy has been discussed in NATO circles,[9] but none has yet emerged. Given the nature of international institutions, that process is slow. But most of the

[9] Conversations with former NATO officials.

NATO community is now convinced that the Black Sea is intrinsically an important strategic consideration for the alliance.

A fourth controversy emerged in the leadup to the 2023 Vilnius summit. One major issue was when Ukraine should be invited to submit a membership application. Some believed that this invitation should be issued at the summit. Others thought that an invitation would be premature, given that Ukraine is at war with a nuclear power and that further work on interoperability and political/judicial reform was a necessary prerequisite to a formal invitation.

Another major question at the summit was the admission of Sweden, which Turkey opposed.

A related element is Turkey's strong economic relationship with Russia, dating back to the 1990s. This includes Turkish trade and investment with Russia, Russian tourism in Turkey and Russian assistance in the construction of the new nuclear power plant in Turkey at Akkuyu. Turkey has attempted to manoeuvre between NATO solidarity, its profitable economic relationship with Russia and its regional objectives in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. In that context, Turkey appears to be reinvigorating its independent Caucasus Strategy through its separate alliance with Azerbaijan that culminated in the violent conclusion to the Nagorno-Karabakh question.

A fifth concerns the domestic politics of some member states. One element here is the persisting (although diminishing) reluctance of many member states to meet NATO's requirement for defence spending as a percentage of GDP. In 2015, three member states met the target of at least 2%. In 2022, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, the number had risen to seven states above the target and a further three close to the target. That means that in 2022, 20 members were below the target. In some cases, there is reason to doubt whether, despite their formal endorsement of the spending goal, they will actually deliver. For example, Canada's prime minister allegedly said recently that his country would not meet the 2% of GDP spending commitment that it had agreed to. (Boulden, 2023). In short, alliance performance in achieving agreed increases in defence spending is not particularly inspiring. This leaves aside how defence spending is allocated; from a NATO perspective, the matter is not only whether the spending target is achieved, but also how the money is spent.

The overarching problem here is "burden-sharing" and "free-riding". NATO allies have learned to rely fundamentally on American military power to provide protection, and that has encouraged many of them to underinvest in defence.

This leads to a sixth weakness. Weapons stocks of NATO states have now shrunk to the point that it is uncertain how long NATO member states' supply of weaponry to the Ukrainian armed forces can be sustained. This is related to a further serious problem. Most member states have allowed their defence industries to shrink. In this sense, the challenge is not merely about rebuilding stocks but also about rebuilding defence industries, which have atrophied since the end of the Cold War. This is not merely a problem for NATO members with smaller militaries. It applies also to major allies, such as the US, UK and Germany (Brenes, 2023).

The final weakness is that sustaining commitments depends on leadership will and popular support. The US is entering a new election cycle. Potential Republican

candidate for president, Donald Trump, has expressed severe reservations about the US commitment to NATO. The latest shipment of US aid to Ukraine was delayed six months, with serious consequences for the defence of Ukraine against Russia. Given the increasing polarisation of domestic politics in Europe, there is reason to expect that domestic leadership consensus on Ukraine may also be perishable there as well. There is major concern over public war fatigue among alliance states. The consensus on engagement is weak.

7 Conclusion

This chapter began by providing a historical background to NATO engagement in the Black Sea region. It then proceeded to discussion of how the end of the Cold War affected NATO, notably through the reduction of the military activities of the alliance, a broadening of the concept of security itself, and the emphasis on enlargement as a means of projecting security and stability to the former Warsaw Pact states and the newly independent republics that emerged after the Soviet collapse. This discussion concluded with an account of how Russia's re-emergence as a major regional military power, and particularly its war against Ukraine, re-focused alliance strategy on the original purposes of the alliance—deterrence and defence in order to maintain security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. It traces the gradual development of NATO perspectives and policy towards Black Sea security from the early membership of Turkey in the alliance through the broader impact of dialogue and cooperation on partner states along the Black Sea littoral and the enlargement of the alliance to include two further Black Sea states, to the geopolitical impact of the war in Ukraine on the alliance, particularly in the Black Sea region.

The analysis then turned to the purposes and objectives of NATO in the Black Sea region. NATO has come to see the Black Sea region as important for achieving the alliance's core objectives in the European area (NATO, 2022b). It is building regional command infrastructure in the region and is increasing land, sea and air deployments on a permanent basis via regular rotation of forces.

In due course, the operational developments will produce a Black Sea strategy, not least because the US Congress is also moving in that direction.

The analysis concluded by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of NATO in the Black Sea area. NATO is not a state; it is an alliance of states. There is a plurality of interests and a diversity of opinion and practice among member states. NATO's cohesion depends on the extremity of the threat. The Russian threat to the alliance is severe. If it diminishes, consensus may become more difficult to sustain. However, the momentum established by the membership of Bulgaria and Romania and the likelihood of eventual membership for Ukraine and possibly Georgia suggests that NATO engagement with Black Sea security will persist.

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China as a Black Sea Actor: An Alternate Route

Niklas Swanstrom

1 Introduction

China's international role has expanded rapidly in the last decades across Central Asia, Europe and the Middle East—all of which the Black Sea region (BSR) connects. The region is only a part of a much larger scheme connecting China to Europe and the Middle East through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the BSR became a hub for transit trade to and from China. Still, the region has yet to be a priority for China despite some significant investments. The Chinese leadership has attempted to establish a southern route to bypass Russia and diversify transit trade from Europe and the Middle East—without replacing Russia as its main route, but ensuring Beijing has more than one actor for overland transit (Swanstrom, 2021). This trend became particularly essential with the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the congestion of maritime routes and Russia's Northern Route, and, most recently, the isolation of Russia from Europe after its ruthless invasion of Ukraine. Since the BRI emerged as China's primary structure for international engagement (including with Europe), Beijing has been forced to reconsider how to effectively reach partners for trade. This chapter analyses how China has engaged the Black Sea region, which Beijing has traditionally seen as Russia's backyard or even a part of Russia. The focus is on how it is slowly becoming more crucial in China's attempts to reach Europe and the Middle East, which are areas of increasing commercial and geopolitical interest; China also seeks to balance the US and, to a lesser degree, the EU. Recommendations are provided on what Europe should do to counter a primarily negative Chinese presence in the region and engage where it is beneficial.

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2 The Black Sea as a Transit Region to Europe

Even if BSR has significantly increased in importance for China, it is not one of the focus regions, and Beijing does not view the region as a region by itself but rather as a transit or connection to other regions of greater importance. The BSR has been seen as a part of European, Caucasian and Middle Eastern regions but has always been a part of the Russian sphere of influence. Over time, it could benefit the Chinese strategy of divide and rule to separate this region from Europe and focus on it as a separate region, much in line with the 14 + 1 initiative, but up to date, it is a bridge too far for the Chinese foreign policy. However, it would be rash to write the region off as simply a transit route, and due to the new economic and political climate, the region has and will continue to increase in importance for China in its aspirations to become a hegemonic power and to divide Europe. This is not only a result of the geostrategic competition between China, Russia and the US. Turkey, Iran and the EU have regional interests relevant to balancing China. For Beijing, control of the Black Sea enables control of Europe's eastern flank and inroads into the European economy. Additionally, the leadership in Beijing hopes to mitigate the consequences of Russia's destabilising foreign policy by cultivating relationships in the region. Before the January 2022 invasion, there were signs of China balancing Russia, but now NATO, the US and the effects of the war are factors (Sanders, 2021).

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chinese trade with Europe through Russia has been halted, and China has instead been forced to seek new alternative routes to Europe. Unsurprisingly, the Black Sea region has emerged as one of the few viable options for China to reach Europe and the Middle East, especially considering the congested maritime routes. It was predicted early on that China would significantly increase its investments in the region and its economic and political clout through this. This has, however, yet to be the case. Another expectation would be that China would more actively link up to existing options, but China has also refrained from doing this to some degree. The focus was still on the Northern Corridor (Russia) as late as January 2022 despite some diversification, as the war in Ukraine would be quick, and the Chinese perception was that Europe would not act in defence of Ukraine. The Russian route is now largely closed due to European and international sanctions that inhibit increased merchandise flow. This partly explains China's engagement in Ukraine and the hope for a compromise to end the war, even though this would create an unresolved border conflict at the expense of a democratic state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

On several occasions, Chinese officials have communicated privately that China is on the losing end of the Russian war in Ukraine, but the official version looks different.[1] President Xi Jinping's close relations with President Vladimir Putin and his pro-Russian policy has made Beijing take de facto side with Russia as the regime has calculated that this is the least harmful alternative, although officially maintaining that its position is neutral (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Even if understanding

[1] All conversations and interviews with Chinese officials will be kept confidential due to the potential repercussions to the respondents.

that a strengthened Europe and transatlantic cooperation is not in Beijing's interest most analysts in China follow the official propaganda that the war in Ukraine is the US fault, one way or the other (Bachulska & Leonard, 2023). Still, as the situation has become increasingly unstable and unpredictable, the Chinese leadership has begun to ponder the possibility of Russia losing the war, or that the war will be prolonged. There is a realisation in Beijing that Russia is a destructive power, and some criticism of Russia's actions has surfaced (Sun, 2022). As a result, China has sought a way out of the war while maintaining its close association with Russia and trying to re-establish much-needed trade with Europe and the region by proposing mediation efforts and reducing sanctions on Russia.

3 An Emerging Hesitant Power in the Black Sea Region

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not come as a bolt out of a clear sky. The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, which ended in Russia occupying 20% of Georgian territory (Cornell, 2014; Cornell & Starr, 2009), and the invasion and occupation of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014 (Kononczuk, 2014) made it clear in Beijing that Russia was expansionist and a destabilising force. Despite this, the Chinese leadership was unprepared for two reasons. In private conversations with People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers and Party officials, it has become apparent that Beijing did not believe that Russia would conduct a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And if such an invasion took place, Ukraine would quickly surrender. This is because Beijing views Ukraine and the former Soviet states as essentially Russian, something that became apparent in Chinese Ambassador to France Lu Shaye's claim that all former Soviet states were Russian. This represents a view that has been noted in Beijing for decades (McCarthy, 2023; The Kyiv Independent, 2023). Additionally, there was a perception in Beijing and Moscow that Ukraine and the West would not be able to muster up sufficient support for Ukraine and that the invasion would be over in a few days or even hours (Palmer, 2022). In the eyes of Beijing, that would testify to the weakness of democracies and the lack of strength and ability among NATO members would, in turn, drive Europe closer to China, a policy that has continued with the so-called 'peace proposal' by China that hoped to divide the West on Ukraine (Pancevski & Mackrael, 2023).

China's relations with Russia have been complex in the BSR and beyond. On one side, Xi's personal ties with Putin have been strong. Conversely, Russia's aggressions in the region have stuck China between a rock and a hard place, as the Chinese support of Russia has made Europe, particularly Eastern Europe, distance itself from China. In practice, even if not expressed in words, China has seen the BSR as the backyard of Russia, if not a part of Russia, as subjects in the Soviet era, even if Beijing has not agreed with Russia's occupation and military solutions. This perception clashes with the Chinese interest to keep the region open for transit trade, increase Beijing's international clout and divide the West to counter the US. It is a clear difference between China and Russia, as China is primarily interested in changing the current

system to work for China. In contrast, Russia has been attempting to disrupt and potentially destroy the current system. China is satisfied with limiting the influence of the US and Europe in the region, working toward a split between the transatlantic powers, and increasing trade with Europe without resorting to Russia's destabilising and military actions.

When looking at the intentions for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is beyond doubt that the old Czarist ambitions are at play in Russia and that this has little to do with NATO and its expansion. The expansion of NATO could much easier be explained by the fear of reoccupation that Russia has instilled in its neighbours. This has been realised in China; even if Beijing still officially blames NATO and the US today, there are some critiques in China of both the support of and reliance on Russia, some even expressed in public forums, which indicates a willingness to at least hedge, if not drop the support of Russia (Kynge, 2023; Mitrovich, 2022). Despite this, as shown in Fig. 1, the bilateral trade between China and Russia has grown since the start of the invasion. Sino-Russian trade has increased 41% in the first five months of 2023 compared to last year, reaching $93.8 billion, which equals strong de facto support for the Russian military efforts in Ukraine, even if the primary objective might be to benefit from the cheap resource and prevent a Russian collapse (Ghasseminejad, 2023).

China now stands before the difficult task of managing its close cooperation with Russia, reaching and strengthening its partnership with the EU while simultaneously attempting to divide the EU and the US. Beijing has realised that even if the Russian invasion of Ukraine were halted immediately, relations between Russia and Europe would not improve since Russia has effectively distanced itself from Europe through

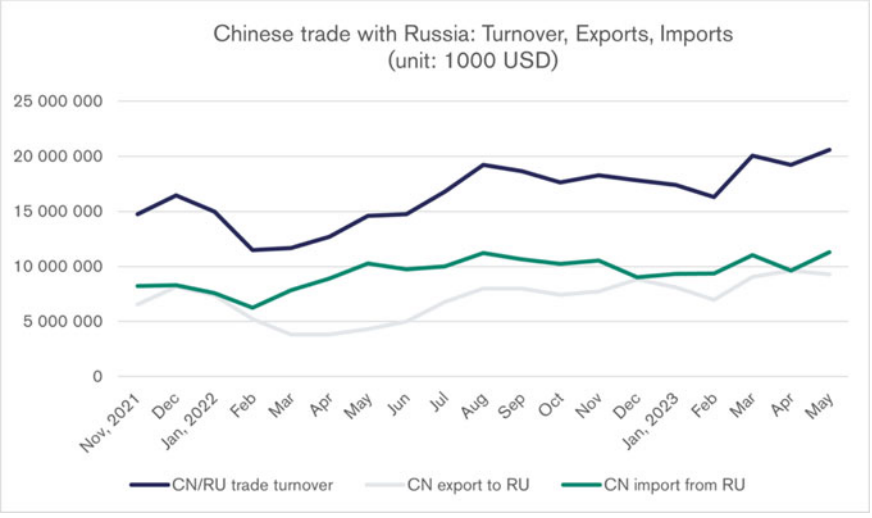

Fig. 1 Chinese trade with Russia (November 2021–May 2023). *Source* By the author with data collected from Truman D, visual capitalist

its invasion of Ukraine. This will force China to seek a new strategy concerning the BSR, especially regarding Ukraine, which enables them to open trade and improve relations without necessarily destroying Beijing's ties with Moscow. Still, Sino-Russian relations could become tenser over time, with Beijing realising that trade with Europe and the possibility of weakening the transatlantic cooperation far outweigh the ties with Russia, notably as the Russian economy is decreasing in importance for China in relative numbers (ChinaPower, 2023). Xi is indeed more ideologically driven than his immediate predecessors, even if some would argue that he is not ideological at all (Torigian, 2022). However, he could more accurately be described as an ideological realist. The current benefits of supporting Russia trump the concerns, but Xi is practical and would not hesitate to reach a compromise that would benefit China in the long run, even at the expense of short-term ideological gains. If European or American relations with China would improve, the support for Russia is not written in stone.

Speaking to Chinese officials, it is evident that there is a growing awareness of the importance of the BSR in Beijing, even if not a priority. China has been reluctant to engage the region based on the relative lack of significance to China in strategic and economic terms but also because that would potentially put it at odds with Russia, Turkey and Iran, which all have much more outspoken national interests in the region and are still essential partners for China as long as the conflict between China and the US remains. To date, China has seen Russia as the dominant power in and around the Black Sea, which was not least noticeable during the first few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine when China was largely silent. That said, with increased instability and the decreased influence Russia has been able to exercise in BSR after the invasion of Ukraine, China is ready to take a more active role in the future, but without making the region a centrepiece of Chinese foreign policy. Beijing is attempting to create a more stable security environment in the region in China's favour. This is not to say that Beijing will not intervene in internal affairs or use coercive power, but it is not in their interests to see further destabilisation and militarisation. China will likely act in an unfavourable direction toward Russia without breaking with Russia in an effort to stabilise the region if there are no Russian gains in the war.

Beijing prefers to engage the BSR multilaterally in the political and military fields, as direct engagement is associated with high political risk. This is different in the economic area, which is seen as opportune and much less sensitive. Beijing's risk aversion has been reinforced by the sensitive situation in the BSR and Beijing's realisation that Putin and Russian interests do not necessarily overlap with China's over a more extended period. Therefore, we are yet to see military exercises in the region between China and Russia, as have been executed in the Mediterranean, Baltic Sea or Asia (Gady, 2017). There has been little security cooperation between Russia and China in BSR, stemming from different perceptions of how to engage the various states and less so with other actors, such as Turkey. This has resulted in China and Russia having no joint military exercises in the BSR at a time when Russia and China have increased their overall military cooperation and become close military partners. The lack of Sino-Russian security cooperation in the BSR is despite Xi's

strong connection with Putin and a preference for the Russian transit routes. China did have a military collaboration within the BSR outside of Russia. Those efforts were directed toward Ukraine, which has been critical for developing China's missile and aerial capacity and in high-technology areas, such as cyber security (Dou & Wu, 2022). This has abruptly stopped with the Russian invasion, and very little indicates a restart. Additionally, there are no major military engagements in the BSR region, but most military cooperation is conducted in other regions, even if engaging BSR states to varying degrees.

It has been a general understanding that China would greatly benefit from diversifying transit routes that circumvent Russia, even if initially, this was much more due to the economic aspects and a healthy scepticism of Russia to implement its grand financial strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (Swanstrom, 2015). China has minimal political will to fundamentally change its policy toward the BSR and instigate further instability. The Great Power competition between the US and China will undoubtedly reach the shores of the Black Sea. Still, there are more pressing issues for China: domestic challenges, Taiwan, North Korea and the geopolitical struggle with the US. Moreover, China seeks a less destabilising policy than Russia, albeit not necessarily less interventionistic for the BSR states. China pursues a balancing role to decrease US influence in the region and to secure a positive view of China and its BRI objectives. As such, China is looking for a role as a facilitator in regional conflicts to be in good standing in the region, as that would allow them to hedge different interests at a minimum political cost with a high potential return. On the surface, China successfully assisted Iran and Saudi Arabia in their dialogues and has shown interest in similarly providing mediation or facilitation support to end the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is not to say they are necessarily interested in a fair and agreeable outcome. Beijing's interest is the stability that it so sorely needs to increase trade without seeking to destabilise relations with other powers and to improve its soft power in the region. Still, there has yet to be local interest in engaging China. It could be noted here that China has increasingly been interested in engaging in other conflicts, preferably multilaterally but also directly, to create good perceptions of China and build Chinese influence in these states (Marks, 2022).

4 The BRI and 14 + 1 as a (Broken) Pathway to Europe

Since the Black Sea region is a transit hub for a more significant economic and political strategy, a few words must be said about the structures that guide China's economic and political strategies. The so-called 14 + 1 (earlier 17 + 1) initiative of summits between China and Central and East European states was supposed to assist the implementation of the BRI. The BRI was created to refocus the supply chains toward China and put the Chinese communist party at the centre of an economic hub that excludes the US and uses the excess production capacity in external projects and exports. This has not been as successful as Beijing was hoping. The BRI has been criticised for lacking transparency, uprooting free trade, creating debt traps

and interfering in the internal affairs of European states. However, perhaps most significantly, it has been criticised for not fulfilling its economic promises. These are apt criticisms, but China has also provided attractive loans to developing states that the West has either forgotten or neglected (Cornell & Swanstrom, 2020). The Chinese BRI and 14 + 1 mechanism exemplify a failure of deliverables; despite promises and advanced propaganda stunts, the deliverables to the region have been modest and, as is the case in so many other areas, have instead created animosity toward China rather than the desired positive effects.

China has pledged $12.7 billion for infrastructure projects and painted the initiative in vivacious colours whilst conveniently forgetting political demands, such as no contact with Taiwan, no criticism of China or its leadership, and its actions in Xinjiang and Tibet, etc. that follow cooperation with China. The initiative expanded to 17 + 1 members in 2019 with the addition of Greece before it eventually collapsed to 14 members in 2020, when the Baltic states chose to leave the structure and, most recently Italy. There are indications that more states might soon leave the initiative. However, only two BSR states have been members of the framework, Romania and Bulgaria, which might reflect the importance of the EU over the BSR for China. Despite this, all states in the BSR region are engaged in the BRI to varying degrees. Romania and Bulgaria expected to receive more than $10 billion in foreign direct investments, much of which never materialised, and some of which was terminated, such as the Cernovada Nuclear Plant in Romania, causing disappointment in the Chinese performance (Ünver, 2021). As a result of the reduced confidence in the framework and the constant trade deficit, its June 2020 meeting was attended by only three representatives from Serbia, Hungary and Greece (Prelec, 2021, p. 28). Beijing has been struggling to find ways to reengage with Europe after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the two most prominent initiatives are not attractive to Europe, given the current limitations (Bachulska & Leonard, 2023).

Transport and infrastructure have arguably been the most prosperous and vital areas of cooperation for Beijing in the BSR. There are three successful port investments in the extended region. One is Odessa, where Port Yuzhny was dredged and expanded by China Harbour Engineering. Another example is Piraeus in Greece, also known as the Dragonhead of the BRI, and even if outside the BSR, it is crucial for connectivity. Critically, the port in Poti, Georgia, where China COSCO Holding Company now owns 51%, also counts among China's successful port investments. In addition, CEFC China Energy purchased 75% of the Poti Free Industrial Zone shares. The assets in Ukraine have been halted and potentially lost due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and currently, Russia is even threatening that civilian transports could be targeted (Savage & Melkozerova, 2023). Due to the war in Ukraine, Georgia is becoming increasingly relevant for the Chinese engagement in BSR and Europe. Georgia has a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU and China, and has emerged regionally as a significant Chinese partner. The FTA between Georgia and China was enacted on 1 January 2018, eliminating tariffs on 96.5% of Chinese imports to Georgia and 91% of Georgian exports to China (Jardine, 2018). As a result, China has replaced Russia as Georgia's third-largest trading partner, investing heavily in trade and economic projects, with the Hualing Group being the largest investor; however, it

failed with large projects. China builds, first of all, infrastructure for European money. In the overall scheme of the BRI project, Georgia is important because of its ports on the Black Sea, its tariff regime, rail connections to Azerbaijan's Caspian coast and its connection between two of the world's largest economies. Chinese investment and diplomatic efforts in Georgia have primarily been focused on tariffs, logistics and direct economic investment, but this should not be overstated. Port infrastructure investments, such as the Anaklia deep-water port project, are dominated by local and American investors, although Chinese investors did join the project in 2018, contributing $50 million (Smolnik, 2018). In 2023, Chinese interest increased in the Anaklia port project. Currently, China is competing with a set of international bidders, such as Spea Engineering, SSA Marine and Van Oord, for control over a port that could be the western hub of a Chinese-dominated Middle Corridor, but there are concerns that Russia could still dominate or stall the project. This corridor connects China with Europe through Central Asian states, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The challenge is that if Georgia allows Chinese control of its deep-water ports and cuddles up with Moscow and Beijing, its membership in the EU and NATO could be jeopardised (Standish, 2023). The Poti project will give China a functioning port facility in the BSR, enabling functioning transit trade, but control over the Anaklia project is preferable. China also signed a new agreement about a new strategic partnership with Georgia, making Beijing a regional player. The deal has been seen as an anti-western and clearly anti-American declaration (Gujabize, 2023).

Although Beijing has interests in Georgia as a potential port hub for China, there are other vital partners in the region. Turkey has become the most relevant destination for Chinese trade. The investments and trade with Turkey have a broader range and depth than any other state in the BSR, apart from Russia, ranging from the telecommunications sector and Turkcell's agreement with China Development Bank on $539 million to the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China's loan of $1.2 billion to increase natural gas capacity at Silivri and Tuz Gölü (Ünver, 2021). It could be argued that despite the economic benefits of the relationship, politics are arguably as important or even more so for China. In 2016, two weeks after the failed coup, which the Turkish state suspected that Americans had been informed of or were possibly even complicit in, the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Ming visited Turkey to express Beijing's support. Additionally, after the Trump administration's tariffs on Turkey in 2018, China pledged a $3.6 billion investment in infrastructure connected to the BRI to assist Turkey when the Turkish currency had dropped 40% (Cornell & Swanstrom, 2020). Despite having had a positive impact, it was evident in Turkey that these efforts were politically rather than economically motivated and viewed with some scepticism. The bilateral trade in June 2023 outlines the main challenge in the trade relations as China exported products for $3.57 billion and imported only $321 million from Turkey, resulting in a negative trade balance of $3.25 billion for Turkey (OEC, 2023), which is not sustainable for Turkey.

Turkey is perceived as an anchor in the region for China, but Ankara and President Recep Erdoğan have tried to balance China and Russia against the EU and NATO for some time. Erdoğan half-jokingly proposed in 2012 that Turkey should

apply for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and drop its application to the EU (Hürriyet Daily News, 2012). This said, the Uyghur question has put a severe strain on Sino-Turkish relations. Even if Erdoğan has been less vocal in expressing support for the Uyghurs recently, Turkey seems to be warming up to Europe and NATO, and relations with China are becoming more strained. This strained relationship can partly be explained by Turkey expecting more investments in infrastructural projects, which have yet to come through. An often-cited success for the BRI is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway. In October 2017, the BTK became operational, connecting the Caspian Sea port with the Turkish railway network. The new Marmaray tunnel under the Bosporus, completed in 2013, connects Turkey's Anatolian rail network with Europe. As a result, there is now an uninterrupted rail connection between China and Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia, with one line through Turkey into Europe and another connecting to the Georgian seaports of Batumi, Poti and Anaklia. However, the investments were not Chinese in any significant way. Most of the funds were invested by states in the region. Azerbaijan financed the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway's sections in Azerbaijan and Georgia, while Turkey funded the section on its territory. Additionally, BTK still has very limited usage. China instead played a role in Kazakhstan's Kuryk port, while the ports on the Caspian Sea were mainly funded by their respective governments (Cornell & Swanstrom, 2020).

Ukraine is China´s lost opportunity, as not only were port facilities there an opportunity for China, but so were investments in high technology and arms. Huawei increased Ukraine's mobile broadband penetration from 8 to 65% between 2016 and 2019 and was selected by the Ukrainian government to instal a 4G network within Kyiv's subway systems (Runde, 2023; Shagina, 2020). Similarly, China invested heavily in food production, especially grain and land investments, which was halted in 2021. Sino-Ukrainian cooperation in the military field was substantial, and before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China was the single largest purchaser of Ukrainian arms and had extensive interests in its maritime and aviation industries that controlled technology that was sought after in China (Sautin, 2018, p. 10). China bought the Ukrainian aircraft carrier Varyag in 1998, which in 2012 transformed into China's first aircraft carrier, Liaoning. All these relations have come to a halt, and Ukraine is today supported by Western powers, with China having left Ukraine. Due to China's de facto support of Russia's military, it is unlikely that China will be able to regain its position in Ukraine to the full unless Russia wins the war, and then China would likely be the main partner in rebuilding Russia-occupied Ukraine. This is not least the case as the US and Europe would be critical of such a development as well, and even if China plays a role in the reconstruction of an independent Ukraine, it will be one partner among many.

5 Complicated Relations and Limit Engagement in the Black Sea Region

China has been very good at marketing its Belt and Road Initiative and utilising the weaknesses with the value-laden European and American policies. However, Beijing still needs to fulfil its vision in the Black Sea Region. Most states currently have a trade deficit with China, as seen in Table 1, and the promised investments were often never realised and attached to political pressure. States like Russia, which is an oil-producing country, or Ukraine, with its grain, have been the exception. For other states, the responses were harsh when they realised that promises would not be fulfilled, but many states, especially Georgia and, to a certain extent, Turkey, still maintain a strong connection with China (Truman, 2023). The reason for this is often as political as financial, as the EU and the U.S. are the major investors and trading partners (Clark, 2023). China, however, is seen as a balance against Russia, but also NATO and the EU. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China was seen as a balance against Russian aggression because many states felt that the US and the EU were less interested in balancing Russia. This has changed, and today, China is caught in a relationship with Russia that could be detrimental to its interests in the region and beyond; due to this, Beijing is trying to modify the perception of its relations with Russia.

It has become more apparent that China has realised the need to counter Europe's ambition to home-shore some of its supply chains, or at least near-shore it. Increased investments from China in European or near-European states have been notable. This is to avoid being cut out of the trend of home-shoring or near-shoring investments and production. The BSR would be an obvious starting point, but China has been late in reacting to this, except in the case of Turkey and Ukraine before the Russian invasion, but those two states had their own merits as well. Chinese companies and the Communist Party, acting through them, have better options than the BSR in a period of more restrictive Chinese investments. It has been argued that China would use the region as an entrance to the EU, but it is difficult to see China using the BSR as a Trojan Horse to access the EU due to its relative economic weakness (Martin, 2021). It is more so reminiscent of a white elephant due to its many failed investment

Table 1 China's total trade in the black sea region (2022)

Country	Imports (2022 USD)	Exports (2022 USD)	Balance (2022 USD)
Bulgaria	$1.3B	$2.8B	$1.6B
Georgia	$0.1B	$1.2B	$1.1B
Romania	$3.1B	$7.4B	$4.3B
Russia	$114.4B	$75.6B	$-38.7B
Turkey	$4.5B	$33.9B	$29.4B
Ukraine	$4.3B	$3.3B	$-1.1B

Source By the author with data collected from Truman D, visual capitalist

schemes. Chinese Foreign Direct Investments have focused on Europe, primarily the advanced economies rather than the former Eastern European states. This is with the aim to trade with and acquire technology from Europe and, if possible, create a wedge between the EU and the US, and the BSR does not fulfil the requirements to replace the EU in importance. The apparent exception could be Turkey and, to some degree, Georgia, which has significant investments from China, and Ankara will continue to increase in importance, not least, as it could be a doorway into the EU with a potential Turkish membership in the EU.

China's hedging between Russia and the West has been a strategy for the region, but with increased Russian aggression, it is increasingly a liability. Beijing is concerned that Russia's aggressions could also create further instability in the region, detrimental to Chinese interests. China is one of the biggest losers in the War in Ukraine, according to many you speak to in Beijing, and the West's strong response against Russia and the closure of trade routes through Russia, as well as the loss of Ukraine, has been damaging both Chinese trade and security.

6 A Potential Force for Stability

It would be natural to see China develop into a more prominent actor in the BSR. This is not only due to its political and economic interest in the region, but China's share of the global economy makes it a power to be reckoned with. Considering the proximity of Turkey, the EU, NATO and Russia, the prospects of China as a dominant power in the region do not seem realistic. They have all greater geopolitical interests in the region, and despite China's interest in the BSR, it is not one of China's main priorities and will not be for some time to come. China's limited engagement in the region cannot be seen as a failure; it is more a result of its relative lack of interest and focus on other issues and regions. China would like to see itself as a balance to Russian influence (Sanders, 2021) and a balance against the West, i.e. NATO, the US and the EU. In the short to medium term, China will be preoccupied with Taiwan, domestic economic development and regional issues closer to home. Speaking to officials in Beijing, there is also still a perception in Beijing that the BSR is the backyard of Russia. With the faltering power of Russia or even potential instability, China is likely to move into the Russian sphere of interest, with or without Russia agreeing with it, which will result in a more active Chinese policy in the region. A weaker Russia would create more opportunities for China in the BSR, and a more assertive Russia would counter Chinese influence.

The main interest for China will be to ensure stability in the region and safeguard that it can be used as a transport hub to and from the Middle East and Europe. Increased investments in infrastructure and port development will be in the cards, and the main question is if Beijing will be willing and able to connect its BRI to

the Middle Corridor and the European initiatives in transport, such as TRACECA.[2] China does not have the bottomless bag of money that many assumed it would throw into the BRI and 14 + 1 initiative, and it will be necessary for Beijing to focus its investments. It could be argued that despite China's main interest in the region as a transport hub, they will also try to maintain a political and potentially a military presence in the region to balance NATO and the EU. EU should be careful in strengthening the Chinese transport networks without assurances that transparency and non-intervention in internal affairs will be respected, something that has been lacking for many years. It would most likely be wiser to develop alternative transport networks to ensure that the EU's supply chains are diversifying from China and that the Black Sea states are closer integrated into a democratic network in contrast to a Sino-Russian framework.

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China used the relative lack of commitment from the EU and the US and moved into what could be described as an economic and political vacuum. It is not the efforts of China that have made it an important actor in the region, but rather the lack of committed policy from the EU and the US. Both must engage the BSR with a more effective and committed policy to prevent further Russian aggression and decrease Chinese soft power and military influence. There is a need to integrate the BSR economies into the European market, ensure strengthened military cooperation and protection (with NATO) and reduce dependency on China and Russia when it comes to all hubs of the supply line. Low-hanging fruit could be increased joint military exercises with the BSR members, investment in infrastructure and ensuring diversification in the supply lines. In retrospect, it is evident that the failure to stand up for Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 resulted in a much more aggressive Russian policy, which should not be allowed to repeat itself. Future regional aggression should be preempted by increased economic and military cooperation with the EU and NATO, with deeper integration into the EU and NATO. The EU must realise that states cannot secure their future on promises alone; concrete policies structured by common security interests must be firmly established. Trade and prosperity are what China has proclaimed that it would ensure, and to counter that tainted message, the EU and the US would need to offer concrete and attractive solutions that also come with a stick. It is insufficient with only positive reinforcement; European and American investments need to materialise. The hedging and playing China against the US and the EU, which the current regime in Georgia is conducting, should be responded to with the withdrawal of investments and trade. China is still a minor player in the region, comparatively seen, and the negative trade balance that the BSR has with China should be transformed into more lucrative trade agreements directed to the western and northern parts of the region, toward the EU, the US and its allies.

[2] TRACECA constitutes an international transport programme founded in 1993 in Brussels, aiming to strengthen economic relations, transport and trade between the EU, BSR, South Caucasus and Central Asia. It engages the EU members, Central Asian States, former Eastern European states and the Caucasus. Notably, it excludes Russia and China.

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Russia and the Black Sea Region: Governance, Geopolitics, Securitisation

Andrey Makarychev

1 Introduction

Moscow's full-scale military intervention in Ukraine has spurred significant changes in its attitude toward the regional spaces close to its borders. Moscow was suspended from the Council of the Baltic Sea States and withdrew from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. At the same time, Russia continues to be a full-fledged member of the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), despite all the insecurities that this part of Europe has to face due to the Russian invasion in Ukraine, including migration flows, environmental hazards and disruptions in energy and food supplies.

Against this backdrop, two questions are central to this analysis: how have Russian approaches to the Black Sea region (BSR) evolved since the 1990s, and what are the key components of Russia's BSR policies since 2022? To tackle these questions, I distinguish between three logics constitutive for Russian policies in the region. One is the logic of **governance** that prevailed in the 1990s and was a core component in Russia's search for much-needed international socialisation. Vladimir Putin's presidency was marked by a gradual tilt toward an alternative logic of **practical geopolitics** that approached the BSR as one of the spaces where Russia asserts itself as a regional hegemon and as a great power. The predominance of geopolitics over governance paved the way for the growth of the **security** logic with the ensuing securitisation of other states' policies in the BSR as an alleged challenge and threat to Russian interests, followed by Russia's force projection in the region. I add to this triad some references to popular geopolitics that change the level of analysis and give the floor to narratives of those Russians whose lives were differently affected by Russia's war in Ukraine.

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This chapter applies approaches pertinent to critical geopolitics (Dodds & Sidaway, 1994) for analysing Russia's posture in the BSR before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. As an academic subdiscipline, critical geopolitics is attentive to practices of governance and security narratives unfolding at different levels of political hierarchy and sensitive to diverse territorial contexts in which these narratives are deployed. In line with the critical geopolitical literature, in this analysis, I single out practical and popular geopolitics (Dittmer & Gray, 2010): the former looks at how policy practitioners at different levels deal with regional security matters, while the latter discusses geopolitics through the prism of non-professional, vernacular and grass-roots narratives and imaginaries.

2 Black Sea Region in Russian Foreign Policy: From Governance to Practical Geopolitics

From its inception, Black Sea regionalism offered several institutional opportunities for Russian foreign and security policy. Two of them fell into the governance category and connote a predominantly managerial, technocratic and legalistic approach to solving regional problems through financial and material incentives, adherence to administrative norms and project-based initiatives. Russia's participation in the BSEC and its Parliamentary Assembly, along with other regional organisations that appeared after the end of the Cold War, was an important element of international legitimating of post-Soviet Russia and its inclusion into the institutional system dominated by the West. Another possibility was the Black Sea Synergy initiative that initially was taken by Russia as a chance for a regional partnership with the EU (Gavrilova, 2020a) and for finding common cooperative denominators with Russia's European partners interested in developing joint projects in the BSR (Aivazyan, 2019). One more potential channel for cooperation was opened by the BlackSeaFor project initiated by Turkey and meant to provide a practical basis for maritime and transportation security in the Black Sea and raise the level of mutual trust among the defence ministries of littoral states (Republic of Turkey, 2022).

At the same time, for Moscow, the BSR was never a full-fledged regional unit. It was increasingly discussed as part of larger geopolitical spaces such as the Black Sea-South Caucasus-Caspian Sea connection, the Black Sea-Mediterranean maritime nexus (Makarychev, 2008) or the Black Sea-Azov Sea water area. Indicatively, the Russian Maritime Doctrine includes the Black and the Azov Seas in the Atlantic cluster of Russian regional priorities, along with the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean (Morskaya doktrina, 2022). These geopolitical constructs are important elements of attempts to upgrade Russia's international status from a regional to a global power with broad transnational interests in what Russian deems its sphere of influence. Russia's expansion from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and further on to the Atlantic is seen as a historical vector of Russian foreign policy aimed at strategic presence in globally important maritime regions. The ensuing tensions with the West

are viewed as a direct projection of past conflicts of the nineteenth century, including Russia's fight for access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Therefore, the BSR is referred to as quintessential for Russian geopolitical subjectivity.

The growing politicisation of Russian regional policies and the doctrinal nexus between the BSR and the Atlantic Ocean did not bring Russia closer to the Western international society. On the contrary, the geopolitical turn in Russian foreign policy shifted the focus of discussion from the idea of a wider Europe with its normative underpinnings to attempts to include the BSR into a Eurasian geopolitical framework (Rak, 2021). Russia's efforts to establish BSEC's connections with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Foundation (Press release, 2016a) also had a lucid geopolitical dimension. Starting in 2008, Russian analysts changed the previously constructive tone toward the Black Sea regionalism, making it more problematic (Degoev, 2008) and depicting the BSR as a domain of competition rather than cooperation (Kolobov & Krasnov, 2009).

This U-turn might be viewed as a part of a broader shift in Russian foreign and security policy from cooperative to non-cooperative hegemony (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018). The former was manifested in Russia's earlier attempts to build its security posture, considering the interests of other regional actors. Examples included Russia's military withdrawal from Adjara in Georgia and Gabala in Azerbaijan, and a rather cautious policy of avoiding direct involvement in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia despite the stationing of the military base in Gyumri and "peace forces" in Nagorno-Karabakh. As for non-cooperative hegemony, it was clearly exemplified by the escalation of Russian transgressions from the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the annexation of Crimea, a proxy war in Donbas and ultimately to the full-scale military intervention in Ukraine.

Noteworthy, already in February 2008, Russia was the only member of BSEC that refused to sign a final statement at an annual meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, insisting on a greater role for this organisation vis-à-vis the EU (Uznarodov & Uznarodov, 2018). After the August 2008 war with Georgia, Russian leadership was unhappy with political assessments given by the EU regarding the de facto occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the aftermath of the EU's launch of the Eastern Partnership programme, some Russian authors claimed that the Black Sea Synergy created a privileged group of EU partners in the so-called Russia's "near abroad" (Gavrilova, 2020b). By and large, Russia was against the EU's independent (i.e. not coordinated with Moscow) Black Sea policy. It wished BSEC to become a partner equal to the EU instead of its role as an object of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Yaz'kova, 2009). In the words of a deputy foreign minister of Russia:

> It is unacceptable for the BSEC to turn into a 'technical agency' of the European Commission or rubberstamp Brussels' standards. It would be in the common interests to rigorously adhere to the principle of non-discrimination of BSEC's contacts with third parties and, above all, to sign a memorandum on mutual understanding with the Eurasian Economic Commission (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

3 From Geopolitical Disconnections to Force Projection

Russia's geopolitical disagreements with the EU and NATO spilt into the sphere of security, leading to an escalation of hostilities on regional and international levels. Securitisation is an alternative to the governance-centric logic and rationality of foreign policy; it implies the primary emphasis on perils and menaces emanating from other regional actors that might threaten Russian positions in the region. As a securitising actor, Russian diplomacy pointed to both extra-regional (US) and intra-regional (Turkey, Georgia and Ukraine) sources of such potential threats.

In the current Russian geopolitical imagery, the BSR is securitised by portraying it as a part of the new *cordon sanitaire* constructed against Russia (Ryabtsev, 2012). Within this logic, it is the EU and NATO's policy of hegemony in the BSR that has ultimately provoked "a crisis in Ukraine" and the Russian military reaction to it. This securitising narrative portrayed the EU and NATO as expansionist blocs. In particular, the Eastern Partnership programme was proclaimed detrimental for the whole BSR and ultimately instigated the "special military operation" in Ukraine, a country that, according to this cliché, became increasingly dependent on external influence.

Therefore, many Russian experts prefer to discuss the war not as a result of Russian policy but as a clarifying event revealing anti-Russian intentions not only of Europe but also of the US, whose role in the BSR is seen as growing. Since 2008, Russia extended its claims to the entire Euro-Atlantic West, protesting interference in regional affairs by "non-regional powers". First of all, by Washington (Burov, 2008), which stood behind the creation of the GUAM group and was seen in Moscow as Russia-unfriendly. By securitising the role of the EU and NATO in the BSR, Russia paved the way for justifying its unilateral policies in the region (Glazova, 2020), as well as attempts to create a bipolar Russian–Turkish regional security order, which has ultimately paralysed BlackSeaFor starting from 2014 (Kucera, 2014).

Against this background, Russia was moving step-by-step to the war against Ukraine as a key component of its overall strategy of cardinally reshuffling the liberal international society, including the post-Cold-War regionalism as its integral part. A major part of the Russian confrontational logic is the detachment of the BSR from the Western-centric security order not only through invading Ukraine but also through attacking the credibility of the EU (in particular, its Black Sea Synergy initiative) and NATO as regional actors. The dramatic sharpening of Russia's relations with the Euro-Atlantic West starting from December 2021 had a clear Black Sea dimension: the Kremlin demanded that NATO roll back its positions to 1997 concerned Bulgaria and Romania.

The direct confrontation with Ukraine that started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the proxy war in Donbas has drastically elevated the level of conflictuality not only in bilateral relations between Moscow and Kyiv but also in the entire region. Russian authorities were trying to use the BSR platform—in particular, the BSEC—to promote its highly securitised discourse that, in Russia's view, justifies the armed conflict with Ukraine. In December 2022, at the meeting of Foreign Ministers

of BSEC, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointed to "illegal actions of the West that were reactions to the collapse of its plans of using the illegitimate Kyiv regime to attack legitimate security interests of Russia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Russia projects onto the regional level the principle of indivisible security (Atlamazoglou, 2023) as a justification for its alleged mistreatment and disregard by Western countries. Within this narrative, Russia portrayed the Ukrainian government as uncooperative due to its refusal to invite the Russian delegation to a BSEC Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Kyiv in the fall of 2021 (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Some Russian commentators proposed transforming the BSR into an area of joint Russian-Turkish security co-management and forbidding other countries (Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria) to have their military fleets in the region at least until the current war ends (Nikolaev, 2022).

Russia's preference for acting from the position of strength was grounded in the expectation of the preponderance of Russian military force projected on Ukraine, including its southern territories. The logic of Russian security planning could be partly explained by a school of thought in foreign policy analysis known as analogical reasoning: for the Kremlin, the military intervention in Ukraine was seen as a continuation of a series of previous—and largely successful, in Putin's view—military campaigns in Chechnya, Georgia and Syria. The annexation of Crimea, the occupation of Mariupol and Kherson (liberated by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2022), and the regular shelling of Odesa and its surroundings are major examples of Russian force projection in the BSR.

However, highly securitised attitudes to the BSR bring multiple risks and insecurities for Russia itself. Debates on this issue in the Russian media made clear that the annexation of Crimea, Donbas and other Ukrainian territories increased Russia's vulnerabilities and did not contribute to greater security in the BSR. Most authors of Russian analytical publications admit that the military intervention of 2022 triggered a bunch of escalating insecurities—in particular, in energy, ecological and nuclear spheres—that make the overall situation in the BSR extremely hard and pernicious (Yakovleva, 2023). As some experts assume, in the case of Ukraine's military success on the battlefields, Russia's losses will be enormous: Russia faces the challenge of becoming a de facto landlocked country and might likely need to reorient its policies toward the Caspian Sea and the Far East (Sysoev, 2023).

Besides, Russia's aggressive stance toward Ukraine provoked several performative and symbolic conflicts that put Russia in a politically awkward position. Thus, speaking at the session of the BSEC Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest in 2015, Sergei Naryshkin, by that time the head of the State Duma, found himself surrounded by a group of participants with anti-Russian posters ("2008 Georgia, 2014 Ukraine, Who Is Next? Stop Putin!") during the speech (INFORM-24, 2015). In 2023, a Russian delegate tried to remove the Ukrainian flag from the assembly hall where a parliamentary session of BSEC was taking place, thus provoking a hassle between the Russian and Ukrainian participants (Ty sho, 2023). Ultimately, the head of the Russian permanent delegation to the BSEC Parliamentary Assembly, Olga Timofeeva, could not hide her disappointment with this organisation's critical stand toward Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and claimed that Russia was considering

discontinuation of its financial contribution to the Assembly (TASS, 2022), which attests to Russia's ultimate failure to win support for its position among members of this regional organisation.

Moreover, the reaction to Russia's uncooperative and securitised hegemony might be the opposite of Russian long-term plans: a new configuration of trans-regional security is cropping up in direct proximity to Russia. The logic of the Three Seas Initiative, Intermarium, the Bucharest 9 platform and the Danube project is based on creating spaces of security and governance without Russia and beyond Russia's geopolitical reach. Under these circumstances, the old idea of Baltic-Black Sea regionalism (Bogdanova & Makarychev, 2020) is likely to transform from a project of West–East connectivity and positive engagement mediated by the EU to a networked region of frontline states wary of threats and dangers emanating from Russia and Belarus, and ready to take preventive actions against them.

4 Back to "Business as Usual"?

Russia's securitisation, however, has its limitations. At a certain point, Russia tried to reverse its securitising moves and come back to the regional governance agenda of "business-as-usual", denying the malign effects of the war and rejecting the competence of regional organisations to discuss the annexation of Crimea (Nota MID, 2016) and the further forceful actions conducive to border changes in the BSR. Thus, Lavrov, in his article devoted to the 30th anniversary of BSEC in June 2022, did not even mention the war in Ukraine but referred to "good prospects" of policy coordination between BSEC and Eurasian Economic Union (Statya ministra, 2022b). In the same vein, the State Duma stated that the main task of the Russian presidency in the Parliamentary Assembly of BSEC is to avoid the "politicisation of this organisation" (Predsedatel'stvo, 2021).

Thus, a shift from governance to geopolitics and securitisation of the BSR did not prevent Moscow from detaching military issues from economic and other spheres. Putin's explanation of Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal is illustrative in this regard. In his words, the growth of food prices in world agricultural markets is unrelated to Russia's war in Ukraine. It can be explained by Western post-pandemic policies of purchasing increased amounts of food for domestic consumption (Russian News, 2023). With all the absurdity of this explanation, it indicates the Kremlin's attempts to find ways to decouple the military aspects of the situations in the BSR from other domains. In a broader sense, Moscow tries to "normalise" (de-politicise and de-securitise) the regional agenda and exclude war-related issues from the discussion. In this endeavour, Russia to a significant extent might rely on a symmetric policy of BSEC aimed at mostly focussing on technical issues and avoiding politically divisive issues.

Russia, therefore, tries to mimic Western post-political narratives as a strategy of sidelining or ignoring conflicts. Within this discursive frame, Russia invites regional power to disregard the reality of war and resorts to what might be dubbed rhetorical

governmentality, referring to barrier-free economic space, integration of integration and non-state funding for infrastructural projects of regional and trans-regional significance. For example, in the sphere of energy security, Russia endeavours to promote itself as a responsible supplier of gas through Black Sea pipelines and a reliable partner for Turkey (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

This approach is visible at the subnational level as well. Many speakers and experts from local governments and analytical centres in Russian regions adjacent to BSR widely use the non-political language of sustainable development, multilateralism, regionalism, development drivers, educational technologies, IT sector and networking. The nodal points of this de-securitised discourse are the blue economy and sustainability of water resources, biotechnologies, renewables and tourism (Chernomorskiy region, 2022a). Many speakers from Russian domestic regions appeal to international stakeholders to invest in environmental issues (water purification), medical infrastructure and educational, cultural and societal issues (Na vstreche, 2017). Many of them prefer de-politicised discourse boiling down to routine practices of normalisation—for example, the functioning of Russian banks and oil traders under the sanctions regime. They regret such negative effects of the war as brain drain and exit of foreign companies from Russian markets (Chernomorskiy region, 2022b). However, they tend to disregard and silence the root causes of Russia's conflict with the West and the reasons for the EU's withdrawal from all previous joint projects.

What Russia wishes to hide behind the seemingly de-politicised discourse is political bargaining with the West. Thus, at the BSEC Council of Foreign Ministers in June 2023, Lavrov directly required to lift sanctions on Russian agricultural products and fertilisers as the precondition for Russia's participation in the grain deal: "The world needs Russian fertilisers and wheat not less than Ukrainian grain that is produced by American corporations and purchased by European for dumping prices" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Yet, this attempt to blend security and governance in one political demand did not resonate within or outside the region.

5 Popular Geopolitics of Migration and Relocation

Russia's confrontation with Ukraine triggered new migratory flows. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, about half a million Russians moved into the occupied peninsula (Mokrushin & Khalilov, 2022). Yet, after the Ukrainian army started preparing for de-occupation, some moved out. At the same time, the full-fledged invasion in February 2022 provoked a mass outflow of Russians to neighbouring countries, including Turkey and Georgia. These migrations produced new discourses and imaginaries belonging to the sphere of popular geopolitics. Their main protagonists are ordinary people who share their impressions, perceptions and emotions through multiple video blogs, travelogues and YouTube channels. Some of them support Russia's geopolitical ambitions and security posture, while others openly challenge Russia's policies.

Russian settlers in Crimea usually reproduce Putin's discourse and extend it to the practices of everyday life. Many of them perceive what they call "reunification" as a civilising mission: they opine that Russia brings a better quality of roads (Vsio o, 2023) and construction work in resort areas (Gurzuf, 2023). Some of the new Russian settlers in Crimea are nostalgic about the Soviet times and hope that in the future, "Ukraine will join us as a friendly state" (Plokho v, 2023).

Evidently, narratives of Russians who left their country after February 2022 are dissimilar from the settlers in Crimea. Most of their visualised stories of new Russian migrants in Turkey are predominantly de-politicised and touch upon practical issues such as inflation, salaries, family budgets, prices, labour market and employment, business opportunities and material conditions for living (Pochemu mnogie, 2023). Starting in 2023, an increased number of Russian narratives from and about Turkey became more critical about the long-term prospects of settling in this country due to the worsened financial conditions and a more restrictive policy of issuing residence permits (Iz Turtsii, 2023).

New Russian migrants in Georgia numbered about 112,000 in October 2022, according to the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs Russians. Some may be politically motivated. Georgia has hosted numerous political and civil society activists from Russia who have produced anti-war and anti-Putin narratives. Many see Georgia as a more hospitable, tolerant and free country than Russia (Gruzia, 2023). Many Russians who escaped from Putin's regime in Georgia are actively engaged in anti-war activities, both online and offline.

These discourses of the Russian diaspora in some of the Black Sea countries are important to take into account for several reasons. On the one hand, they show a high level of support for the annexations and war-by-proxies in Ukraine within Russian society in general and those Russians who relocated to Crimea in particular. On the other hand, the mass outmigration to such countries as Georgia demonstrates that a significant part of the anti-Putin opposition had to leave the country and settle abroad, thus creating new Russophone communities that produce narratives alternative to the imperial Russian world or Eurasianism.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

From a conceptual perspective, Russia's war on Ukraine has re-actualised the relevance of the previously discussed ideas of "bad weather regionalism" (Makarychev, 2020) and "incomplete regionalism" (Makarychev, 2015). These concepts coined before the war nowadays seem to rise in relevance since Russia's aggression is a strong blow not only to the BSR but also to the very philosophy of the regional security community that seems to be incompatible with Russia's policy of spheres of influence and bilateral deals rather than multilateral policy frameworks. The war against Ukraine made clear that such regional organisations as BSEC are ill-equipped and unready to face hard security challenges and develop policies to counter Russia's encroachments on basic principles of international law. Moreover,

the largely de-politicised agenda of BSEC, with its focussing on technical matters of secondary importance and detaching transportation and environmental issues from the contexts of the war, largely plays into Russia's hands and seems to be consonant with Moscow's "business-as-usual" strategy of normalising the military intervention. De-politicisation, therefore, is not only an academic concept but can function as a policy tool with a broad range of meanings—from rationalisation to implicit support of war.

Against this backdrop, regional security complexes (Buzan and Waever, 2003) remain a desired security ideal rather than an established policy model. Regions located at the crossroads of different civilisational and institutional spaces—such as the BSR—largely failed to become platforms generative of new security practices. On the contrary, instead of becoming "security pioneers", these regions transformed into spaces that tended to reproduce and amplify the logic of confrontation and conflictuality. The case of the BSR makes clear that normative inclusiveness does not necessarily prevail over fragmentation and disintegration along national lines (Diez & Makarychev, 2023). The expectations of regions to be solidified by such common technical, financial or economic projects as the Black Sea transportation ring, in many respects, became dysfunctional. Therefore, we should take into serious account such research-based findings as a limited replicability/spillover of regional security practices from one region to another and regions' lack of both political will and resources to engage with security issues.

From a more practical perspective, this study has shown that Russian discourses on the BSR are inherently controversial, inconsistent, and dislocated, vacillating between governance with its emphasis on managerial and administrative technicalities, geopolitics of "big spaces", and military force-based security. As a general trend, Russia moved away from the governance paradigm that implied Russia's readiness to play by the established and mutually beneficial normative rules toward Russia's self-assertion of its exceptional role and status in the BSR, ultimately conducive to the justification of the intervention against Ukraine. The agenda of normalisation and de-securitisation of relations between neighbours based on the adaptation of all actors to the global imperatives of de-politicised problem management was substituted by confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic security community and its Black Sea members.

Based on this overall trajectory, one may presume that BSR might be regarded as a major testing ground for practical relevance and appropriateness of such key concepts defining Russian foreign policy as spheres of influence and great power management. They are considered in the Kremlin as ultimately conducive to the normalisation of Russia's force projection and the ensuing border changes, to preventing the EU from using its normative power at the regional level, as well as to blocking extra-regional powers from having a geopolitical or security impact on the BSR. Within this framework, Russia invests its diplomatic resources in bilateral relations with individual countries, challenging their right to represent the institutional consensus existing within the EU or NATO.

Yet Russia's relations with Turkey lucidly demonstrate the fragility of coordination and co-management of security issues between major regional powers. Russian

experts have always acknowledged Turkey's strong resources and position in the BSR, including commercial and military dimensions (Kuryliov, 2013). Turkey is referred to in Russian discourse as the promoter of the civilisational project of the "Turkic world" at the expense of the "Russian world" (Nauka i politika, 2023). In the military domain, some Russian scholars were concerned about Turkey's policy of letting military vessels belonging to NATO member states go through the Bosporus straits (Ivkina et al., 2020), and these concerns were only exacerbated after 2022. Russia's decision to withdraw from the Turkey-mediated grain deal in July 2023 shows the limits of the great power management model at the regional level.

Therefore, regardless of the situation on the battlefield, it seems highly unlikely that Russia might use its experience of engaging with the BSR to validate core principles and ideas shaping Russian diplomacy on a broader scale, first of all, a new "concert" of great powers with their spheres of privileged interests immune to interventions from the so-called "extra-regional powers". Russia's policy of non-interference in Azerbaijan's military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh makes the whole concept of "spheres of interests" —including its Eurasian dimension—blurred and uncertain. At the same time, Russia's attempts to open the BSR to Chinese economic projects devaluate the rhetoric of preventing "non-regional powers" from meddling in regional affairs. Equally questionable is Russia's understanding of the principle of indivisibility of security, particularly after the occupation of Georgian and Ukrainian territories. At the same time, Russia might gain some tactical advantages—for example, from the illiberal and Western-sceptic attitudes in the Georgian government or from the reluctance of BSEC to openly raise political and security issues pertaining to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, by and large, the security dynamics in the BSR will constitute a major challenge to the key pillars and premises of Russian foreign policy and, in the long run, might debunk some of them.

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The UK and the Black Sea Region: Moving from the Periphery to Centre-Stage

Tracey German

1 Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) has long-running strategic interests in the Black Sea region connected to its wider international interests. Until 2022, the region constituted a key periphery of the Euro-Atlantic theatre: an important area, but, nevertheless, not one that was central to either UK interests or its views on international security and stability. This has changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has clarified the criticality of the region for both UK and global stability in a number of ways: food and energy security, migration, war and challenges to the rules-based international order and great power competition. The UK approach to the region is focused on (comprehensive) security in its broadest sense (the topic of this volume), encompassing a wide range of risks and threats from military attack to great power competition, human rights, climate change and economic fragility. It is also based on the understanding that an open and resilient international order underpinned by democratic societies and effective global institutions is the best way to address this array of threats. Since the end of World War II, multilateralism, internationalism and Atlanticism have been enduring themes in UK foreign policy, and are clearly in evidence in its approach toward the Black Sea region.

This chapter examines the UK's foreign policy approach toward and role in the Black Sea region. It starts with a brief overview of the enduring drivers of UK foreign policy before setting out the country's interests in the region and what shapes these interests. It then assesses the extent of UK engagement at the bilateral and multilateral levels, examining the development of specific ties with individual countries. The chapter argues that important changes have occurred in the UK's approach to the region. Firstly, prior to 2022, the Black Sea region constituted an important, yet peripheral, region for the UK; Russia's war in Ukraine emphasised the region's

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criticality for both UK and global security, and the Black Sea is now a key area of UK policy interest. Secondly, the invasion has also accentuated the need for a clear strategic vision for UK policy toward the region, which remains too reactive, responding to events in the short term rather than pursuing a well-thought-through, long-term strategy.

2 Mapping UK Foreign and Security Policy

As an island nation, for centuries, British foreign policy has consistently sought to ensure free trade and freedom of navigation in order to protect access to the global trade that is so critical for the country's success. This need-to-trade has shaped an internationalist outlook that is also shaped by liberal democratic values and a desire for the UK to act as a "force for good in the world", defending "openness, democracy and human rights" (HM Government, 2021). This means that British foreign policy is often a balancing act between the pragmatic pursuit of British interests and an idealistic adherence to core values. The 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy set out the UK government's understanding of the international strategic environment and the UK's place in it in the wake of its departure from the EU, alongside its strategic priorities for the coming decade. The Review stated that "essential values", including a commitment to universal human rights, the rule of law, free speech and fairness and equality, would continue to guide all aspects of the UK's national security and international policy, particularly in the face of growing authoritarianism, noting the risks and threats emanating from both Russia and China (HM Government, 2021).

The 2021 Integrated Review also emphasised the UK's intention to continue playing a "leading international role" and its unequivocal commitment to European security through NATO, the Joint Expeditionary Force and bilateral relations. One notable change from the previous Review was signalled: a shift in approach from an enduring focus on preserving the post-Cold War rules-based international system to being more dynamic in terms of strengthening those elements of the international architecture that are under threat and shaping the "international order of the future by working with other" (HM Government, 2021). Traditionally, British governments have focused on stability, seeking to sustain the *status quo* and prevent or discourage radical changes that might destabilise the international order. However, the 2021 Review revealed a belief that the existing rules-based international order was under pressure and characterised by growing competition between actors over interests, norms and values. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote in the foreword:

> History has shown that democratic societies are the strongest supporters of an open and resilient international order, in which global institutions prove their ability to protect human rights, manage tensions between great powers, address conflict, instability and climate change, and share prosperity through trade and investment. That open and resilient international order is, in turn, the best guarantor of security for our own citizens (HM Government, 2021).

These enduring tenets of UK foreign policy—the maintenance and protection of global free trade, the defence of the existing rules-based international order and a commitment to specific liberal values—underpin its approach toward the Black Sea region. Since 1991, it has viewed the region as an important European periphery that has become part of both the EU and NATO areas, and a key neighbourhood. Post-Brexit, the UK has tended to look at the Black Sea region through the prism of NATO, particularly the implications of Russia's security posture and the subsequent requirement to provide reassurance for regional allies.

3 Shaping UK Policy Interests in the Black Sea Region

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has been a critical juncture in the UK's approach, prompting much more dynamic, proactive engagement. The war has coincided with the UK seeking to re-establish its international position in the wake of Brexit and the emergence of the "Global Britain" brand, which has seen the country's leaders keen to proclaim that the country is still open for business, that it remains a global power with global interests. The challenge posed by Russia vindicated the assumptions contained within the 2021 Integrated Review. It also served as a reminder that, despite a focus on the global arena, NATO (and the Euro-Atlantic area) remains a key element in defending British interests. A debate has centred around the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on regional and global security, in particular, the violation of international norms regarding the use of force: frequent reference is made to "Russia's illegal invasion", which is viewed as a serious challenge to the existing rules-based international order (HM Government, 2023).

The war has prompted a change in the UK's approach; prior to 2022, there was concern about provoking Russia-shaped policy toward the Black Sea region and bilateral relations with regional states (i.e. policies were largely Russia-centric). For example, UK defence engagement with Georgia focused on activities such as providing Special Defence Advisors and visiting by military bands, rather than overt military support that Moscow could interpret negatively. This wariness has changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the UK government has made it very clear that it will lend whatever support is necessary, with one minister describing the UK's "irrefutable duty" to help Black Sea littoral states such as Moldova overcome the worst impacts to the war (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022).

This shift in approach is manifest in strategic policy documents published over the past two decades, such as the Integrated Review (and its predecessors, such as the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). The UK's first published security strategy, the 2008 National Security Strategy (NSS), makes no reference to the Black Sea region nor any of the regional states other than Russia, which is only mentioned in passing on several occasions in relation to energy security, US-Russia talks on nuclear disarmament, missile defence and Iran (Cabinet Office, 2008). The second NSS, published a year later in 2009, refers directly to the Russia-Georgia

conflict of August 2008 and its "potential negative wider implications", stating that the UK was working to ensure greater stability in "that region"—without clarifying which region it is referring to. Both Georgia and Ukraine are referenced regarding their potential NATO membership, and Turkey and Russia are mentioned in relation to their contribution to European energy security (Cabinet Office, 2009). The 2010 UK NSS makes no mention at all of the Black Sea region nor any of the regional states, despite being published a mere two years after Russia's invasion of Georgia. The 2015 document again makes no mention of the Black Sea region but does reference Ukraine several times in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea. It draws attention to increasing competition between states and the potential for the existing "rules-based" international order to be undermined; within this context, it refers to Russia over 20 times, noting that it has become more "aggressive, authoritarian and nationalistic" (HM Government, 2015). Nevertheless, the lack of any reference to the Black Sea region suggests that the implications of Russia's actions in Ukraine for the security balance in the wider region had not been fully appreciated.

Whilst the 2021 Integrated Review characterises Russia as the most acute threat facing the UK in the Euro-Atlantic area, there is only a single mention of the Black Sea region, and that is within a very broad statement that Britain "will support collective security from the Black Sea to the High North, in the Baltics, the Balkans and the Mediterranean" (HM Government, 2021). The accompanying Defence Command Paper, which sets out the specific defence contribution to the Review's objectives, does make a number of references to the Black Sea region as a NATO flank (along with the High North and Arctic, Baltic Sea, the Balkans and the Mediterranean) where the UK will seek to project its forces and increase its commitment:

> Our capacity building mission, which includes both land and maritime training, will support the development of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and their interoperability with NATO. We will work with other partners in the Black Sea region, notably Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey, to ensure freedom of navigation and security. As part of this we will continue to exercise our freedom to operate in the Black Sea, in strict accordance with the Montreux Convention, both through NATO and on stand-alone deployments (Ministry of Defence, 2021).

Thus, the Black Sea region has consistently been framed in UK policy documents and discourse through the lens of both Russia and NATO. This accentuates that, for the UK, it is an important periphery, but one that is defined by competition between powerful states and organisations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted the government to revisit its foreign and defence policy assumptions that had been set out in the 2021 Integrated Review. The ensuing document, the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, noted the acceleration of strategic competition playing out across overlapping "strategic arenas" where there is constant and dynamic competition between actors. Russia's invasion of Ukraine confirmed a number of the assumptions underpinning the 2021 Review, particularly the gravity of the threat from Russia. It had stated that the "international order is only as robust, resilient and legitimate as the states that comprise it" (HM Government, 2021). Thus, from a UK perspective, the Black Sea has become a crucial region in terms of constraining Russia and defending the rules-based international order more broadly. The invasion also reinforced UK

support for Ukraine across all sectors of security, from political to economic, military and societal.

4 Engagement with Black Sea States

Partnership with states in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space was initially intended to prompt a move away from the Cold War mentality of East vs. West, to build stability and security for all through democratisation, modernisation and the promotion of good governance. As discussed above, one of the principal aims of UK engagement with the Black Sea region is the development of an area of democracy, prosperity and stability to facilitate security in the eastern neighbourhood. This long-term objective has been sought through a variety of means, such as economic and political transformation, including democratisation and the diffusion of norms, and direct engagement, such as strategic partnerships and defence cooperation, including training and access to equipment. Consequently, partnership with states in the Black Sea region has focused on the need to consolidate democracy and the rule of law, as well as continuing with long-running reform of their defence and security sectors. The UK has been a defence actor in the region for a number of years, providing support on a bilateral basis, as well as through multilateral organisations such as NATO. For example, the Royal Air Force sent Typhoon fighters to Romania as part of NATO's Black Sea air policing mission.

The challenges of UK security and defence cooperation in the Black Sea region were accentuated in June 2021 by the HMS Defender incident. Following the signing of a trilateral naval cooperation agreement[1] between the UK, Ukraine and industry onboard HMS Defender, in port at Odessa, Ukraine, the Type 45 frigate set sail for Batumi in Georgia on a freedom of navigation patrol through the disputed waters around Crimea. Russia claimed that it fired warning shots near the British vessel as it passed the Crimean peninsula, although accounts are disputed (Interfax, 2021; BBC News, 2021). The incident highlighted both the UK's core interest areas in the region—economic, defence and security cooperation, alongside the objective of upholding free trade and the international rules-based order—and the inherent difficulties of such an approach.

The UK has been a leading supporter of Ukraine since its independence in 1991. It played a central role in the negotiations around Ukraine giving up its nuclear capabilities inherited from the USSR, one of three nuclear powers (along with the

[1] The agreement encompassed support for Ukraine's Naval Capabilities Enhancement programme and included the development and joint production of eight fast missile warships, the creation of a new naval base on the Black Sea as the primary fleet base for the Ukrainian Navy and a new base on the Sea of Azov, the sale of two refurbished Sandown-class minehunters to Ukraine, as well as missiles, and training and support for these. See: Ministry of Defence (2021). 'UK signs agreement to support enhancement of Ukrainian naval capabilities', 23 June, press release. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-signs-agreement-to-support-enhancement-of-ukrainian-naval-capabilities.

US and the Russian Federation) that signed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which offered Ukraine "security assurances" in exchange for its adherence to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.[2] Security cooperation has remained a key feature of bilateral relations between the UK and Ukraine, as well as more broadly across the wider Black Sea region. Initial military assistance to Ukraine was largely focused on defence reform, planning and capacity building. This support increased significantly in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea and a request from the Ukrainian government for bilateral military assistance to their armed forces. In October 2014, the UK government announced a package of support, including the provision of non-lethal military equipment that is "defensive and designed to prevent further UAF [Ukrainian armed forces] fatalities and casualties" (House of Commons Library, 2022, p. 2). In early 2015, Operation Orbital was launched, a non-lethal training and capacity-building mission to provide guidance and training to the Ukrainian armed forces to enhance their resilience and fighting power. The Defence Minister described Ukraine as "our friend", and a statement from the Ministry of Defence set out the UK's stance on military assistance to the country, making it clear that the focus was on non-lethal support and capacity building:

> UK policy since the start of the crisis has been to provide non-lethal assistance to Ukrainian armed forces, in line with [the government's] assessment that there must be a political solution to this crisis. The [Ministry of Defence] will continue to focus on support and assistance that will reduce fatalities and casualties amongst members of the Ukrainian armed forces, whilst building their capacity and resilience (Ministry of Defence, 2015).

With an initial focus on medical, logistics, general infantry skills and intelligence capacity building, Operation Orbital was gradually expanded to include survival skills training, countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs), training for defensive operations in an urban environment, operational planning, engineering, and countering attacks from snipers, armoured vehicles and mortars. Operation Orbital was developed to include the notion of "training the trainer", enabling Ukrainian military personnel to pass on skills they were taught, and also expanded to include all branches of the armed forces: in 2018, the Ukrainian Navy was trained by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. By 2022, Orbital had trained over 22,000 members of the Ukrainian armed forces. The focus was consistently on defensive operations and non-lethal assistance, implicit acknowledgement of a desire to avoid activities that could be framed as provocative or escalatory by Moscow, demonstrating the (self-imposed) limits of UK engagement in the Black Sea region. The UK has lent its political support to the NATO accession hopes of both Ukraine and Georgia but has remained circumspect on the timing of this, concerned about the implications of their future membership for relations with Moscow and stability across Europe more broadly.

The Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement with Ukraine (2020), which came into effect at the end of 2020 (replicating the effects of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement), reaffirmed the importance and efficiency of

[2] See: Budapest Memorandum (1994). Available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf.

the security assurances enshrined in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. In early 2022, prior to the Russian invasion, the UK began to supply Ukraine with weapons. The highly visible nature of this supply prompted other countries to follow suit and consolidate the UK's leading role in providing assistance for Ukraine, which has expanded significantly since February 2022. Prime Minister Johnson had made several public visits to Kyiv in a highly visible show of support, signalling that the UK would do everything it could to restore Ukrainian sovereignty. In a speech to the Verkhovna Rada in May 2022, Johnson made a clear link between Putin's decision to invade Ukraine and authoritarianism, depicting the war as a struggle between Ukrainian democracy and "Putin's tyranny", "freedom versus oppression" (Prime Minister's Office, 2022). In the face of an existential threat to Ukraine's statehood, military assistance was stepped up dramatically, as the UK and its partners supplied weapons and equipment to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, delivering equipment including main battle tanks, helicopters, anti-tank weapons, anti-air missiles, multiple launch rocket systems, armoured vehicles, artillery, small arms and ammunition. It has also provided helmets, body armour, rations and medical equipment, as well as training thousands of Ukrainian soldiers in basic infantry skills as part of Operation Interflex.[3] Plans have also been announced for an additional UK-led training programme to include Ukrainian fighter jet pilots and marines. It is not just military assistance that the UK has been providing to Ukraine; it is also providing a range of economic and humanitarian assistance, as well as imposing sanctions on Russia and Belarus.

As discussed above, UK interest in the Black Sea region is shaped principally by its membership of multilateral organisations such as NATO, the OSCE and the UN (as well as the EU, prior to Brexit) and its commitment to the security of allies in the region: within this context, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey are all important NATO allies. However, UK engagement tends to be centred around bilateral relations with those littoral states that are not members of either NATO or the EU, with a particular focus on political transformation and support for good governance, trade, and security and defence cooperation rather than a comprehensive approach to security (Fig. 1). The UK government signed a number of partnership agreements covering a range of issues, including political and trade relations, in the wake of Brexit. These agreements were designed to replicate previous agreements between individual Black Sea countries and the EU and ensure continuity in its approach. There are several bilateral initiatives with the non-NATO member littoral states, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The annual Wardrop Strategic Dialogue between Georgia and the UK has been taking place since 2014 and covers a wide range of issues, reflecting the comprehensive nature of the bilateral relationship. The eighth round of the Dialogue was held in early 2023 and focused on political, defence and security policy arenas,

[3] By the end of June 2023, approximately 17,000 Ukrainians have gone through the five-week training package and a further 20,000 will be training 2023-24. See: British Army (2023). 'UK Armed Forces on track to train 37,000 Ukrainian recruits', 26 June. Available at: https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2023/06/uk-armed-forces-on-track-to-train-37-000-ukrainian-recruits/#:~:text=To%20date%2C%20some%2017%2C000%20Ukrainians,track%20to%20deliver%20another%2020%2C000.

	NATO member?	Key bilateral initiatives with the UK
Bulgaria	✓	
Georgia	✗	Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (2019) Wardrop Strategic Dialogue (2014-)
Moldova	✗	Strategic Partnership, Trade and Cooperation Agreement UK-Moldova Strategic Dialogue
Romania	✓	Strategic Partnership (2003-)
Turkey	✓	Free Trade Agreement (2020) Framework Agreement on Military Cooperation (2019) Security Agreement concerning the Protection of Defence Classified Information (2016)
Ukraine	✗	Poland-Ukraine-UK trilateral (2022) Framework Agreement on Official Credit Support for the Development of Capabilities of the Ukrainian Navy (2021) Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement (2020) Operation ORBITAL (2015-2021)

Fig. 1 Strategic ties between the UK and countries in the black sea region

as well as the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and its implications (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023a). The two countries reaffirmed their commitment to the "shared values and common interests, which lie at the heart of the partnership" and pledged to deepen their strategic partnership and "uphold the rules-based international system to address global challenges". Other key areas of discussion included economic issues, trade ties and the role of the Chevening Scholarship Programme in facilitating societal contact. There is a similar Strategic Dialogue between the UK and Moldova, the second session of which took place in March 2023, covering cooperation between the two states, as well as UK support for Moldova in energy security, anti-corruption measures, democracy-building, development of the private sector and cyber security. The UK also supports Moldova through the inter-governmental Moldova Support Platform, which seeks to help the country tackle challenges to its sovereignty and independence, particularly in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as through NATO. Under the Alliance's Tailored Support Package, the UK provides support for English language training, strategic communications and military engineering, and a range of training courses (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted further support for the Black Sea states to help them reinforce their resilience and protect their states against malign Russian activities, labelled the "threat on their doorstep". New funding of £10 m was announced in March 2023 to support governance reforms and uphold free and

fair elections, reflecting the UK's core interests in the Black Sea region: support for good governance and defence of the rules-based international order. As UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly stated:

> Few societies understand the underhand tactics of Russian malign activity more than Moldova and Georgia. The UK will not stand idly by while Moscow blatantly undermines their democracy, sovereignty and territorial integrity…. Both countries are vulnerable as they suffer from the effects of the Kremlin's hybrid tactics, aggression and attempts to extend Russian control over the region (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023b).

While in Chișinău, the Foreign Secretary announced UK government plans to bolster Moldova's resilience to malign interference with an additional £10 million of funding for economic and governance reforms. To help strengthen democracy in Georgia, the UK will also be providing funding to facilitate an environment for free and fair elections in 2024, protecting them from external interference with a government and ruling party that will manipulate the election in line with Russian propaganda and disinformation (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023b). The UK has also strengthened its partnership with Romania, using a bilateral meeting in March 2023 to affirm UK support for the Black Sea region. The two countries have had a strategic partnership since 2003, and Romania has been described as a central bulwark in the UK's defence system in the region (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023c). The NATO allies have emphasised their commitment to collective defence and countering Russian aggression in the wider Black Sea area.

5 Conclusions and Outlook

UK foreign policy priorities outside the Black Sea region include the "tilt" toward the Indo-Pacific region and a focus on AUKUS (Australia, UK, US). The alliance aims to limit China's influence while strengthening ties between countries that already cooperate closely. The UK already has a presence in the Indo-Pacific, Africa and the Middle East but is keenly aware that it needs to work with other powers to maintain its own influence and that of the West more broadly. Post-Brexit-UK has been keen to demonstrate its global engagement (and relevance) and continued interest in European security, rebranding itself as "Global Britain". This reflects the country's enduring internationalist outlook that is shaped by the desire to ensure free trade and liberal democratic values, the pragmatic pursuit of British interests and an idealistic adherence to core values. However, the label itself was criticised as little more than an "empty concept" that was symbolic of post-Brexit Britain and its lack of foreign policy purpose (Whitman, 2022). Under the government of Rishi Sunak, the phrase "Global Britain" has disappeared from official speeches, statements and reports, indicative perhaps of a focus on substance in terms of foreign policy, rather than style.

The UK's desire to play a global role constitutes both a strength and a weakness in terms of its approach toward the Black Sea region. On the one hand, in the wake

of the UK's exit from the EU, the country has sought to play a more important role in international relations and is active in many areas, including the Black Sea and Indo-Pacific. This is linked to a desire to limit the influence of powers such as China and Russia and support the international rules-based order. For many years, UK interest in, and concerns about, the Black Sea region were largely connected to its membership of the EU and NATO, as well as its close relationship with the US. On the other hand, the Black Sea region remains a peripheral region for the UK despite the ongoing war in Ukraine. As a key periphery of the Euro-Atlantic area, the Black Sea is critical for the security and defence of Europe, both a source of threats and an arena for their resolution. In an era of renewed strategic competition, the Black Sea area has once again become increasingly contested, with powers such as Russia, China and Turkey seeking to extend their influence at the expense of others. The UK's focus on the promotion of good governance and freedom of navigation in the region is part of wider efforts to defend the international, rules-based order, which is perceived to be under threat.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has crystallised the UK's view of the Black Sea region, both in terms of the threats that emanate from it and the imperative of supporting Black Sea states, especially those caught "in-between" Russia and the West. The UK has shown itself to be a staunch ally of Ukraine, galvanising international support for the country since February 2022. This is both a strength and a weakness: the decision to lead was made partly because it was seen as the right thing to do but also because it provided a useful diversion for then-Prime Minister Johnson, who was beset with problems on the domestic front, enabling him to project an image of statesman-like behaviour on the international stage and distract attention away from his failings at home.

A further weakness of UK policy toward the region is that it remains too reactive, responding to events in the short term rather than pursuing a well-thought-through, long-term strategy. Moscow has vital regional interests and is focused on safeguarding its security and strategic interests, including its regional hegemony. By contrast, until Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the UK had struggled to articulate a clear strategic vision for the region. Whilst the war in Ukraine has prompted a reaffirmation of the UK's commitment to the Black Sea region, it is unlikely this would have happened without the Russian invasion; the region would have remained peripheral to UK interests and activity. Finally, UK policy toward the Black Sea remains too Russia-centric, focused on Russia and its activities rather than the broader region and its smaller states. While the UK has a strong partnership with Turkey across a range of areas, including trade and investment, migration and defence cooperation, the country's status as a Black Sea littoral state appears to be less significant in the bilateral relationship than its location within the wider Middle East.

Moving forwards, the UK will remain engaged with the Black Sea region, although its focus is likely to continue to be driven by the dual priorities of seeking to defend the rules-based international order and containing Russia (and increasingly China). Questions remain about the extent to which the UK is acting to prevent and resolve the issue of democratic backsliding across the region. Russia's war against Ukraine has clarified the centrality of liberal democratic values to both the UK and Western

states more broadly and could become a decisive moment in the relationship between the collective West and states in the Black Sea region. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not just a physical attack against a neighbouring country that is part of wider Europe; it was also arguably a broader assault on what it means to be "European" on shared values and liberal democratic principles. This chimes with concerns in London that the existing international order is threatened with change from an anti-democratic reversal after years of the pre-eminence of the liberal democratic model. The country will need to take bolder steps to promote good governance and support the consolidation of democracy across the Black Sea region, at the same time as ensuring states in the region can defend themselves and their interests.

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Turkey's Black Sea Policies (1991–2023) and Changing Regional Security Since the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Mustafa Aydın

1 Introduction

The Black Sea has witnessed conflictual relations for centuries. However, changes after the end of the Cold War allowed for the emergence of a cooperative environment, albeit briefly, prompting a gradual shift amongst the regional countries, except Russia, towards Western political and economic space (Aydın, 2005, p. 57). Amongst the regional countries, Turkey, already a Western-aligned Cold War veteran, benefited from the weakening of the Russian power at the end of the Cold War and the gravitation of regional countries away from the Russian influence. These movements allowed Turkey to play a more significant role in the broader Black Sea region, including the Balkans in the west and the Caucasus in the east. Both regions also witnessed centuries-long competition between Czarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey.

Beyond geopolitics, if the region is integrated into the global economy, Turkey could be presented with increasing economic benefits due to its location at the gateway between the two ends of Eurasia. It links the EU, the world's largest market in the West, and China, the engine of global economic growth in the East. Benefiting from its connection to NATO and the EU, Turkey could present itself early on as a conduit between the regional countries and the world, guiding them towards integration with the broader world. This intention was clear in its earliest regional initiative, creating the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Initiative, later Organisation (BSEC).

Turkey also benefited from weakening the Russian military presence on its borders. The gradual withdrawal of Russian land forces from Caucasia removed a centuries-long land-based threat on its north-eastern border. However, later conflicts in the region and the return of Russian border guards to the Armenia-Turkey border continued to irritate Turkey. Similarly, the division of the former Soviet Black Sea

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Fleet (BSF) between Russia and Ukraine, the inability of Russia to keep up the maintenance of its navy, and its loss of easy access to deep-sea harbours in the region presented an opportunity for Turkey to overtake Russia in the Black Sea as the most important naval power. All these gave Turkey a unique chance at the end of the Cold War to reverse the centuries-long weakness against the Russian maritime supremacy in the Black Sea since the latter took control of Crimea in 1783.

Beyond the historical legacy of shifting control of the Black Sea from Ottoman/Turkish dominance to Russian/Soviet supremacy, causing several wars in its wake, the Black Sea represents exceptional geopolitical importance for Turkey as it still controls southern access to the sea, which elevates its strategic value to international actors, including Russia and the US (Aydın & Kaptanoğlu, 2007). Controlling the Straits zone (The Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosporus) allows Turkey to control both Russian access to the Mediterranean and the non-littoral states' access to the Black Sea, thereby granting it a role to regulate both regions. It also enhances Turkey's significance for regional geopolitics and security.

Western attention towards the Black Sea became particularly pronounced in the wake of the September 2001 attacks in the US. As the wider Black Sea region provided northern access to the broader Middle East and North Africa (Asmus, 2004), Washington moved to extend its presence in the region, arguing that it had become a stakeholder with vital interests in the Black Sea (Asmus & Jackson, 2004). While Russia became increasingly agitated against what it saw as the infringement of the West in its "near abroad" (Kubicek, 2000, p. 547), Turkey, too, showed its unease in the face of increasing US military presence in the region as it came to consider this as a destabilising factor.[1] As the Western influence in the region gradually expanded, the Russian response was to intensify its connection with dissatisfied minorities in regional countries and to prop up groups friendly towards Russia in the so-called frozen conflict zones. The first showdown of the heightened tension was in Georgia in August 2008; then came Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022.

As a strategically located middle-power country with aspirations for regional influence, Turkey did not appreciate the Black Sea region turning into a scene of a great-power rivalry (Aydın, 2012) and opted for what it termed the "third way" (Aydın, 2009), emphasising regional ownership and multilateral cooperation. With this, Turkey hoped to contain Russian aggression and Western encroachment into the region. However, the Russian resurgence since the late 2000s endangered these attempts and paralysed multilateral cooperation while heightening regional threat perceptions. This then weakened the regional ownership rhetoric.

The Black Sea security scene has increasingly militarised in recent years, and rudimentary regional security structures—developed since the end of the Cold War with significant political investment from Turkey—have dissipated. The projection and hopeful agenda put forward by Turkey at the beginning of the 1990s failed to produce a stabilised, secure and prosperous region with Turkey at the helm. While significant changes have occurred in regional geopolitics since 2008, Turkey has been busy

[1] Based on the author's conversations with Turkish policymakers who have dealt with the region over the years.

recalibrating its relations with Russia, going beyond the Black Sea. Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has since strained Turkey's policies, forcing it to reassess its approach to the wider Black Sea. Accordingly, this chapter will first examine the fundamental parameters and priorities of Turkey's Black Sea policies since the end of the Cold War. It will then investigate its changing regional security perception since 2008. Finally, the evaluation of Turkey's policies and positions since the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 will be presented.

2 Turkey's Black Sea Policies and Priorities

Turkey initiated the BSEC in 1992 and continuously supported various regional cooperation initiatives throughout the 1990s and 2000s as an alternative to possible regional power competition (Aydın, 2009). This continued until the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 made all such attempts impossible. The primary intention of Turkey in creating the BSEC was to construct a multilateral, regional organisation where member countries learn to cooperate on functional areas. As there was not much tradition of intra-regional cooperation and trade, the BSEC served as a springboard where regional countries, some of which were locked in historical hostilities, would experience the value of economic cooperation.

Another aspect of the Turkish initiative was to help its leadership bid in the broader region from the Balkans to Central Asia by presenting itself as a model for newly independent states for their economic and political transformations. The zone was described as linking the old Silk Road to Europe while helping the regional countries to adopt the requirements of the modern international system (Aydın, 2009).

Moreover, the BSEC was one of the earliest initiatives that brought NATO members with former Warsaw Pact countries together in a region divided by power struggles for centuries and separated by one of the main fault lines of the Cold War. Its local ownership induced member countries towards cooperative behaviour and regional identity creation during the 1990s (Aydın & Fazlıoğlu, 2007). While Turkey's initial vision was never fully realised, it served as a multinational venue for the former Soviet bloc countries to adapt to global trading rules by transferring know-how from the market economies of Greece and Turkey. It persuaded Russia, which was also going through a painful transformation and suffering from a loss of power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to participate in negotiations with former Soviet countries on an equal footing. This also helped to create a cooperative mood in the region and reduced the possibility of spilling over various conflicts to other countries.

However, it soon became clear that the member countries lacked the political will to create a working regional security system. Although BSEC and other regional initiatives generated a discussion on regional identity, this did not facilitate political dialogue between conflicting countries, let alone region-wide security cooperation. Although Turkey followed BSEC with more security-oriented cooperation schemes,

such as the establishment of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BlackSeaFor) in 2001 and Black Sea Harmony in 2004, these initiatives were not able to prevent increasing competition and resurgent Russia's military moves after 2008 (Custara & Danila, 2009). While Turkey still tried to withstand the decaying influences of armed conflicts and rising political tension, Russian revisionism in the 2000s weakened all attempts for regional cooperation.

The changing security environment after the 9/11 attacks, Turkey's increasing turn to the Middle East after the US invaded Iraq in 2003, and growing tensions between Russia and the EU/NATO led Turkey to move to a more nuanced policy line in the Black Sea. As such, the Black Sea, for a time, lost its distinctive character in Turkish foreign policy, requiring separate policies, and was subsumed into its bilateral political relations with the littoral states. As a result, in contrast to the 1990s, during which Turkey's Black Sea policy was made at the highest levels and followed closely by President Turgut Özal, by the time of the 15th anniversary of the BSEC in 2007, care of Black Sea affairs was relegated to the level of Deputy Director General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Security aspects were left to the care of the Turkish Naval Command (Aydın & Fazlıoğlu, 2007). This was to change gradually as Russian moves in the region between 2008 and 2014 brought it back firmly into Turkey's priority agenda.

In the meantime, one of the cornerstones of Turkey's Black Sea policy in the 2000s solidified: upholding the Montreux Convention of 1936, which recognised Turkish sovereignty over the Straits region, thus controlling access to the Black Sea. From the Turkish perspective, the centuries-long struggle between great powers of the day over controlling the Straits had been one of the reasons for Ottoman weakening and final collapse at the end of the First World War. Therefore, it was important for republican Turkey to regain sovereign control, albeit with certain limitations, over the Straits with Montreux Convention and avoid high-risk environments in the Black Sea that might encourage other actors—certainly Russia in the north and perhaps even Turkey's NATO allies—to seek control over the Straits once again. It was, after all, only by the end of the Second World War that the Allied countries—the US, Britain and the Soviet Union—discussed the control of the Straits at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences (Aydın, 2021, pp. 13–14).

One of the often-overlooked aspects of the Montreux Convention is that it created a unique passage regime, severely limiting the warships of non-littoral countries in the Black Sea, thus allowing Soviet/Russian naval dominance in the region, which instilled a feeling of security to the latter and stabilised the region after centuries of confrontation (Baldıran et al., 2022; Oral, 2017). From the Turkish perspective, which suddenly found itself commanding the naval scene in the Black Sea after centuries, limiting the presence of non-littoral states, primarily the US, navies in the region was seen as a precaution against inducing Russian threat perception. This policy functioned until Russia started militarising the Black Sea with substantive investment in its BSF from the mid-2000s onwards and replaced Turkey as the dominant navy in the region by 2010 (Aydın, 2020; Çoşkun, 2024).

It should be mentioned here that the NATO countries favoured the Convention during the Cold War because it limited the Soviet naval ability to shift forces to

the Mediterranean quickly. However, with the changing security dynamics, Bulgaria and Romania brought about the possibility of relaxing the terms of the Convention for a more prominent US naval presence in the Black Sea. Turkey strongly opposed these suggestions, fearing that this would corner Russia in the Black Sea, forcing it to retaliate, thus turning the region into a zone of great-power competition. Moreover, these suggestions, usually ignoring the legal and strategic aspects of the debate, do not present a viable response to the question of what happens if Turkey allows violations of the Convention, thus leading to the discontinuation of the treaty. As the Convention uniquely provides for Turkish sovereignty over an international waterway, it is unclear what benefits Turkey would get for foregoing its control over the Straits, as the current international law foresees free access to international waterways, not national control. Besides weakening Turkey's control over the Straits, this kind of move would stimulate conditions for international rivalry, as witnessed from the mid-seventeenth century until 1936, creating instability and threats to Turkey's security.

Thus, Turkey's reservations about the US's long-term objectives in the Black Sea region differ from Russian opposition in motives and reasoning. For example, when some countries suggested expanding NATO's Operation Active Endeavour (OAE) to the Black Sea, which was initiated by NATO in the Mediterranean in October 2001 to avert the movement of terrorists and weapons of mass destruction (Aydın, 2012; Blank, 2007), Russia's opposition rested on its aversion to seeing an expansion of Western influence in its neighbourhood. On the other hand, Turkey's opposition resulted from its concern about preserving the Montreux regime of the Straits and the political and military balances that emerged in the Black Sea after the end of the Cold War. Turkey, for example, does not oppose the expansion of NATO and the EU to the Black Sea countries or strengthen the security forces of the NATO members in the region; it only differs in bringing extra-regional naval forces to the Black Sea in clear violation of the Montreux Convention. It thus created an alternative task force in the Black Sea (Black Sea Harmony) in March 2004, offering to team up with the Black Sea littoral states, three of which were NATO members and two were NATO's Partnership for Peace countries, to undertake the same mission as the OAE (Kır, 2005).

Russia joined Black Sea Harmony on 27 December 2006 and Ukraine on 17 January 2007. Others followed suit when the US signalled change in its Black Sea politics in early 2007, giving up trying to send further naval forces to the region and encouraging regional partners to join (Aydın & Fazlıoğlu, 2007). In the meantime, Black Sea Harmony became affiliated with Operation Active Endeavour in September 2005 and started sharing the information it gathered with the NATO command in Naples (Birsay, 2007, p. 106). Although the operation is currently conducted only by Turkey in its territorial waters since other countries discontinued participating after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Turkish Navy's surveillance and reconnaissance operations in the Black Sea still provide 67% of NATO's recognised maritime picture from the region (Güvenç & Aydın, 2023).

Although Turkey's policies in the Black Sea are questioned by its partners and allies in the region every time a crisis emerges, Turkey has consistently defended

the status quo that occurred at the end of the Cold War and argued for preventing the region from becoming a confluence of the Russia-West conflict, even if this occasionally pits Turkey against its allies. At the same time, it has also advocated the region's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and the strengthening of NATO members and partner countries' security forces since the early 1990s. While the resulting status quo allowed Turkey to play a more significant regional role, it has recently become a difficult position to maintain with the growing Russian challenge and open aggression in the region.

3 Shifting Balances and Russian-Turkish Cooperation in the Black Sea

A shared understanding of the benefits of compartmentalising their relations since the end of the Cold War surrounds ever-expanding ties between Russia and Turkey. The earlier preference to separate economics from political issues, including security concerns, was evident in their multilateral cooperation in the Black Sea through BSEC. Similar positions against non-littoral states in the Black Sea, reflecting their compatible views about the regional balances, eventually led to a Russian-Turkish economic-political condominium between the two largest coastal powers. Later, with mutual port visits, naval exercises, the establishment of BlackSeaFor in 2001 and Operation Black Sea Harmony in 2004, the relationship anticipated an informal regional security system.

Nevertheless, these indicators of closer cooperation were yet to be fully institutionalised when the Georgia-Russia War of 2008 challenged their premises. Though Russia's use of force for political gains did not sit well with Turkey, it chose an expedient way out when it saw a weak Western response to the crisis and sought to rebalance its relations with Russia in the Caucasus and the Black Sea. When Russia first occupied and then annexed Crimea in 2014, Turkey's reaction was still muted. However, it saw that returning to the days of containing Russia within regional organisations was no longer possible (Rüma & Çelikpala, 2019). While Russia suspended its membership in BlackSeaFor after Turkey shot down its military plane over the Turkish-Syrian border in 2015 (Tass, 2015), Turkey finally halted all its efforts for regional cooperation after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

The backbone of the Turkish-Russian understanding of the Black Sea security has been the common position against the presence of non-littoral naval forces in the region. From the Turkish perspective, the delicate balance that had emerged in the region following the end of the Cold War needed to be protected. It wanted to avoid alienating Russia and cornering it with the additional presence of extra-regional powers. The tool most often used by Turkey to ensure this was the 1936 Montreux Convention. This meant that Turkey's position in the region differed from that of its NATO allies (especially the US, Romania and Bulgaria) and regional partners (e.g. Georgia and Ukraine). The acrimony between Turkey and its regional partners

became apparent in the early 2000s when the US wished to increase its presence in the region after the 9/11 attacks, though subsided after 2007 when the US announced that it had no intention of challenging the Montreux Convention and reduced its activities in the region (Aydın, 2011, p. 526).

In general, Turkey recognised the geopolitical changes in the region since 9/11 and, accurately assessing Russia's position on extending NATO to its borders, has taken a middle position between its allies and its regional partner. While Turkey's long rivalry with Russia over the energy resources of the Caspian Basin was ending, Turkey encountered problems with its application for EU membership, impacting its relations with the West. Moreover, Turkey's strategic interests in the Caucasus (and, to a lesser extent, in the Black Sea) had diverged significantly from and occasionally competed with those of its Western allies in the 2000s. All these contributed to Turkish-Russian rapprochement or the "axis of the excluded" (Balta et al., 2021; Hill & Taşpınar, 2006).

Since the annexation of Crimea, however, Russia has exceeded most expectations by restoring its BSF and fortifying Crimea. Within a few years of the annexation, Russia became the most powerful naval force in the region (Delanoë, 2014; Schneider, 2017). It controlled several exclusion zones around the Black Sea and the Caucasus and used its BSF to support its newly created Mediterranean naval task force and Syrian bases—effectively encircling Turkey. The strategic impact of this development on Turkey's regional reach from the Caucasus to the Eastern Mediterranean has led to some recalibration of Turkey's posture towards Russia. While an imperfect balance had emerged in the Caucasus after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the new lines drawn by Crimea and subsequent Russian moves in Ukraine required a reassessment of Turkey's position at a time when its centre of gravity had shifted to the Levant, where Turkey felt it needed Russian presence to balance its increasingly acrimonious relations with the US.

Although Russia's militarisation of the Black Sea and advances in the Mediterranean (Syria in the east and Libya in the west) worry Turkey, its frustration with US policies continues to drive Ankara to work closely with Russia (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017). The cooperation of the US in Syria with the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is affiliated with the PKK—classified as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU—leads to a strong "sense of betrayal" in Turkey (Neset et al., 2021, p. 12). The alienating impact of this connection on Turkey is enormous. It continuously feeds into Turkey's attempt at using Russia to counterweight the US in Syria, even overriding Turkey's uneasiness over Russian aggression in Ukraine. From the Turkish perspective, in a nutshell, the future of Syria and the US connection to the Kurdish groups are categorised as "existential", while the Russia-Ukraine War is seen as a "regional security problem". This prioritisation then impacts Turkey's wider relations with the US, Russia and connected issues.

Nevertheless, this does not mean Turkey is happy with the increased Russian presence in its neighbourhood. Thus, while Russia has become a valuable counterweight for Turkey against American positions in Syria, alloying part of its existential threat perceptions, Turkey has not shied away from confronting Russian-backed forces in various theatres from Syria and Libya in the south to the Caucasus and Ukraine in

the north (Aydın, 2024). In this context, Turkey and Russia have developed a relationship of "competitive cooperation", whereby they cooperate in various regions to advance their interests against third parties while simultaneously competing with and challenging each other when their interests clash (Aydın, 2024).

4 Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War

While the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended in rebalancing Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus, the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 forced Turkey to reassess its position in the wider Black Sea region. While Turkey found itself in a difficult position between its regional partners, Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Russia and the West, the policies it pursued—supporting Ukraine with weapons systems and condemning Russia while staying out of Western sanctions against Russia—allow it to position itself to assume the role of a potential mediator between the warring parties and increase its regional influence (Bechev, 2024). Conveying trilateral foreign ministers meeting with the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers on 10 March 2022, in Antalya, followed by the fourth round of ceasefire/peace talks on 14–17 March in Antalya and the fifth round on 29 March in Istanbul were some of the attempts by Turkey to end the conflict early on (Atlantic Council, 2022). Later, brokering the "Grain Deal" in July 2022 with the involvement of the UN (Bagirova, 2022; Interfax, 2022) showcased Turkey's ability to sustain both sides' trust. Turkey has also benefitted from increased trade—though it has become increasingly wary of transferring sanctioned dual-use goods (Akmenek et al., 2023; Bechev, 2024; Jenkins, 2023)—and from its heightened profile as a producer of successful unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) on the international stage.

Having signed agreements to deepen its strategic partnership and enhance security cooperation with Ukraine only a few days before the invasion (Isajiw, 2022), Turkey's first reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2024 was to enforce the Montreux Convention to prevent widening of the conflict and limit its impact on the regional security. Assessing the provisions of the Convention, Turkey declared on 27 February, the third day of the conflict and before any other country to do so, that the developments amounted to "war", thus justifying the closure of the Turkish Straits to warships of the warring parties under Article 19 of the Convention (Malsin, 2023). This made Turkey the first country to declare the Russian move as an act of war (Güvenç & Aydın, 2023).

Moreover, Turkey, signalling that it was primarily concerned with regional security, called on other countries to voluntarily refrain from sending warships to the Black Sea and asked Russia not to recall the ships of its BSF that had remained outside the Black Sea, although it had right to do so under the Montreux Convention (Delanoë, 2024, p. 7). The reason given to Russia was that "this would be seen as an escalation and would not be conducive" to regional security (Yinanç, 2023). It is estimated that the number of Russian ships that belong to the BSF but are not in the Black Sea is between 20 and 30. Five or six of these are Kalibr-capable platforms,

two of which are enhanced Kilo-class submarines (Güvenç, 2023). Although Turkey has not activated Article 21 of the Convention, which allows it to prevent the passage of any country's warships through the Straits by declaring "Turkey is under the threat of war", its position was made clear to all countries and Turkey steadfastly refused any third-party military ship passing through the Straits.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the continuation of the war and Russia's inability to subdue Ukraine have implications for Turkey's assessment of Russia's military power and value to Turkey's regional policies. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to speculate on the impact of the war in Ukraine on Turkey's broader foreign policy stance, there are signs that Turkey is reassessing its emphasis in recent years on strategic autonomy in its foreign policy, which distanced it from its Western allies, and several steps are underway. It has reached out to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Armenia and the West in general—in most cases accelerated after February 2022—and is on its way to normalising its relations with most of them.

Regarding Russia, Turkey has agreed to all the resolutions proposed at NATO since the invasion, particularly the 2022 Strategic Concept, which declared that "the Russian Federation poses the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security" (NATO, 2022). It ratified Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO (albeit belatedly) for national and intra-Alliance reasons rather than to please Russia (Fraser, 2023). Moreover, Turkey's NATO-affiliated Rapid Deployable Corps, based in Istanbul, became the designated NATO warfighting corps in December 2022 for contingencies in 2023 (NATO, 2023), supplementing Turkey's command of the Alliance's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force's maritime component from June 2022 onwards. This technically meant that Turkey would spearhead NATO's response to any aggression towards the Alliance in its vicinity. The implication of this is straightforward, as it is only from Russia that the Alliance expects possible aggression.

In addition, the Turkish Navy conducts continuous maritime reconnaissance in the Black Sea and provides NATO with 67% of the regional picture it receives. Turkey has also been sharing this information with Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea (Yinanç, 2023). Furthermore, Turkish fighter jets are stationed in Romania to participate in the NATO Enhanced Air Policing Mission against potential Russian intrusions (NATO, 2023). Lastly, Turkey spearheaded an agreement with Romania and Bulgaria on 11 January 2024 to establish the Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea), with the possibility of other NATO countries joining the effort (Euronews, 2024).

Likewise, Turkey has remained resolute in its decision to keep the Straits closed even though this is increasingly damaging to Russia as the war wore on due to the wear and tear of its naval forces in the Black Sea and its inability to rotate them (Güvenç & Aydın, 2023; Delanoë, 2024). This became particularly poignant as Ukraine has damaged nearly a third of Russia's BSF (Frian, 2024), including its flagship, *Moskva*, in April 2022 (Dilanian et al., 2022). This development is rapidly compromising Russia's maritime supremacy in the Black Sea. Although Russia is still able to rotate vessels from its Caspian Flotilla through the Volga-Don Canal to the Black Sea, this is restricted by the number of ships that can be rotated

without weakening its Caspian forces (Castillo, 2024; Coffey, 2023). Moreover, the increased Ukrainian ability to hit Russian naval assets in the Black Sea has restricted the activity area of Russia's existing forces in the north-eastern part of the sea. All these are changing the maritime balance in the Black Sea, propelling Turkey to the first position again.

Turkey also increased and expanded its military support for Ukraine against Russia. While its supply of weaponised UAVs to Ukraine since March 2019 put Turkey ahead of most NATO members in providing Ukraine with lethal military equipment, it has so far shied away from officially acknowledging the nature and quantity of its military assistance to Ukraine and avoiding, until recently, to coordinate with other NATO members. According to publicly available data, Turkey has not only contracted to build four corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy but has also supplied Ukraine with a range of other military equipment. This includes various types of UAVs, air-to-surface munitions for UAVs, precision-guided missiles, guided multiple rocket launchers (Soylu, 2022), over 600 heavy machine guns (Soylu, 2024), mine-resistant armoured personnel carriers, ground and airborne electronic warfare equipment (Janov, 2022), possibly T-155 Fırtına howitzers (Militarnyi, 2023), as well as various types of mortars, ammunition, helmets and flak vests (Güvenç & Aydın, 2023). The ammunition supplied by Turkey includes 100,000 much-needed 155 mm shells and critically needed 122 mm Soviet-standard artillery shells (Korshak, 2023). It was also alleged, though rejected by Turkey, that it has been supplying cluster munitions to Ukraine since November 2022 (Detsch & Gramer, 2023; Soylu, 2024). Finally, the US Ambassador to Turkey has recently made public that the US Department of Defense is cooperating with a Turkish firm to set up 155 mm munition production lines in the US (Flake, 2024).

While available data suggests increasing support, it is difficult to pinpoint the total value of the support as commercial sales are mixed with donations, and the Turkish government does not release related figures. Nevertheless, the above-listed military supplies and other policies of Turkey indicate that it heavily sides with Ukraine except not participating in sanctions on Russia and avoiding heavy-handed language in condemnation, though also clearly denouncing the use of force and occupation of Ukrainian territory by Russia.

Ukraine has long figured prominently in Turkish strategic thinking as a counterweight to Russia in the Black Sea, and relations with Kyiv improved significantly after Turkish F-16 s shot down a Russian bomber on the Turkey-Syria border in November 2015. Ties also deepened because Turkey turned to Ukraine when its Western partners put an effective ban on sales of jet engines and other defence industry-related components after Turkey's incursions into northern Syria. Yet, Turkey does not perceive its relations with its two Black Sea neighbours as mutually exclusive. Instead, Turkey sees Ukraine as balancing Russia in the Black Sea and Russia as balancing the US influence in the broader region.

5 Conclusion

Turkey has aimed to develop a regional security structure in the Black Sea capable of keeping non-regional countries out of the basin while containing Russia within regional multilateral institutions. Based on the equilibrium that emerged in the region between Turkey and Russia after the end of the Cold War, various premises of this strategy have been stretched to their limits since 2008 and severely damaged by the latest war between Russia and Ukraine.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine put Turkey in a difficult spot. While Turkey tried to limit the impact of war on regional balances and keep non-Black Sea countries out of the region, which it managed so far in terms of the sea area, the outbreak of conflict dealt a fatal blow to the post-Cold War regional security architecture and political-economic cooperation structures that Ankara had put together. As none of the regional countries are willing to consider Russia a reliable interlocutor on any aspects of regional politics, let alone a partner in security affairs, Turkey's various regional multilateral initiatives, ranging from the economic sector to security, have discontinued if not entirely disbanded. Their future will depend on the outcome of the current war, Russia's ability to reconcile with regional concerns, and the willingness of the other regional countries to move ahead with perhaps a reformed regional cooperation structure.

Although it is too early to assess the exact combined impact of all these factors on Turkish-Russian relations and, by extension, Turkey's Black Sea policies, there is no doubt that they will have an effect after the war ends, if not before. Turkey would ideally like an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to the *status quo ante*. Still, it would also prefer the current stalemate to a Russian victory despite the upset to the regional political balance. A Russian victory would undoubtedly bring back memories of centuries-old Russian/Soviet domination of the Black Sea, thus prompting Turkey to develop counterbalancing partnerships. Ukraine will certainly play a more prominent role in this search. At the same time, Turkey's NATO allies (Romania and Bulgaria) and partners (Georgia) in the region could become essential parts of this strategy if they change their policy preference for enhanced US presence in the region in favour of a regional partnership model Turkey prefers.

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Black Sea as a Battlefield: Ukraine's Perspectives and Strategies in the Region

Maryna Vorotnyuk

1 Introduction

The area encompassing the Black and Azov Seas holds immense strategic importance for Ukraine's national interests. Since 2014, it has been a site of conflict for Ukraine due to Russia's occupation and militarisation of Crimea, creeping occupation of the Sea of Azov and denial strategy in the Black Sea. This area has become an actual battlefield with Russia's reinvasion in 2022.

With the longest coastline amongst the Black Sea states, Ukraine traditionally sought to capitalise on its trade and transit capacities, and access to natural resources in the Black Sea. Those ambitions were severely disrupted by Russia's offensive actions against Ukraine.

This chapter discusses Ukraine's perspective on the Azov and Black Seas as a strategic space for its political, economic, security and energy interests. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and 2022 full-scale invasion have transformed the Black Sea from a zone of opportunities to a source of military threat and insecurity. The fragmented nature of the regional security landscape in the Black Sea has historically weakened Ukraine's position. Presently, Russia's control of the Sea of Azov and dominance in the Black Sea further hinder Ukraine's ability to advance its broad interests in the region.

2 Ukraine's Positions in the Azov-Black Seas

As a result of the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, Ukraine lost control over three-quarters of its maritime space, with 100,000 out of 137,000 square kilometres going under Russian control (Centre for Defence Strategies, 2020). The losses of the

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Ukrainian Navy amounted to 75% of personnel, 70% of ships and key infrastructure (Ukrainian Navy, 2019).

Russia's 2022 reinvasion resulted in it occupying about 18% of Ukrainian territory, establishing a land bridge connecting occupied Crimea with Donetsk and Luhansk, and full control of the Sea of Azov. Russian aggression has had significant implications for Ukraine's energy sector and its economic stability. Plans for the Black Sea and Sea of Azov offshore oil and natural gas production had to be suspended because Ukraine lost access to its offshore reserves. Exploration and production activities were affected. Before the reinvasion, around 75% of Ukrainian export was handled via ports (AgroPolit.com, 2022). In 2022, cargo turnover at Ukrainian seaports decreased threefold compared to the previous year (Ports of Ukraine, 2022).

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia transformed the peninsula into a heavily militarised outpost and regularly prohibited navigation in the Black Sea. It also carried out an attrition campaign in the Azov Sea; the Russian Coastguard blocked free navigation, often performing intrusive inspections of civilian vessels near the Kerch Strait. The 2018 construction of the Kerch Bridge between Crimea and the Russian mainland reduced ship traffic from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. One reason is it bars Panamax-class vessels—over 20% of all ships before—from entering the sea (Vorotnyuk, 2021a).

In 2014–2022, Ukraine's policy became directed at decreasing vulnerabilities stemming from the Black Sea region. From a military perspective, there was recognition that a potential Russian attack might originate from the Black Sea area. With the Russian military significantly increasing in Crimea, the maritime was believed to be the most vulnerable in Ukraine's defences (Ukrainian Navy, 2019). In fact, the first open use of conventional force against Ukrainian forces was by Russian warships on 25 November 2018, when three small Ukrainian military vessels were seized on their way from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov (Vorotnyuk, 2019).

Ukraine's insufficient naval capabilities were identified as a serious challenge. Palpable threats from the sea included Russian forces carrying out maritime blockades, striking coastal facilities and undertaking landing operations (Ukrainian Navy, 2019). The scenario of a maritime blockade by Russia was rightly regarded as one of the most dangerous for Ukraine's economy, which is heavily dependent on maritime transportation.

After 2014, Ukraine focused on developing a "mosquito fleet" of small vessels because of their speed, manoeuvrability and ability to perform a broad spectrum of tasks (Vorotnyuk, 2021b). The assessment was that a stronger enemy could be defeated using their high speed and power while working in sync with unmanned aerial and surface vehicles and coastal anti-ship systems (Ryzhenko, 2020). Plans to build two new naval bases on the Black and Azov Seas were also underway, with the UK committing to supporting their construction as part of the joint Ukraine Naval Capabilities Enhancement project (UK Government, 2021). However, as of February 2022, those plans were far from fruition, and Russia's dominance at sea was 12-fold Ukraine's (ArmyInform, 2023).

Due to the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine lost access to the Azov Sea. Russian forces created a land bridge connecting occupied Crimea and Donbas,

resulting in the loss of Ukraine's Berdiansk and Mariupol ports on the Azov Sea—two ports that had constituted a significant portion of cargo turnover. Control of the Sea of Azov is crucial for Russia's dominance over the Crimean peninsula due to logistical reasons, posing a substantial hindrance to Ukrainian war efforts. Russian control over the Sea of Azov allows it to secure supply lines on the occupied land bridge between Crimea and Donbas. The Sea of Azov plays a vital role in Russia's power projection by utilising the Volga-Don canal for redeploying military vessels (Coffey, 2020). Consequently, Ukraine's counteroffensive strategy should involve its armed forces reaching the Sea of Azov and disrupting two key bridges—the aforementioned land bridge and the Kerch Strait Bridge—to challenge Russian positions in Crimea and southern Ukraine (Brennan, 2023).

At the same time, since the start of the 2022 war, Ukraine has successfully prevented Russia from exploiting its early dominance in the Black Sea. Russia failed to carry out an amphibious assault on Odesa or maintain control over the northwestern part of the Black Sea later on (Germond, 2023).

Since 2022, Russia has lost significant assets in the Black Sea, including the flagship *Moskva*, landing ships, a submarine and smaller vessels. Furthermore, Ukraine regained control of Snake Island in June 2022 and of gas rigs in the Black Sea in September 2023. During a 2023 counteroffensive, Ukrainian armed forces initiated a series of coordinated and damaging asymmetric strikes against Russian positions in Crimea (Cecil, 2023a). Throughout the summer and autumn, they targeted various military installations in Crimea, including the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, resulting in the degradation of Russian capabilities in the Black Sea.

Russia had to relocate its naval assets closer to its bases in the eastern part of the Black Sea, and its ability to operate freely in the Black Sea became limited. It is prevented from reinforcing its positions in the Black Sea due to Turkey's application of the Montreux Convention and restriction of the passage of warships through the Turkish Straits.

Ukraine's military and political strategies have consistently prioritised the liberation of Crimea following its annexation by Russia in 2014. Political and diplomatic efforts aimed at the de-occupation of Crimea were the cornerstone of Ukraine's strategy until 2022. Recent developments (since the 2022 reinvasion) have seen Russian installations in Crimea become actual military targets for Ukrainian armed forces in response to Russia's offensive. Despite international concerns cautioning against direct attacks on Crimea due to its unique significance to Russia and, reportedly, the potential for extreme, including nuclear, retaliation, Ukrainian leaders and military planners consistently argue that achieving sustainable peace for Ukraine hinges upon the liberation of Crimea (Cecil, 2023b).

Ukraine seeks to resist Russian efforts to cement its dominance over the Black Sea, aiming to un-transform it from a "Russian lake". Russia has been compelled into a defensive posture, and its ability to maintain a blockade on Ukrainian ports has been compromised. Through targeted strikes on Russian facilities within Crimea, Ukraine seeks to raise operational costs for Russia, diminishing the military effectiveness of Crimea. This strategic approach aims to challenge the perception of Crimea as an irreplaceable asset for Russian military planners and policymakers (Minzarari,

2023). These attacks are strategically designed to erode Russia's capacity to utilise Crimea as a springboard for assaults on Ukraine, disrupting its control over the Black Sea and, ultimately, leading to the liberation of Crimea.

3 The Black Sea in Ukrainian Strategic Thinking

Historically, Ukraine's Black Sea strategy has mirrored the nation's strategic orientation, fluctuating between Euro-Atlantic integration and non-alignment (neutrality or non-bloc status). Since gaining independence, Ukraine's strategic orientation has been shaped by the interplay of these two stances. Initially, the newly independent nation sought neutrality to protect its statehood. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, there was a marked shift towards Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic goal for Ukraine. This eventually led to a non-bloc status, which was used by the Ukrainian political elite to either resist democratisation pressure from the West or appease Russia during the presidencies of Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovych (Vorotnyuk, 2020b, p. 109). The concept of neutrality in Ukraine's strategic thinking was discarded being perceived as an instrument of Russian coercion, particularly after the Euromaidan protests, the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, and even more so following Russia's reinvasion in February 2022.

The West–East dichotomy has shaped the discourse in Ukraine over more than two decades. The Black Sea has remained virtually absent from its system of geopolitical coordinates. While sporadically mentioned in official documents since the early 2000s, when Ukraine aspired to assume a regional leadership role, these ambitions were not substantiated by adequate resource allocation or attention. In the past decade, it was thought that Ukraine should take the lead in promoting regional multilateral efforts beyond the ineffective frameworks of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) or GUAM formats. However, Ukraine's policy focused on bilateral relations with regional states and lacked a comprehensive approach to the region in its own right (Gaber et al., 2019, p. 38).

The evolving security landscape in the Black Sea calls for a different approach. Ukraine not only maintains its aspirations to be a key player in the Black Sea and a regional leader but also envisions itself as a conduit for Euro-Atlantic interests in the area, anticipating future EU and NATO membership. This strategic shift reflects Ukraine's increased determination to actively shape the security order of the Black Sea region.

In February 2022, immediately after the commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine applied for EU membership and was accorded the status of a candidate state (June 2022). The European Council, based on the European Commission's recommendation, decided in December 2023 to initiate accession talks with Ukraine. Concurrently, in September 2022, Ukraine also submitted an application to join NATO. The strategic decisions to seek EU and NATO membership are evident in Ukraine's Black Sea strategy.

The Black Sea is an important category of analysis in Ukraine's strategic documents. The most recent ones, adopted in 2020 and 2021 before the reinvasion, highlight the erosion of the regional security framework as a key factor contributing to insecurity in the Black Sea. This erosion is attributed to Russia's aggressive policies and power projection in various regions, including the Azov-Black Seas, South Caucasus, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean. Russia's hybrid warfare strategies against Ukraine and other regional states, involving tactics such as weaponising energy, election interference, disinformation campaigns, manipulation and cyber attacks on critical infrastructure and institutions, are identified as primary sources of insecurity in the Black Sea (President of Ukraine, 2021c).

At the regional level, there has been recognition of the potential for destabilisation in the Balkans, Baltic and Black Sea regions, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe as the most likely threats (President of Ukraine, 2021a).

Ukraine treats the Azov and Black Seas as interconnected, referring to the "Azov-Black Sea region" as a unified security space. The militarisation of Crimea and Russia's interference with freedom of navigation in the Black and Azov Seas are highlighted as major contributors to insecurity (President of Ukraine, 2021c). Moreover, the Black Sea region is often considered within the broader context of the Baltic-Black Sea region, where Ukraine prioritises ensuring peace, security and sustainable development (ibid).

Countering Russian aggression, restoring territorial integrity and maintaining the sanctions regime have consistently been the enduring priorities for successive Ukrainian governments (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2020). The most recent governmental Action Plan in 2020, in addition to overarching goals such as fostering dialogue with the EU for full membership and ensuring the compatibility of Ukraine's armed forces with NATO, emphasises the importance of upgrading and strengthening the Eastern Partnership. Furthermore, the plan highlights the exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons in Ukraine's Black Sea shelf as a priority (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2020).

To address the various sources of insecurity in the Black Sea, Ukraine asserts its commitment to leveraging existing regional formats, including those involving neighbouring states (OSCE, Bucharest Nine, Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) and Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (BSEC). Through active participation in joint security and defence initiatives, Ukraine aims to stabilise the security situation in the region. The country advocates for consolidating positions amongst Black Sea states to counter threats posed by Russia's policies in the Azov-Black Sea region. Kyiv calls for reinforcing NATO forces in the Black Sea region and preserving freedom of navigation in the Black and Azov Seas (President of Ukraine, 2021c).

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, its extensive militarisation and subsequent use as a launching point for the 2022 reinvasion into Ukraine, have emerged as significant security threats for the country. To address this issue, before the 2022 reinvasion, Ukraine prioritised political and diplomatic solutions, launching the Crimea Platform and adopting the Strategy of De-occupation and Reintegration

of Crimea in 2021. According to this strategy, Ukraine is committed to the denuclearisation and demilitarisation of Crimea, considering it a fundamental requirement for peace and security in the Black Sea. The document outlines a comprehensive set of measures, including diplomatic, military, economic, informational, humanitarian and other approaches, as crucial for the de-occupation of Crimea (President of Ukraine, 2021b).

In the context of regional security, Ukraine's National Security Strategy outlines its objectives to leverage opportunities arising from regional cooperation and establish strategic partnerships with Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Additionally, Ukraine aims to foster partnership relations with Central and Southeastern European states, maintain pragmatic relations with Moldova, and engage in practical cooperation with NATO member states to ensure security in the Black Sea basin (President of Ukraine, 2020).

4 Ukraine's Black Sea Strategy: Deterring and Defending Against Russia, Cooperating with the West

Ukraine perceives the current security order as one where Russia dominates the strategic space and poses as the primary source of insecurity. Russia is considered a strategic adversary engaged in a total war with Ukraine and an existential threat. In the Black Sea region, Russia implements a strategy of denial, actively cultivating insecurity amongst neighbouring states and wielding influence over their foreign and, at times, domestic policies (often through its veto powers). Russia leverages inherent advantages in the Black Sea, enabling its unilateral control, the perpetuation of frozen conflicts and the initiation of hostilities against Ukraine (Vorotnyuk, 2020a, pp. 18–19).

Despite the presence of three allied nations (Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania) and two EU member states (Romania and Bulgaria) in the region, there has been a lack of a coherent strategy from the West towards the Black Sea. Ukraine argues that this engagement asymmetry has emboldened Russia and invited its revisionist policies. For instance, Ukraine's Foreign Policy Strategy attributes Russia's active opposition to the European choice of Eastern Partnership (EaP) states in the Black Sea to "the EU's restraint in strengthening its geopolitical role in the region" (President of Ukraine, 2021c).

Similarly, there is a perception that the presence of NATO in the region has been notably weakened due to the differing approaches of three allies—Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania—and the limited focus of the United States and other powers within NATO. Despite Russia's conflict with Georgia, there was not a sufficient reevaluation of relations with Russia, and even after 2014, there remained a considerable disparity in attention and NATO capabilities between the Baltic Sea (Enhanced Forward Presence) and the Black Sea (Tailored Forward Presence).

Ukraine's principal strategy for the Black Sea region centres on deterring Russia and establishing collective defence arrangements under the NATO framework covering the entire region. The overarching strategic objective is to increase NATO's presence in the region, ultimately leading to Ukraine's accession to NATO. This would extend collective defence measures over the whole non-Russian part of the Black Sea, effectively safeguarding the area against its potential future aggressive actions.

In contrast to Turkey, which advocates for regional ownership of Black Sea security, Ukraine sees NATO expansion into the Black Sea as the most viable means of ensuring security. Given the stagnation of Black Sea regional security cooperation initiatives that include Russia, like BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony, and with Russia continuing to disrupt the region's stability in the foreseeable future, Ukraine's vision for the Black Sea involves its full integration into the Euro-Atlantic sphere.

In light of Russia's aggressive posture since the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, Ukraine's defence and security community has been consistently drawing attention to the need for the country and its partners to forge a common Black Sea strategy and coordinate national, regional and international responses. It was believed that a three-pillar strategy was vital to deliver the stated goals: Ukraine's strengthened potential, including acquiring naval capabilities and developing shipbuilding industry, more active regional cooperation and greater engagement of the US and NATO—for instance, increased NATO naval and air presence (Centre for Defence Strategies, 2020, p. 56).

Following Russia's reinvasion in February 2022, Ukraine has been asserting that it should receive security guarantees from its allies as a nation bearing the primary burden of resisting Russian aggression. According to Kyiv, these guarantees should form the foundation for a new security order in Europe, with a specific emphasis on shaping the security order in the Black Sea region.

The concept of the Kyiv Security Compact embodies Kyiv's vision. In September 2022, a report by the Ukrainian president's office and Western advisors (the Rasmussen-Yermak Group) proposed that Ukraine's international partners commit to multi-year efforts to mobilise the necessary military and non-military resources to help Ukraine defend itself. This proposal is based on an assessment that before Ukraine fulfils its strategic aspirations to become both NATO and EU member and benefit from their mutual defence clause, it needs to get security guarantees that will enable its self-defence.

Support for Ukraine's self-defence would encompass a range of measures, including weapons supplies, intelligence sharing, investment in the Ukrainian defence industry, training missions, joint exercises and sanctions against Russia until the latter no longer poses a threat to Ukrainian sovereignty.

The report specifically singles out potential regional security arrangements in the Black Sea, with a package of guarantees including regional agreements with Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria (Fogh Rasmussen & Yermak, 2022).

As a step towards practical implementation of this format, on the margins of the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023, G7 partners agreed on an international

framework for Ukraine's long-term security guarantees, being "the first time that this many countries have agreed a comprehensive long-term security arrangement of this kind with another country" (UK Government, 2023). Long-term, bilateral security commitments for Ukraine were declared, with the details of those commitments as part of the long-term bilateral security pacts being the work in process at the time of writing (ibid).

The Black Sea, according to Ukraine, is to be covered by systems of security guarantees provided by its key strategic partners. Ukraine has been in negotiations with Turkey about the latter becoming its security guarantor (Alçı, 2022). The Romanian government has decided to join the G7's declaration on providing security guarantees for Ukraine (Kholina, 2023).

While the specifics of these security commitments are yet to be fully defined, their potential impact and whether they will extend beyond the already existing bilateral frameworks of security and defence cooperation remains to be seen.

5 Ukraine's Priorities in the Black Sea: Issues and Partners

Kyiv predominantly perceives the Black Sea region through a lens of hard security, as Russia's expansionist actions impede various forms of cooperation such as transport, energy, ecology and tourism. In 2020, when Ukraine put forth its candidate for Secretary-General of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and outlined its priorities for the organisation, it highlighted the importance of enhancing business collaboration, fostering IT development and promoting regional cooperation in areas like transport, energy, tourism and healthcare. Simultaneously, Ukraine acknowledged the inseparability of prosperity and security, as reflected in the statement by Foreign Minister Kuleba to the Council of Foreign Ministers of the BSEC: "Unfortunately, we talk about Crimea in the context of security, not tourism" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2020).

Ukraine's economic interests have been severely disrupted by the impediments to the exports of its goods through the sea as a result of Russia's de-facto blockade. Russia's maritime blockade of Ukraine caused considerable disruption to Ukraine's connectivity, cutting it from its traditional maritime supply chains. Ukraine's seaborne transportation was severed due to Russian forces targeting commercial vessels, too.

In the absence of a maritime transportation option for its non-agricultural goods, Ukraine had to explore and develop alternative logistics. Limited agricultural exports were made possible via the Black Sea grain corridor mediated by the UN and Turkey with Ukraine and Russia in June 2022. EU-Ukraine "solidarity lanes" (railway, roads and internal waterways such as the Danube) have been operational since May 2022. Initially these were the only options for the export of Ukraine's non-agricultural goods and imports of all the goods the country needed, including fuel and humanitarian aid, thus becoming the lifeline for Ukraine's economy (European Commission, 2023).

From June 2022 to July 2023, the Black Sea grain initiative was in effect, providing a mechanism for exporting Ukrainian grain from its ports. Following Russia's exit from the grain deal, Ukraine successfully set up a temporary humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea from its three ports (Odesa, Pivdenny and Chornomorsk) that passed through the territorial waters of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. Given the limited capacities of "solidarity lanes" and the cost-effectiveness of seaborne exports, restoring full commercial navigation in the Black Sea continues to be a top priority for Ukraine.

Ukraine's crucial interests in the energy sector are centred in the Black Sea. The country's role as a transit country for Russia's hydrocarbons has significantly reduced in recent years due to Russia's development of alternative transportation routes to European markets, and most notably, following the start of the full-scale war in 2022. Although Ukraine continues to earn revenue from transit as the EU has not completely stopped importing Russian gas and oil after the 2022 reinvasion, the transit country model is expected to become obsolete from 2027 when the EU plans to cease imports of Russian fossil fuels (Lafitte & Moshenets, 2023).

To safeguard its energy interests, Ukraine aims to increase its natural gas production (which stood at 20 bcm per year before the war) to achieve self-sufficiency and potentially export gas. Given that substantial gas reserves are located on the Black Sea shelf, the outcomes of the war significantly affect this ambition (ibid).

Ukraine endorses energy diversification projects in the Black Sea, such as the Euro-Asian Oil Transportation Corridor, which seeks to establish a transport route for Caspian oil to the EU markets (via Azerbaijan, Georgia, across the Black Sea to Ukraine, and further to the EU, expanding the existing Odesa-Brody oil pipeline), as well as the Southern Gas Corridor that transports gas from Azerbaijan to the EU via Turkey. Ukraine also aspires to play a significant role in offering its extensive storage facilities to store Caspian gas for EU states (Ministry of Energy of Ukraine, 2023).

5.1 Strategic Partnerships

The Black Sea region presents a diverse landscape of partnerships for Ukraine, with four out of eight neighbours in the Wider Black Sea—Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Turkey—defined as Ukraine's strategic partners (President of Ukraine, 2020; President of Ukraine, 2021c) (see Table 1). Nevertheless, as underscored by Russia's conflict with Ukraine, these partnerships do not always signify a complete alignment of strategic interests. Instead, they often denote specific shared interests in particular domains.

While all Black Sea nations support Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of Russia's aggression, each country maintains its unique approach to handling relations with a resurgent Russia. Five states in the broader Black Sea area—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Turkey—have opted for a "neutral" position, though with a pro-Ukrainian leaning in the case of Moldova and Turkey.

Table 1 Ukraine's relationships with the states of the Wider Black Sea region

	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Bulgaria	Georgia	Moldova	Romania	Turkey
Formal strategic partnership between Ukraine and the country in question[1]	–	+	–	+	–	+	+
Implementing sanctions against Russia	–	–	+	–	–	+	-
Military assistance to Ukraine	–	–[2]	+	–	+[3]	+	+
Humanitarian assistance to Ukraine	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Member of Ukraine defence group (Ramstein group)[4]	–	–	+	+	+	+	+
Part of Ukraine's Crimea platform[5]	–	–	+	+	+	+	+

[1] As defined in Ukraine's strategic documents
[2] While there is no confirmed Azerbaijani military assistance to Ukraine, undisclosed transfers of arms to Ukraine have reportedly been made through third countries.
[3] Moldova provided non-lethal military assistance
[4] Ramstein Group is an alliance of 54 states created to coordinate the supplies of military aid to Ukraine in response to Russia's 2022 reinvasion
[5] Crimea Platform is an international consultation and coordination format initiated by Ukraine to de-occupy Crimea

Amongst Black Sea nations, only Romania and Bulgaria participate in international sanctions against Russia. Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey have refrained from joining these sanctions, citing their various security, economic, or energy concerns regarding Russia, or the belief that sanctions are ineffective.

During the launch of Ukraine's Crimea Platform summit in August 2021, Armenia and Azerbaijan opted not to participate, a decision presumably influenced by their individual ties with Russia. In contrast, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia and Moldova have been engaged with the Crimea Platform and endorse its Joint Statements as signatories (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2023a).

Following the 2022 Russian aggression, the allocation and nature of military support provided to Ukraine correlated with each state's relationship with Russia. Ukraine has received military and humanitarian aid from three NATO allies in the Black Sea (Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey), while Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia provided only humanitarian assistance. Moldova provided non-lethal military aid.

However, none of the three NATO countries mentioned above lead in terms of absolute numbers or GDP percentage spent on military aid to Ukraine. As per the Ukraine Support Tracker from the Kiel Institute, Bulgaria ranked 21st with 260 million euro in military aid, Turkey ranked 27th with 64 million euro, and Romania

ranked 31st with 4 million euro (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023). In 2019, Turkey, though, sold Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, but these were classified as private sales, not official military assistance. Notably, before 2021, Turkey was the only country, apart from the US, to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons.

Furthermore, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Turkey (excluding Armenia and Azerbaijan) participate in the Ukraine Defence Group, commonly known as the Ramstein Group. This alliance comprises over 50 nations and was established to bolster Ukraine's defence and coordinate the provision of military aid.

Ukraine regards its strategic partnership with **Turkey** as a crucial tool for containing Russia's expansionism in the Black Sea region and, through Turkey's diplomatic influence and unique rapport with Russia, preserving what remains of the disrupted equilibrium in the Black Sea. In addition to their vital economic ties, Ukraine and Turkey have developed robust defence industry collaborations. Ukraine stands as Turkey's primary partner for ongoing and planned joint projects related to critical military technologies such as turboprop and diesel engines, avionics, drones, anti-ship and cruise missiles, radar and surveillance systems, space and satellite technologies, etc. (Gurcan, 2020). Kyiv's successful use of Turkish Bayraktar drones on the battlefield against Russia received significant attention. Turkey also delivered Kirpi mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles to Ukraine (Gaber, 2022).

Turkey has consistently supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and has actively participated in the Crimea platform. Following Russia's reinvasion in 2022, it invoked the Montreux Convention, restricting Russia from reinforcing its naval presence in the Black Sea, thus offering significant support to Ukraine's military efforts. Turkey has also hosted negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv, helped free Ukrainian prisoners of war and facilitated a Black Sea Grain initiative in collaboration with the United Nations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Turkey's strategic partnership with Russia and its preference for Russian-Turkish condominiums as a model of regional order pose notable limitations to Ukraine-Turkey relations.

Georgia is acknowledged as a strategic partner of Ukraine despite significant challenges in their relationship in recent years. Tensions between the two nations have primarily emerged due to Georgia's neutral stance concerning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Throughout the war, the Georgian government has been cautious, avoiding actions that might provoke Russia into opening a second front in Georgia. At times, they have accused Ukrainian authorities of attempting to draw Tbilisi into war (Seskuria, 2023). Consequently, Georgia aimed to strike a delicate balance between diplomatically supporting Ukraine's integrity while refraining from joining Western sanctions.

Kyiv has expressed concerns about Georgia's non-participation in anti-Russian sanctions and allowing Russia to circumvent those. Moreover, Ukraine has criticised Georgia for reportedly impeding Georgian volunteers from joining the Ukrainian armed forces and rejecting Ukraine's requests for military assistance, such as Javelin missiles and Buk missile systems, following Russia's reinvasion. Another contentious issue has been Ukraine's objections to the imprisonment of Mikheil Saakashvili, the former Georgian president who currently holds Ukrainian citizenship (Kirichenko, 2023).

Russia's announced plans to set up a naval base in Ochamchire, Abkhazia, situated within Georgia's occupied territory, is viewed as a substantial risk in Georgia, as there are concerns that it could become a legitimate target for Ukrainian military strikes (Seskuria, 2023).

Despite this strained relationship, both countries prioritise the restoration of sovereignty and territorial integrity. They put aside their differences and continue to support each other on various international platforms. For instance, Ukraine supported resolutions at the United Nations General Assembly initiated by Georgia and endorsed Georgia's election as a member of the UN Human Rights Council in October 2022.

The strategic partnership between Ukraine and **Azerbaijan** has been solidified by their shared objectives of restoring territorial integrity. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion, the limitations of this alliance have become evident, with Baku refraining from joining anti-Russian sanctions and not offering full support to Ukraine at the UN General Assembly (Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2023, p. 86).

This partnership is mainly rooted in Ukraine's interest in successfully implementing the Southern Gas Corridor project and establishing a new route for transporting oil from the Caspian region to EU markets (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2023). Both countries have emphasised energy cooperation and the execution of infrastructure projects as top priorities (President of Ukraine, 2022).

Amongst Ukraine's strategic partners in the Black Sea, **Romania** undeniably shares the closest threat perception with Ukraine. Both nations are deeply committed to strengthening the Euro-Atlantic deterrence against Russia. Ukraine has been actively pursuing a strategic partnership with Romania, recognising its prominent roles within the EU, NATO and the broader region.

Romania holds a top-tier status amongst the partners that the Ukrainian government has specifically identified as crucial for its interests. These include formats such as the Bucharest Nine, the Three Seas Initiative, the Ukraine-Poland-Romania cooperation and the Ukraine-Romania-Republic of Moldova triangles (Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2023, p. 135). Romania's role in facilitating the shipment of Ukrainian exports through its ports has been particularly valuable under the conditions of Russia's maritime blockade.

5.2 Regional Alliances

In addition to the system of strategic partnerships, Ukraine has singled out the regional alliances it prioritises and aims to leverage**.** In 2021–2022, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs championed the concept of employing a "small alliances" strategy as part of Ukraine's proactive foreign policy (Kuleba, 2021). This regional approach was intended to complement Ukraine's steadfast commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration at a strategic level. The small alliances Ukraine strives to develop and utilise have included the Lublin triangle (Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland),

Ukraine-Romania-Moldova, Associated Trio (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and Quadriga (with Turkey).

The establishment of the **Associated Trio**, composed of the EU's associate states Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, was presented as a necessary step to distinguish amongst members of the EaP who held varying political aspirations towards the EU. It was seen as a choice between "quietly observing the continued uncertainty of the Eastern Partnership" and "proactively taking on a role as an engine" for the region and the EaP (Kuleba, 2021). Ukraine envisioned the Trio as more than just a coordination mechanism for matters related to European integration. It was meant to hold transformative and motivational potential for the entire region, fulfilling "a significant historical and political mission" (ibid). Given that these countries shared territorial challenges with Russian involvement and held shared interests in trade, energy and international transportation, this partnership was believed to be cemented by these commonalities. Ukraine expected the Associated Trio to represent the next wave of EU expansion after the Balkan countries, and it was seen as a decisive counter to Russia's efforts to re-establish its imperial influence (Ibid).

Also termed as a prioritised alliance, the **Quadriga format** is built upon the partnership between Ukraine and Turkey. It incorporates a mechanism for consultation and coordination at the level of their respective foreign affairs and defence ministries, focusing on regional security and defence industry collaboration (President of Ukraine, 2021c).

In addition to the Quadriga and Associated Trio formats, Ukraine has sought to foster close cooperation within the "triangles" of **Ukraine-Poland-Romania** and **Ukraine-Romania-Moldova**. The aim has been to develop a shared agenda encompassing foreign policy, security, defence and economic matters (ibid).

However, not all these formats have proven useful or fully functional. Amongst them, the Lublin Triangle (Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland) displayed the most dynamism, whereas none of the Black Sea formats has evolved into an alliance in its true sense. The concept of "small alliances" appeared pertinent in pre-war circumstances, serving as a practical mechanism to supplement Ukraine's strategic European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Russia's invasion in 2022 has hindered the development of these alliances' potential or, as seen in the case of the Associated Trio, exposed underlying differences between the participating states.

Despite receiving support from its Black Sea and external allies, Ukraine's security strategy has highlighted a significant limitation. As it is not a part of any collective defence arrangements, Ukraine finds itself standing on its own against a much more powerful adversary. Ukraine's system of strategic partnerships cultivated in the Black Sea region over recent years has not translated into automatic support. While none of the Black Sea nations have contested the importance of restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity as a foundation for a future regional order, some of these states have had their own threat assessment, which has not always aligned with Ukraine's.

For instance, in 2016, when Ukraine proposed the creation of a Black Sea flotilla involving Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania, this idea failed to materialise due to the lack of support from them (Chiriac & Neresheva, 2016). Divergent interests amongst strategic partners have also become evident in the functioning of the Associated Trio

(Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia); with increasing tensions between Ukraine and Georgia, this format has faced stagnation (Gerasymchuk & Drapak, 2023).

6 The Future of Ukraine's Engagement in the Black Sea: Challenges and Opportunities

Ukraine's vital interests in the Black Sea face significant threats due to Russia's ongoing war. Not only does Russia challenge Ukraine's status as a Black Sea power, but it also questions Ukraine's very existence.

However, Russia's strategic objectives have only been partially achieved. Ukraine has shown remarkable resilience and addressed military and economic bottlenecks created by Russia in an asymmetric manner. It has launched asymmetric strikes against Russian forces in Crimea and the Black Sea, preventing Russia from exploiting its advantages in the maritime domain, redirected parts of its exports through railways, roads and inner waterways, and established temporary maritime corridors for grain and other shipments after Russia's withdrawal from a Black Sea grain deal.

In spite of the existential nature of this war and the significant toll it exacts on Ukraine's economy and society, the state aspires to position itself as a resilient, Western-oriented nation and an emerging regional power. Ukraine defines its identity as a contributor to Euro-Atlantic security and aims to solidify its role in international security, energy and logistics.

Kyiv seeks to leverage the growing importance of the Black Sea for the West, which, after years of neglect, is striving to match Russia's military posture in the region. NATO's enhanced deterrence posture in the Black Sea has influenced Russia's strategic calculations and limited its expansionism, further supporting Ukraine's ongoing war efforts.

In summary, Russia's attempts to reshape the regional security landscape have not been fully successful—despite maintaining disruptive capabilities in the Black Sea, Russia's influence in the region has notably declined. Shifting power dynamics present an opportunity for significant recalibration and a new format of regional cooperation.

Ukraine's approach to the Black Sea is based on the belief that the future of the European security order depends on the outcome of the Ukraine-Russia war and is negotiated in the Black Sea. As it strives for NATO membership, Ukraine sees stability in the Black Sea as closely tied to the expansion of the alliance. It is to continue advocating for a stronger NATO presence in the Black Sea and for an increased strategic role for the EU in the region. Post-war, Ukraine is poised to emerge as a "regional pivot for efforts to contain Russia" (Melvin, 2022).

The outcomes of the conflict and the subsequent pace of recovery will determine whether Ukraine can develop the capabilities needed to shield itself from Russian military threats, halt Russia's maritime blockade, harness its transit potential and

considerable natural resources, and find ways to consolidate the positions of Black Sea nations as a counterbalance to Russia.

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Russia's War Against Ukraine: Its Impact on Romania's Black Sea Policy

Iulia-Sabina Joja

1 The Black Sea in Romania's Strategic Thinking

If there has been one constant advocate of Black Sea securitisation and bringing the region to the forefront of Western security priorities, it is Romania. For Bucharest, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (along with the 2014 invasion) has confirmed the Romanian threat perception and reinforced the country's Black Sea strategy.

The Black Sea and Russia's aggression and revanchism in the region became Romania's most significant security concern as early as 1991 when Moscow orchestrated conflicts in the newly independent countries of the Black Sea region, particularly the Transnistrian war in Moldova. Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, reconfirmed in Bucharest Moscow's Black Sea warmongering.

Over the past three decades, Romania has tried to emphasise its Black Sea security concerns, first of all, towards the EU, NATO and the US—but the West has been slow to adapt. Moreover, due to limited support from its Black Sea neighbours, many of Romania's efforts have been incomplete. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, has brought with it significant changes. The Black Sea has become, for the first time, an area of priority for the West.

Bucharest has developed a Black Sea strategy over decades. This becomes apparent in Romania's national security and defence strategies. All national security strategies mention, often times dedicate pages to the Black Sea region and its security. Romania's bipartisan consensus with regard to its Western institutional membership—Romania became a NATO member in 2004 and joined the EU in 2007—morphed into a national foreign and security strategy aimed at making the country's neighbourhood more Western. Bucharest has pursued its aim of "Western-ising" the Black Sea region by integrating its neighbours (the EU and NATO) and

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bringing more US and European presence into the region. Romania has spent the past two decades lobbying NATO, the EU and the US to prioritise the Black Sea region—to invest in Black Sea security, to push back against Russian aggression and to integrate Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova into Euro-Atlantic structures.

All of Romania's national security strategies since the revolution in 1989 have stressed the Black Sea as the country's vital interest. The Russian-sponsored conflicts in Moldova and Georgia in the early 1990s led Romania to call out Black Sea threats in the country's 1996 national security strategy. As Romania joined NATO (2004) and the EU (2007), an explicit Black Sea strategy became visible. Its 2006 national security strategy explicitly stated the aim to "democratise", "stabilise" and "orient the region towards European integration" (Romanian Presidential Administration, 2006). Romania itself was to become a key"regional security factor" (ibid, 2006). Bucharest has called the Black Sea an area of "maximal strategic interest" and has as one of its primary aims making its allies aware of its role and the importance for security (ibid, 2006). Romania's most recent national defence strategy mentions the "Black Sea" (and "eastern flank" and "eastern frontier") 22 times, and Russian "aggressive/offensive actions" eight times (Romanian Presidential Administration, 2020–2024).

This chapter will address whether the war in Ukraine has changed Romania's role in the Black Sea, as well as Bucharest's perception of Black Sea security. The extent to which Romania defines itself as a Black Sea country is key to understanding its role and perceptions. This chapter offers an overview of Romania's Black Sea security policy as reflected in the national security strategies of Romania and relevant statements and policies adopted by Romania's decision-makers. Bucharest has made the Black Sea region its number one security priority over the last fifteen years. Furthermore, the chapter focuses on Romania's interaction with the West—the US, NATO and the EU—to determine its role in Romania's Black Sea strategy. Romania has been lobbying all three actors to prioritise the region and address its insecurity. Finally, the last part of this chapter offers an outlook on the prospective role of the country in a future regional security architecture.

2 Romania's Black Sea Strategy

If we look through Romania's lens at the Black Sea, securitisation of this region is paramount. Securitisation is defined as the process of positioning through speech acts of a specific issue as a threat to survival (i.e. national security); securitisation (with the conditional consent of the relevant constituency) enables emerging measures and the suspension of that issue from "normal" politics (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 23–29; Wæver, 1995, p. 55).

Romania securitised the Black Sea region as threatened by Russian aggression, increasingly portraying Russia as "the other" (Joja, 2019, pp. 146–153). As a matter of fact, Romania's communist regime had assessed—albeit unofficially—that the greatest security threat stemmed from the Soviet Union, not from the West. In this

sense, Romania's securitisation of Moscow has been at the core of its strategic culture independent of the regime. Especially after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia—in which Warsaw Pact member Romania refused to participate—Romania's military doctrine became one of guerrilla warfare. In 1968, Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, after condemning the suppression of the Prague Spring by Soviet and Warsaw forces, appealed to anti-Sovietism amongst Romanians and asked for resistance against perceived threats stemming from Moscow. Patriotic Guards paramilitary formations were established under the direction of the Romanian Communist Party. Armed and trained, these formations were intended to provide rear security, augment ground forces and act as guerillas if faced with an invasion from Moscow. Additionally, Ceaușescu invested in developing an independent defence industry and acquisition process.

Despite the 1989 Revolution and the end of the Communist regime, much of the military and political elite stayed in power, maintaining a similar threat perception towards Russia. The conflicts in newly independent Moldova—part of Romania's territory seized by Moscow after the Second World War—and in the South Caucasus confirmed this threat perception.

Romania's perspective on the extended Black Sea region in the early 1990s was profoundly—and unsurprisingly—collared by the conflicts sparked in the context of the Soviet Union's collapse. The Kremlin's role in the conflicts across the extended Black Sea region, from Transnistria to the South Caucasus, solidified the understanding in Bucharest that despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia would continue to dominate this region, support conflicts and interfere politically in the newly independent Black Sea countries. Amongst these, the biggest concern was the war next door in Moldova. But in the context of Romania's 1989 Revolution and transition to democracy, as well as the Balkan wars of the early 1990s, Bucharest does not yet articulate a coherent Black Sea policy.

In 2005, Romania's President Traian Băsescu, speaking at Stanford University, accused the Kremlin of treating the Black Sea region "like a Russian lake" (Hotnews.ro, 2005). He argued that Ukraine and Georgia need the international community's support for "democratisation" and that it is the "duty of the international community to intervene before it is too late" (ibid, 2005). With his Stanford speech, Băsescu set in motion a long-standing Black Sea policy aimed at reducing Russian aggression by lobbying for Western partners (far and near) to invest in the democratisation and security of the Black Sea region.

In the decade that followed, Băsescu's views were validated. In this decade, the force rapport in the Black Sea shifted in Russia's favour, while Turkey—the only country with comparable military power and the gateholder of the Bosporus Canal—developed ever-growing economic ties to Russia. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, months after the NATO summit in Bucharest, where Romania lobbied for Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO accession, albeit unsuccessfully.

Romanian fears and threat perceptions were only confirmed and reinforced by a variety of actions. These include Moscow's suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 2007; the stoppage of gas deliveries to Ukraine in 2009; the protraction of Black Sea "frozen" conflicts; political interference across

the region; cyberattacks; borderisation; passportisation; hybrid warfare employed by Russia in the Black Sea region; the invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Joja, 2019).

Romania worked to raise awareness and build alliances in the region but often remained the Black Sea's "lone ranger". Following the 2008 invasion, Romania developed regional alliances and strategic partnerships aimed at deterring Russian aggression and building Western-dominated economic, political, military and societal ties. Romania was the first Western country to sign a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan (in 2009), an energy-rich opponent at the time of Russia in the Black Sea region. In the same year, Romania and Poland signed a strategic partnership solidifying the security and military cooperation between the two largest NATO countries of the eastern flank—also considered as Washington's two Eastern European"anchors". In 2010, Romania forged a partnership with Moldova. In 2011, it established a strategic partnership with Turkey, forming the Poland-Romania-Turkey trialogue. All of these alliances were long-term Romanian investments aimed at balancing out Russia's growing power in the region.

2.1 Results Have Been Mixed

In the case of Moldova, Romania invested significant financial aid, sponsored Romanian-language TV, offered EU passports to the majority of the population and promoted the Romanian Orthodox Church—all measures aimed at countering Russian influence and increasing Romanian and, hence, Western influence. In 2012, Romania and Moldova signed a military cooperation agreement that enabled Romania to support Moldova with armament (For the ratification, 2012). Starting with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Moldova's subsequent vulnerability, Romanian officials declare support for Moldova's resilience against hybrid threats and lobbied on behalf of Moldova in Brussels for financial aid. Then-Prime Minister of Romania Nicolae Ciucă declared during a visit to Chișinău in March 2023, "Romania permanently promotes, including in Brussels, the need to support the Republic of Moldova on several levels to resist Russia … Romania will continue to promote at the European level security measures for resilience, an example being the objective to create a civilian EU mission for the Republic of Moldova" (Government of Romania, 2023).

Three months later, in June 2023, following a request from the European Council, the EU Commission approved an aid package for Moldova directed specifically at countering Russian hybrid threats (European Commission, 2023). Finally, Romania provides extensive aid to Moldova in terms of energy. In 2015, the two governments signed an agreement to interconnect their respective natural gas and electricity networks (Memorandum of Understanding, 2015). By November 2022, Romania was providing over 90% of Moldova's electricity (Hotnews.ro, 2022).

The results of Romania's long-term investment into Moldova's Western integration are—in Bucharest's view—paying off. Moldovan officials confirm this on every

occasion. In one of her many visits to Bucharest since February 2023, Moldovan President Maia Sandu declared, "Romania is Moldova's most important advocate" (Cotoros, 2023). Through the years, Moldovans have become more pro-Western in their worldviews. The election of pro-Western Sandu leads the country towards EU integration despite Russian interference, and even towards the contemplation of NATO membership, the first time in the country's history. The relationship between Romania and Moldova has grown so close that in June 2023, the Romanian president said, "Romania is not only ready, but also willing to support the Republic of Moldova in any scenario" (G4Media.ro, 2023). Amongst all countries in the Black Sea region, Romania has unequivocally and in a bipartisan manner prioritised investments into Moldova for obvious historical and cultural reasons. In this sense, Romania's Moldova policy has been its highest investment and, so far, most successful Black Sea "Westernisation" policy.

By comparison, Romania's success in steering EU and NATO member Bulgaria towards the West has been more limited. In 2016, two years after Russia invaded Ukraine, in preparation for the NATO summit in Warsaw, Romania proposed a NATO Black Sea fleet. The Alliance declined, so Bucharest proposed instead a regional Black Sea fleet. Ukraine, Turkey and initially Bulgaria agreed to participate (Joja, 2018). However, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov unexpectedly changed his mind. Taking Romanian President Klaus Iohannis by surprise, Borisov declared that he wanted "peace and love" and not war at the Black Sea (Joja, 2018). Back then, Bulgaria was known as Russia's Trojan horse in NATO (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Bulgarian Service, 2023). Today, the situation is radically different. During the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion, Bulgaria became a staunch Ukraine supporter, shipping weapons and ammunition to Ukraine and cancelling its own 90% dependence on Russian gas.

Bulgaria's shifting Russia stance resulted in Romania and Bulgaria signing in 2023 one of Bucharest's most comprehensive strategic partnerships. This was aimed explicitly at security cooperation to defend and deter Russian aggression and support Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. An eight-page strategic partnership document was explicitly agreed upon in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and was targeted at contributing to security in the Black Sea region. The partnership focuses on bilateral cooperation as well as collaboration in EU, NATO and regional frameworks such as the Three Seas Initiative.

Looking back, Romania's Black Sea strategy has been streamlined. With limited resources and facing its allies' limited willingness to prioritise the Black Sea region, Bucharest maintained Black Sea security throughout the presidential administrations. Romania's Black Sea securitisation has found broad domestic political and public consensus and support. Russia's repeated aggressions and atrocities in Ukraine have reinforced Romania's regional securitisation policies. Alternatives exist, such as a pro-Russian orientation (similar to Hungary's) or a neutral position (similar to Turkey's) but do not have much broad public support.

3 Romania's Cooperative Security

Romania's Black Sea priorities are straightforward: Westernise the Black Sea region by bringing in more Western hard and soft power. In Bucharest's understanding, "Westernising" means attracting commitments from anyone willing and able from the US and Europe. In this sense, Romania's view of Black Sea security is state-centric and dominated by the political and military dimensions. Driven by the logic of hard security and guarantees to protect sovereignty, Romania has been outspoken in its support for Georgian and Ukrainian membership in NATO, including prior to the 2008 Bucharest summit. The country has supported Moldova's, Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO.

Today, military and political security dominates arguably even more Romania's Black Sea agenda. An illustrative example of Romania's security understanding of the region has been articulated in the act of Black Sea securitisation by Băsescu, the former Romanian president (2004 to 2014), who, as a former naval officer, was very much focused on the sea and happened to be passionate about foreign and defence policy. In August 2014, less than a month before Germany and France negotiated the Minsk I agreement over illegally invaded Ukrainian territory, Băsescu was amongst the first NATO leaders to lobby for the delivery of lethal weapons to Ukraine. At the yearly meeting of Romanian ambassadors, the president had tasked the country's diplomats to lobby for this, warning, "If the West will not give lethal aid to the Ukrainian armed forces, Russia will gain the upper hand and the conflict will turn into a massacre" (Stirileprotv.ro, 2014). He continued, "Democratic states must overcome the moment of declarations of good intentions" because the Ukrainian army "is fed up with how many helmets and non-lethal weapons were sent to them" (ibid, 2014). Băsescu went on to announce at the NATO summit in Wales how he would lobby the Alliance for a Black Sea fleet to deter Russia.

Romania's current president has continued to pursue the same strategy. For example, at a meeting in April 2023 with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Iohannis argued in favour of "an increased NATO Black Sea presence is necessary" and the "inclusion of the Black Sea issue in all relevant processes for strengthening the security of the Euro-Atlantic area" (Ziarmm.ro, 2023). Through the lens of Black Sea security as Romania's referent object, relations with Black Sea neighbours have varied in intensity. Bucharest's Black Sea aim is democratisation and Westernisation of its neighbourhood and the inherent push against Russian influence. This means Romania has prioritised as its Black Sea strategy the integration of Black Sea countries into the EU and NATO.

Out of the three countries competing for Euro-Atlantic integration, Bucharest has undoubtedly dedicated most of its resources to its relationship with Moldova. The language and historical affinities have paved the way for this unique relationship. Romania's constant political, economic and social investment into Moldova has not led to an absolute majority in either country favouring unification. Rather, Romania's political elite and Moldova's pro-Western elite portray the bilateral relationship as "reunification with EU integration", referring to Romania's support of Moldova's EU

membership that would lead to the removal of the hard border running through the region of Moldova's ever since Soviet occupation. The two elites have succeeded in pushing Russia increasingly out economically as well. Romania has replaced Russia as Moldova's largest trading partner.

Romania forged two additional strategic partnerships with Black Sea countries, Georgia to the east (from 2022) and a more comprehensive partnership with Bulgaria to the south (from 2023). While the Georgia-Romania partnership is focused on Black Sea interconnectivity, the Bulgaria-Romania connection is explicitly aimed at security cooperation to defend and deter Russian aggression and support Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration.

In practice, the scale of the 2022 invasion has left a visible mark on Romania's Black Sea strategy. Bucharest accelerated national defence investments and enhanced regional alliances and strategic partnerships. Bucharest increased its military budget from 2 to 2.5% in 2022. Prior to 2022, Romania had no NATO troops deployed on its soil despite numerous requests. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed NATO's eastern flank defence and led to the deployment of a brigade-size battlegroup in Romania (as well as in Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria). France leads the Romanian-based battlegroup. Romania has become a key supporter of Ukraine. Bucharest has served as a transit hub for weapons flowing into Ukraine. Romania is a centre for training Ukrainian forces and a production facility of military goods destined for Ukraine.

There are also cooperative security formats that Romania has been investing in over the years to contribute to Black Sea "Westernisation". Two initiatives stand out. Both were formed shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014. First is the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), a forum of 12 EU member states that border the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas (hence the name) focused on attracting investments for critical infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe. The Initiative was launched in 2016 and Romania pledged 500 million euro into its fund in 2019. Other similar investment commitments include Poland (500 million euro) and the US ($1 billion). In September 2023, Romania hosted the 3SI summit for the second time.

The other notable trans-regional cooperation format is a Romanian initiative known as "Bucharest 9" (B9) that was launched in 2015. B9 brings together the nine NATO members of the Alliance's eastern flank for regular summits centred around security and attended by heads of state and ministers of foreign affairs and defence. Initiated by Iohannis in his first term, the B9 invites on an ad hoc level the US president, EU leaders and the NATO Secretary General to discuss urgent regional security matters, prepare for NATO summits and highlight Black Sea security matters.

3.1 The Role of the United States

If there is one country that matters most to Romania in the context of the Black Sea—and, for that matter, national security—it is the US. Romania signed a strategic partnership with the US in 1997 focused heavily on security, and ever since, Bucharest

has built what it perceives as its most important security guarantee. Today, Romania hosts three US military bases, thousands of American troops and some of the most costly and sophisticated US military capabilities (such as the NATO Ballistic Missile Defence system, which is co-hosted with Poland and Turkey). But for Bucharest, these security investments are in need of improvement in light of its heightened threat perception of Russia. As an example, almost four months before the full-scale invasion, Romania pitched the US for further troop increases on its territory (Gould, 2021). The US troop deployment in Romania was indeed boosted, but only following the 2022 invasion, to approximately 4,000 troops.

The US deployment in Romania is geographically the closest to the war (Jakes, 2023), and the troops train with personnel from Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. Although it benefits from NATO membership and the security guarantees of Article 5, Bucharest considers the US, including its nuclear security umbrella, as the ultimate source of its security. In exchange, Romania prioritises investments into major U.S. military capabilities that are now, with the full-scale invasion, proving invaluable in Ukrainian defence. Many of the acquisitions Romania is making were on Bucharest's shopping list prior to 2022, but Romania's decision-makers are drawing lessons in terms of military capabilities to be acquired. Most of Romania's acquisitions are US-made, such as F-16 and F-35 fighter jets, Patriot defence systems, HIMARS artillery systems and Bradley infantry vehicles. Finally, Romania has been lobbying the US to formulate a dedicated security strategy for the Black Sea region. Such a strategy was being developed by the US administration in 2023.

Undoubtedly, NATO and the EU have significantly stepped up their Black Sea presence as well, albeit much later than Bucharest's leaders would have wanted. In the case of NATO, the full-scale invasion changed its entire outlook in the region. Before 24 February 2022, NATO's Black Sea presence was "tailored", and unlike in the Baltic Sea region, it did not include NATO troops on the ground. In 2022, the Alliance switched to brigade-size level deployments of troops in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia and increased deployments in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Less than a month before the full-scale invasion, Romania's president had pressed for NATO troops on the ground in his country: "I have been constantly saying we are ready to host an increased allied presence on our territory" (Ilie, 2022). Nonetheless, thanks to allied support, Romania has been hosting since 2022 the French-led NATO Response Force composed of French, Belgian and Dutch troops. In 2023, the Romanian prime minister demanded from his German counterpart that Berlin deploy troops to Romania, but without a positive response so far (von der Burchard, 2023).

3.2 The Role of the EU

In the case of the EU, Romania lobbied for the Black Sea to become a priority region for the bloc's security investments since before the country's integration. As

Romania was counting down towards its 1 January 2007 EU membership status, Bucharest's EU representatives were nudging Brussels to contemplate the Black Sea region more. In 2007, Brussels launched its Black Sea Synergy, a timid and vague first step towards prioritising the region by encouraging increased cooperation. In the following years, the EU initiated a series of civilian and monitoring missions in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and most recently Armenia, all supported by Romania. After February 2022, the EU has been increasingly present with critical infrastructure investments that steer partners away from Russian dependence. Romania has been trying to secure EU funding for cross-Black Sea multinational energy infrastructure projects such as a submarine electricity cable (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Romania Service, 2022) and LNG ports (Ernst, 2022).

3.3 Connectivity in the Black Sea

Over the last few years, energy has become a central part of Romania's Black Sea security policy. An exception in Europe, Romania produces the vast majority of the energy it produces. This relative energy independence and investments into interconnectors and pipelines have enabled Bucharest to help Moldova in its hour of need. But Romania's resources are finite. The alternatives are gas from across the Black Sea, such as from Azerbaijan, and renewables. Regarding the latter, Romania has been developing wind energy on its Black Sea shores. Romania ranks 11th out of EU countries transitioning to/reliant on renewable energy. The Black Sea is key here. Romania's Aeolian potential in the area is "colossal", Romania's energy minister declared in 2023, referring to the results of a new study by the World Bank (Dumitru, 2023).

While renewable Black Sea energy is a relatively new subject, Romania has focused on regional energy security for many years. Between 2002 and 2013, Romania actively supported the Nabucco pipeline project that would have connected Central Asian and Azerbaijani natural gas to the European market—via Turkey and circumventing Russia. The project would have been partially financed by the EU, which cancelled the project in 2013 due to Russian interference and European mismanagement (Kirwin, 2022). Nabucco would have created a viable alternative to Russian gas. Instead, a much smaller capacity pipeline from Azerbaijan was built, which Romania supported. The Transanatolian Pipeline is, to date, the only east–west pipeline into the EU that is not controlled by Russia. Still, according to Azerbaijan's leader Ilham Aliyev, the Nabucco pipeline could yet be revived (Trend.az, 2023).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of Romania's Black Sea energy security is offshore gas exploitation in the country's Exclusive Economic Zone. Offshore exploitation started in Romania in the 1980s, but new technology permitted a series of discoveries since 2015, culminating with the Neptun Deep discovery that will make Romania the largest gas producer in the EU (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Romania Service, 2023a). But ever since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia and Romania have become maritime neighbours. Crimea's Exclusive

Economic Zone meets Romania's, making gas exploitation and insurance expensive. The full-scale invasion has significantly added to Black Sea energy insecurity for Romania.

Trade, too, has catapulted the Black Sea region to the international front in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion. Romania has been the main route through which Ukrainian grains are being shipped out, both in parallel and as an alternative to the Russian Grain Deal. Ever since Russia cancelled the deal in the summer of 2023, Romania and Bulgaria have permitted ships with Ukrainian grain to sail along the two countries' territorial waters to shield them from Russian attacks. After Russia cancelled the grain deal, Romania and Ukraine signed an agreement—Romania significantly expanded its export capacity of Ukrainian grain and now constitutes the main export route of Ukrainian grain. In 2023, Ukraine exported 14 million tonnes of Ukrainian agricultural products through Romania, approximately 40% of Kyiv's total exports, and up from 8 million in 2022 (Reuters, 2024). Overall, for Romania, the 2022 war has meant ample pressure on its critical infrastructure to help Ukraine survive and export much-needed agricultural products. In the long term, Romania is expanding its critical infrastructure to play a larger role as a security provider—including in economic terms—for its Black Sea neighbours.

4 Romania's Black Sea Strengths and Weaknesses

Looking back over the last two decades, Romania's Black Sea strategy has been constant and persistent, even if its results have been mixed. Now that the Black Sea area has become a priority in Washington, Bucharest's efforts for Black Sea "Westernisation" have become a lot more visible. However, for a long time, Romania was perceived as punching below its weight and running under the radar. Why hasn't Bucharest's Black Sea strategy, despite its providence, been more successful? Why hasn't Romania managed better to be heard? Why has the West invested predominantly in Baltic Sea security while neglecting Black Sea security, despite Russia channelling most of its military aggression into Black Sea nations? The answer to these questions is a combination of two factors: an incoherent regional threat perception and Romania's unassertive policy style.

First is the regional incoherence of threat perception vis-à-vis Russia, which disabled Black Sea countries to speak with one voice. Small countries are rarely heard by their larger—in this case, Western—partners, unless they speak with one voice (Joja, 2023). In the Baltic Sea region, the three Baltic nations, often joined by Poland, made the case for increased NATO and EU regional security focus because they have a very similar shared threat perception of Russia. The Nordic countries also share this and have invested in one of the highest degrees of defence coordination in the world—all to deter Russian aggression.

Around the Black Sea, even after the full-scale invasion, countries do not share a comparable threat perception of Russia. This absence of a comparable threat perception is the main obstacle to developing more cooperative security in the Black Sea

region—and hence, a more successful deterrence of Russia. If we are to compare Black Sea countries' threat perceptions and strategies vis-à-vis Russia in 2023, we would have Romania on one end of the spectrum and Turkey on the other. Until 2022, as mentioned, Bulgaria was perceived as Moscow's Trojan horse in Western alliances. We can recall that Ukraine's population was split between favouring EU or Eurasian Economic Union membership until 2014. Georgia's population has been extremely supportive of EU and NATO integration (National Democratic Institute, 2023), but the government has been rather unsupportive of Ukraine whilst doubling its trade with and increasing its economic dependence on Russia ever since the full-scale invasion (Civil.ge, 2023).

However, could Romania have been forming alliances sooner to speak with a louder voice in Western capitals? Baltic delegations in support of Ukraine are nowadays a constant in Washington and Brussels. Not so Black Sea delegations. Romania could lead cooperative efforts with Moldova, Bulgaria or even Ukraine. One interesting point is that Romania is the only NATO member that refuses to make public any part of its military aid to Ukraine (offers or otherwise). Romanian officials have only invoked "the national interest" as a reason. This lack of transparency has prompted questions, such as when BBC Hard Talk host Stephen Sackur asked Romania's foreign minister whether his country is a democracy (Sackur, 2023). Romania's civil society and expert community have been criticising the government strongly, arguing for more transparency (Goşu, 2023; Gusilov, 2023; Joja, 2023; Nuțu, 2022).

Romania has not always been the ideal neighbour. Romanian officials have accused their Ukrainian counterparts over the past year of discriminating against the Romanian minority in Ukraine. The issues Romania raised were language laws that applied to the Polish minority as well, but Poland did not make the same accusations. In another instance, without evidence, Romanian officials accused Ukraine of illegal dredging in the Danube Delta.

The big picture shows Romania being supportive of Ukraine. A prime example was when Romania and Ukraine resolved in 2009 a territorial dispute over the now infamous Serpent's Island at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in a manner so peaceful and democratic that it can serve as a model for resolving similar disputes. The Serpent's Island is a tiny piece of land with gas deposits at the intersection of the Romanian and Ukrainian Exclusive Economic Zones. The island became internationally known when Russia tried to occupy it in 2022, and Ukraine re-claimed it in 2023. On one of the main tracks, Romania has been supportive of Ukraine's EU and NATO membership. However, in comparison to the Baltics, Bucharest has been slow, reluctant and unassertive in its support for Ukraine. Behind closed doors, Romanian officials love to remind people that Ukraine was not pro-Western before 2014. Some officials have been slow to adapt and embrace the new reality of Ukraine defending European security at large.

In a sense, Romania's Black Sea strategy is very much in the re-making. Enabled by the West's support for Ukraine—and the Black Sea region—Bucharest has become more assertive vis-à-vis Russia. Just recently, in June 2023, Romania applied the principle of diplomatic parity and expelled 40 Russian diplomats. The year before, Romania expelled only one. Romania's more assertive Russia policy is becoming

visible in its support for Ukraine. In his first visit to Bucharest in October 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked Romania for the ample ammunition deliveries and announced "big things" bilaterally, including Romania's training of Ukrainian pilots in American F-16 fighter jets (Digi24.ro, 2023).

Can Romania increase its alliances in the next years? Can one voice be used to speak with key partners and allies in the years to come? It certainly can. For now, albeit forced by tragic circumstances, Bucharest is finally succeeding in bringing the Black Sea region to the forefront of its Western security alliances and partnerships.

5 Romania's Black Sea Policy Going Forward

The last decade of Romania's Black Sea policy has demonstrated continuity. Russia's military aggressions of 2008, 2014 and 2022 and renewed hybrid aggressions against the wider region have reinforced Romania's threat perception and its view of the Black Sea region as being critically important but inherently unstable. With each aggression, Romania has responded by increasing its defence capabilities and developing or reinforcing alliances, both regionally and with its main security partner, Washington. Romania's Black Sea strategy has been continuous, broad and bipartisan. Current and former Romanian decision-makers have pursued the same strategy of Westernising the region. All mainstream Romanian political parties have shared a similar understanding of the Black Sea region, the threat that Russia poses and their country's principal sources of security: strategic partnership with the US, NATO and EU.

Because of Russia's constant military aggression—after all, Moscow has been waging war against Ukraine uninterrupted for the last nine years—Romania is likely to maintain its Black Sea policy in the future. If anything, it will increase its investments in deterrence and defence. The Romania service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty expects funding beyond 2.5% of GDP. Regional alliances will also be bolstered, such as new strategic partnerships with Bulgaria and Georgia, and increased security cooperation with Turkey, which will probably be through the Joint Bilateral Working Group on Black Sea Security that was launched in December 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2023).

Given Romania's "lone ranger" status in the region, the expectations from its allies and partners will only increase. The outcome of the war will also add to the responsibility Romania has taken on to bring more Western security to the region. In the years to come, Bucharest will be expected to become a security provider for neighbouring countries.

Bucharest has the capability to strive for more cooperative security and be more supportive of its neighbours, particularly Ukraine. Just like Baltic and Central European delegations lobbying for Ukraine (and their own increased security) have become standard in Washington, Black Sea security delegations led by Romania in cooperation with Ukraine, Moldova and others can also become a reality. This would lead to more pressure on Western allies to increase military support for Ukraine and

end the war, ensuring Ukrainian victory faster. So far, Romania has lobbied for national security—for more US, German and other NATO troop commitments. It is high time for Romania to promote Ukraine, too. Instead of accusing Ukraine of things like illegally dredging in the Danube, Romania should work with Ukraine to ensure a NATO maritime presence in the river's delta (Joja, 2023). Speaking with one voice would also increase pressure on Turkey to change its Black Sea policy and engage in more cooperative security with NATO instead of fostering bilateral ties with Russia (ibid, 2023).

Beyond working more on cooperative security, Romania's Black Sea strategy should be continued in the same bipartisan manner in the years to come. Russia's full-scale invasion will most likely last into the next year or even years. Bucharest will be well advised to put—as it has over the last years—the bulk of its foreign and security policy resources into ensuring the West's focus on the region and support for Ukraine. The logic is the same one across the eastern flank—keep helping Ukraine so that Moscow's aggression does not spread beyond Ukraine's borders.

These are recommendations for supporting and accelerating the process of transforming the Black Sea from a "Russian lake" into a NATO-dominated domain that is in sync with Romania's long-standing national Black Sea policy. Ukraine's victory would eliminate the grey zones Russia imposed over the Black Sea region. In the long term, pending Western-enabled Ukrainian victory, the Black Sea region could reach the same levels of cooperative security that we are now witnessing in the Baltic Sea region.

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Bulgaria Adapted to the Black Sea Security Challenges

Valeri Ratchev

1 Introduction

The Black Sea region is an area of escalating geostrategic tensions, and Bulgaria is situated close to its epicentre. The most significant military conflict in Europe since World War II has turned the sea into the front line of transatlantic security and the new dividing line in Europe. The Black Sea is part of the theatre of war between Russia and Ukraine, where Russia strives for regional military dominance, sole maritime traffic control and power projection toward Western Ukraine, Caucasus, the Balkans and the broader Middle East. Due to the Kremlin's greater range of options, a potential military confrontation with Russia is more likely to occur in the Black Sea than in other NATO borders. The unpredictable nuclear program of Iran, routes of mass migration and drug trafficking, worsening situations in the South Caucasus and the effects of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas have further complicated the strategic situation across the region. On the other hand, the wider Black Sea area is a vital hub for gas, oil, food and other raw materials to Europe, for which Bulgaria has an essential role.

However, Bulgaria was dangerously unprepared for the war outbreak in 2022, as Ukraine and Europe were unprepared. With some solid and timely decisions, the governments of Kiril Petkov and Nikolai Denkov have returned Bulgaria to the mainstream European and transatlantic security agenda. The most important question is how to turn this momentum into a sustainable strategy for comprehensive security in the Black Sea. This study highlights domestic and foreign policy features to exploit and deficits to overcome for successful strategy implementation. Among the most important is the dual national identity that still feeds the culture of balancing between the West and Russia, the inability to establish a comprehensive national security platform, the impact of speculative securitisation, the energy dependence curse and

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Russia's direct interference in domestic affairs. The study highlights the key policy priorities and achievements that promote "cautious optimism" (Tcherneva, 2023). Bulgaria will stand strong on the Black Sea coast.

2 "Foreign Policy Begins at Home"

Richard Haass (2013) made the above notable statement, suggesting that a country's underperformance at home can lead to an imbalance between its foreign policy goals and means. The dual national identity is Bulgarian foreign policy's most serious internal problem.

Having fallen under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria remained aloof from the significant social, political and economic transformations in Western Europe. The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution created core European values but only partially permeated Bulgarian identity. On the other hand, Bulgarians' respect for liberating Russia is so great that they do not notice how the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation oppose every critical act of Bulgarian sovereignty between the Declaration of Unification (1885), Declaration of Independence (1908) and NATO membership (2002). Moscow has never supported Sofia, but Russian influence on Bulgarian identity persists. This identity ambivalence (Filipova, 2022a, 2022b) manifests through the foreign policy "balancing" doctrine.

The notion of "balancing" between the West and Russia has evolved historically with different interpretations under monarchy and communism. However, during the early post-Cold War period, the foreign policy of balancing was a tool of the communist resistance to the Europeanisation of Bulgaria. On the one hand, Bulgaria's political ideology of neutrality aimed to stay equidistant from all conflicts, including those in the former Yugoslavia, the Transnistria occupation and the Armenia-Azerbaijan war. On the other hand, it envisioned forming a specific Bulgarian identity through the "fusion" of Eastern and Western features such as Pan-Slavism and democracy. Making Bulgaria such a "balancer" and "neutral player" would preserve Russian influence in Bulgaria and, respectively, weaken the EU and NATO through one of their vulnerable members (Filipova, 2022b).

The Russian aggression against Ukraine invigorated the notion of "balancing" as an implicit declaration of neutrality in favour of the Kremlin. The rhetoric of President Rumen Radev (in office since 2017) and pro-Russian and anti-systemic parties mingled in a chorus for the refrain "Struggle for Peace". Peace that fixes the Russian conquests and peace as an argument for preventing military aid to Ukraine. The chorus repeated Radev's promise that Bulgaria would not provide Ukraine with military assistance. Lying frankly that Russia and Ukraine increasingly realise that negotiations are the solution, Radev announced that "Bulgaria has a reason to claim to be a place for such negotiations, but this must be done in coordination with the European Union" (Balgarsko Natsionalno Radio, 2023).

During the last decade, Bulgarian foreign policy was hardly infected by decision-making deinstitutionalisation. Presidents Georgi Parvanov and Rumen Radev, Prime

Ministers Boyko Borisov and Stefan Yanev, and key ministers and party leaders often exhibited a lack of understanding of international relations, an inability to cooperate with allies, and a tendency toward loud populism (Todorova, 2012).

In a constructive aspect, Bulgaria's foreign policy aims to bring its Balkan neighbours back to the EU's agenda. Bulgaria directed its rotational EU presidency in 2018 to this goal, achieving the maximum possible when the EU does not want to expand, and the Western Balkans countries do not want to reform. The Sofia Summit on 17 May 2018 was a success because the Bulgarian presidency subsequently participated in the pressure to set a date for negotiations with Macedonia and Albania. Former Prime Ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev also shook hands on the issue of the Macedonian official name. The so-called "Sofia agenda" will remain the name for particular projects receiving European support (Tcherneva, 2018).

In 2019, the United States and Bulgaria began having regular strategic dialogues. In the two sessions held in 2020 and 2023, they discussed various topics such as Russia's aggression toward Ukraine, security in the Black Sea and the Western Balkans, China, Iran and other global and regional issues. The foreign ministers also discussed military cooperation, energy, Bulgaria's candidacy for OECD membership and related matters.

In 2023, the UK and Bulgaria signed a joint declaration of strategic partnership as an expression of the two countries' ambition for cooperation in foreign policy, security and defence, justice and home affairs, economic and trade cooperation, technologies, science, health, education, culture and the environment.

The Petkov and Denkov governments demonstrated their capacity to establish effective multilateral relations, resolve most of the "perpetual" dependencies on Russia and build trust among traditionally sceptical allies. The already-signed agreement (11 January 2024) on joint demining operations in the Black Sea between Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey is an excellent example of finding a multilateral solution in a crisis environment. The redeployment of NATO's defence capabilities in the region will continue and will be supported by numerous operational and infrastructure projects between littoral allies and partners.

3 The Black Sea in the Context of Comprehensive Security

The first government of Boyko Borisov (2009–13) included the development of a national security strategy in its political agenda in 2011. The decision was influenced by the EU's Internal Security Strategy in Action: Five steps Towards a More Secure Europe (2010) and NATO's Allied Strategy Concept Active Engagement, Modern Defence (2010), and demonstrated a commitment to the European and transatlantic mainstream in security and foreign policy. However, the institutional work on the document began without serious political discourse and expertise. The comprehensive security concept was used as a platform without clarity about how comprehensive the security can be and how to integrate the security of the state, society and individuals. While the holistic approach in EU and NATO documents was about identifying

a comprehensive spectrum of security threats, the Bulgarian document was much closer to the Copenhagen school's theoretical comprehensive security model (Buzan et al., 1998).

Moreover, comprehensive security is a cooperation model, a framework for doing things collaboratively by government agencies, local authorities, businesses and civil society. Neither the government nor the security sector organisations were reformed for such an approach, and the National Security Strategy (2011) remained useless. This failure resulted in widespread securitisation (Wæver, 1993), which captured Bulgarian foreign and security discourse and policy.

Securitisation is used *constructively* in Bulgarian politics when society and politicians do not perceive an issue as a security problem. The proposal to construct a South Stream gas pipeline and a Burgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline, connecting Russia to the major Bulgarian seaside resorts, faced experts' opposition due to environmental and economic concerns that the project promoters failed to address. As a result, the intention to build these pipelines was transformed into a security issue. Both projects were stopped.

Speculative securitisation is most often used as a pretext for extraordinary measures. In 2015, Prime Minister Borisov asked Bulgarians to imagine what would happen if one million Syrian refugees came to Bulgaria. After that, the government built a wire fence along the border with Turkey and sent the military to reinforce the Border Police.

Speculative de-securitisation is used to promote strategic corruption and conceal illegitimate political agendas. Constructing a new nuclear power plant with Russian reactors (Project Belene) was a form of strategic corruption. Refusing Turkey and Romania's proposal for a unified Black Sea flotilla under the pretext of protecting Bulgarian tourism and business interests when the actual goal is to avoid a confrontation with President Vladimir Putin was a way of covering up an illegitimate political agenda. In Bulgarian practice, securitisation not only refers to the speech act of a securitising actor but also impacts the documentation of politics, the institutional assessment of national security threats and the work of the media.

The above-explained dual identity of the Bulgarian elite and society complicates the problem. The dual identity determines the securitising actors' positions and compromises their rational choices and the historical necessity of their decisions (Wæver, 2001). This effect creates the impression that Sofia is pursuing two foreign policies, one for Brussels and the other for the Bulgarians.

4 Official Documents on Comprehensive Security

The National Security Concept was the first officially approved document that 1998 introduced the notion of comprehensiveness in security policy. The description of "national security" interprets the classical definition of Lippmann (1943), encompassing the protection of state borders, territorial integrity and independence from

military attack, as well as the democratic rights and freedoms of citizens, constitutional order and economic sovereignty. The primary source of threat was the situation in the Balkans and the ongoing war in Kosovo. The Black Sea region was seen as part of the transformational problems of Eastern Europe and in connection with the access of Caucasus and Central Asia countries to the European markets.

The 2011 Strategiya za Natsionalna Sigurnost na Republika Bulgariya (National Security Strategy) set the tone in the discourse and documentation of foreign and security policy in two directions: soft security and enhanced comprehensiveness. Approved three years after the Russian invasion of Georgia, the document was a "guidebook" on soft security threats: terrorism, organised crime, cybercrime, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, failed states and, of course, security of the energy supplies are widely reflected as the most severe threats (apart from organised crime, the others do not affect Bulgaria's reality). The Strategy expanded the concept of comprehensive security to include various policy sectors such as social policy, judiciary, postal service, public communications, transportation and defence. The document was more inward-oriented than foreign policy and security. The Black Sea region was treated exclusively in constructive terms as a field for developing cooperation between the countries in economy, trade and security. Avoiding concrete threat assessment and missing strategic direction, the document underlines Bulgaria's "…commitments to protect the external borders of NATO and the EU" (Council of Ministers, 2011). However, soft securitisation was the necessary platform for the following decade-long leadership of Borisov and his party, Grazhdani za Evropeysko Razvitie na Bulgariya (GERB).

After annexing Crimea and fighting having engulfed eastern Donbas in 2014, former caretaker Prime Minister Georgi Bliznashki launched the Natsionalna Programa Bulgariya v NATO i v Evropeiyskata otbrana (National Programme Bulgaria in NATO and European Defence 2020). It was prepared by the Ministry of Defence and aimed to evaluate and reflect on the altered security situation. The assessment emphasised that Bulgaria is in an "informational, hybrid war with Russia", a "risk for the security of Bulgaria and the Alliance" (Council of Ministers, 2014). This attempt to define Russia as an aggressor and a source of threat to Bulgaria's national security triggered a public scandal inspired by pro-Russian political forces in the parliament, led by BSP, former President Parvanov and some media. Parvanov has accused the minister of defence of compromising the relationship with Moscow. The prime minister withdrew the document for revision.

This gossip affected the amendment of the National Security Strategy in 2018. The security assessment was general, neutral and unaddressed. Russia was not named as the aggressor, the escalating war in Ukraine was qualified as a "crisis", the annexation of Crimea was "illegal", and the situation was summarised as "…a permanent disruption of the geostrategic and military balance in the Black Sea region". Consequently, the statement, "In the Black Sea region, the Republic of Bulgaria strives for an active role in the bilateral and multilateral plan to support peace and security in the region…" sounded infantile (Council of Ministers, 2018).

Only in 2020, the Ministry of Defence's Annual Report on the State of Defence and the Armed Forces acknowledged that the main destabilising factors are the

continuing conflict in Ukraine, the militarisation of illegally annexed Crimea, the regional strategic balance and the "frozen" conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The potential for significant military confrontation has been preserved, which creates preconditions for growing regional instability (Ministry of Defence, 2020).

5 The Russian Influence

During the last decade, aggressive Russian propaganda and its local agents and proxies were revealed as significant political and public opinion factors. Russian agents of influence could be found among key political leaders and parties. Parvanov, the former BSP leader and president, will go down in history for the "Grand Slam" of economic projects with Russia—a new nuclear power plant, the Bourgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline and the South Stream gas pipeline—all contracted with Putin on the eve of the global financial crisis in 2008. President Radev had amazed Europe by responding to the question of "Whose Crimea is it?" with "Russian, whose should it be?" and blocking any official military aid to Ukraine through its caretaker governments. Prime Minister Borisov had provided Russia with a gas pipeline toward Central Europe (called Turk or Balkan Stream) that bypassed Ukraine in a critical moment and was paid for by Bulgarian taxpayers for about €1.7 billion. Borisov also became famous for saying, "I want to see sailboats, yachts, tourists, peace and love in the Black Sea," refusing the proposal to establish an allied Black Sea fleet for collective defence in 2016, as suggested by Turkey and Romania (Bulgarska Telegrafna Agentsiya, 2016). Minister of Defence Stefan Yanev was dismissed after publicly disagreeing with the government's stance on the conflict in Ukraine, firmly echoing Putin's terminology of a "special military operation".

The Bulgarian political landscape is also coloured by small but noisy anti-systemic, anti-EU, anti-NATO and pseudo-patriotic parties. The European Council on Foreign Relations (Gressel, 2017) reported that Bulgaria is home to Europe's most anti-Western political party, Ataka, and the most anti-Western mainstream party, BSP. In addition, the country has four more parties ranked in the top 30 of most anti-Western, which is more than any other European country. Some of these parties left the political scene, giving way to even more radical populists and Putin supporters (Garshkin, 2020).With 37 deputies, Vazrazhdane (Revival) is the third party in the current parliament. They have been exhibiting aggressive anti-Western behaviour and a solid pro-Russian stance. When Bulgarian politicians debated foreign policy and security issues regarding Russia, pro-Kremlin parties caused a political crisis. The country's political landscape remains complicated and controversial, which turns almost all foreign policy decisions into domestic power struggles.

6 Media and Public Opinion

It is widely acknowledged that Bulgaria's media landscape faces challenges regarding freedom and the quality of media products (RWB, 2023). Some journalists, traditional and online media, including the public, have brutalised the public discourse on security and foreign policy issues, sharpening the dividing line between Russophiles and Russophobes. Russian propaganda in 2022 increased from five to 20 times compared to 2021. The year started with 39 propaganda articles daily and reached 1,785 publications on 22 February and 1,262 publications on 24 February—the day of the Russian offence. Then, the number of publications "normalised" to approximately 400 per day on average, or ten times more than before the aggression. Toward the end of the year, the average number of propaganda publications increased to nearly 800 a day. Russian propaganda was combined with conspiracy theories. A comprehensive study performed by the Human and Social Studies Foundation for the period 2013–23 identified a four-point narrative shared by Moscow and like-minded actors: The global hegemon (the collective West, the US, NATO) through his puppets (domestic liberal elite and Brussels Eurocrats) is killing the sovereignty of Bulgaria; therefore Europe is perishing and only Russia rightly resists, rises from the ashes, and is the saviour of Europe (Yakimova et al., 2023). The Russian propaganda and its local agents either avoided interpreting the Black Sea militarisation or presented it as a rebirth of Russian might.

Generally, during the first decades of the 2000s, the soft-security approach dominated Bulgarian political attitudes toward developments in the Black Sea. Energy supplies, transborder organised crime and trafficking, illegal migration, religious radicalisation, environmental challenges and political instability were documentally and orally securitised. However, the comprehensive security approach was applied without coordination and balance between the sectors. Based on politically motivated threat assessment, the military aspect of security was broadly marginalised by various governments. The inertia of that "pre-war" time still affects the public perception of what happens across the Black Sea and how Bulgaria must cope with the real challenges.

7 Policy Priorities

The ruling coalition led by Nikolai Denkov has outlined ambitious but realistic goals and is taking concrete actions to implement them. Key priorities include but are not limited to continuing support to Ukraine, improving national and collective defence capabilities, reducing Russia's energy dependence, neutralising Russian influence and advancing democracy.

7.1 Support to Ukraine

Contrary to the previous line of passive behaviour, during the short period of its existence (December 2021 to August 2022), the government of Kiril Petkov showed determination and ability to conduct an effective foreign policy in conditions of severe internal opposition. Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and Finance Minister Asen Vasilev (Partiya Prodalzhavame Promyanata (PP)—We continue the change) found a creative way to provide ammunition, anti-tank weapons, and diesel fuel during the critical period for Ukrainian defence. The strategy was curious because Bulgaria officially did not deliver any weapons to Kyiv. It was essential to keep things confidential because Kornelia Ninova, the BSP leader, was also the economy minister and responsible for granting permits for all arms exports. Despite being a part of the government, Ninova was determined to show that Bulgaria did not provide military aid to Ukraine. About one-third of the necessary ammunition and about 40% of the diesel fuel needed for the Ukrainian army were transported to Kyiv through American, Polish and Ukrainian companies by air, trucks and railroads. Defence industry enterprises worked 24/7, producing diesel fuel at Lukoil Neftohim Burgas! Later, the German daily *Die Welt* announced Bulgaria as the country that secretly saved Ukraine (Volkmann-Schluck, 2023). In just a few months, the mantra that Bulgaria is a mere satellite of Moscow was refuted.

Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov's coalition, seated since June 2023, declared that supporting Ukraine is a moral and strategic imperative. The secrecy was left aside, and the aid was provided officially, openly and under parliamentary control. According to Defence Minister Tododr Tagarev, more than 7,000 tons of ammunition, small arms, spare parts and C-300 air defence missiles were delivered from army stocks, and 108 armoured personnel carriers came from the Ministry of the Interior. Tagarev declared that Bulgarian assistance would continue according to Ukrainian needs as long as required (Tagarev, 2023a, 2023b). The promise is realistic as the overall defence production and exports have increased eight times since the war began.

Nearly 2.2 million Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Bulgaria since 24 February 2022. More than 174,000 received registration for temporary protection, and more than 67,700 have chosen to stay in the country.[1]

7.2 Strengthening National and Collective Defence Capabilities

Bulgaria made significant military contributions to Southeast European and Black Sea cooperation before the war. The US-inspired Southeastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process (SEDM, launched in 1996) resulted in the establishment of a multinational mechanised brigade (SEEBRIG) and the Black Sea Naval Force

[1] UNHCR in Bulgaria, 6 January 2024, Sofia.

(BLACKSEAFOR). The Bulgaria-US 2006 Defence Cooperation Agreement envisaged shared military infrastructure at Bezmer Air Base, Novo Selo Range, Graf Ignatievo Air Base and Aytos Logistics Center. The facilities are used intensively for national, bilateral and international combat exercises in the region and are seen as a strategic asset in any potential Black Sea military confrontation. The Bulgarian Navy regularly contribute to annual Sea Breeze exercises and NATO and EU operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

However, the occupation of Crimea and its subsequent militarisation caught Bulgarian defence off guard due to incomplete rearmament and an absent NATO defence contingency plan. Bulgaria's air defence system was virtually incapable of even air policing, with minimum naval capabilities and outdated coastal defence capacity. Major combat systems like MiG-29, SU-25, S-300, and others are obsolete, and their operational readiness depends on Russian spare parts and certification.

In January 2024, Bulgaria and Romania joined the Turkish proposal to establish the Mine Counter Measures Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea). The purpose of this group is to ensure the safety of shipping lanes and to address the threat of sea mines, which has become a common concern following Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Bulgaria inaugurated the Maritime Coordination Centre in Varna in 2020 to facilitate more significant NATO and regional cooperation in the Black Sea region.

Significant advancements occurred following the NATO Vilnius Summit in 2023. One of NATO's new battle groups, led by Italy's 6th Bersaglieri Regiment of Trapani, is stationed in Bulgaria and has been operational since December 2022. The government provided the necessary host nation support for expanding the battle group to the brigade level (about 5,000 military). Additionally, in 2024, preparation for deploying a multinational divisional headquarters on Bulgarian territory will begin, which will be an element of the Alliance's adapted force structure. Bulgaria and Romania have decided to collaborate on establishing a Regional Component Command for their Special Forces. During the Vilnius Summit, NATO approved the first contingency plan for the defence of Bulgaria.

Minister Tagarev announced that defence spending will increase from 2% of GDP in 2024 to exceed that share in the following three years. The top procurement priorities include armoured 183 combat vehicles Stryker Dragoon for a mechanised brigade, 16 multirole fighter jets F-16 Block 70 and two multipurpose modular patrol vessels for the Navy (built-in Varna and armed with European-made sensors, equipment, weapon systems and munitions). The defence ministry is also progressing in acquiring 3D radars, air defence, coastal defence systems, tactical fire control systems, drones and other equipment (Tagarev, 2023b).

Bulgaria is a member of five projects within the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO): Military Mobility, Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations, Upgrade of Maritime Surveillance, the European Union Network of Diving Centres and the leader of the Deployable Modular Underwater Intervention Capability project.

Notably, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the government's decisions to radically strengthen defence capabilities have been set as an undisputed

political priority for resource provision. They are seen as a synergy between national defence and NATO's collective defence in the eastern area of responsibility. They also demonstrate Alliance solidarity to remind potential aggressors that an attack on one is an attack on all.

7.3 Reducing Critical Dependencies

Bulgaria has inherited dependencies in four sectors that have been escalated to a critical level by Russia's war against Ukraine—energy, military, tourism and ideology. These dependencies have a structural nature and have become a tool for Russia to exert influence in Bulgaria and beyond in Europe under Putin's rule.

Bulgaria heavily depends on Soviet energy resources due to its macroeconomic infrastructure, designed in the USSR. Russia provides 100% of nuclear technology and fuel, the Lukoil refinery in Burgas is fuelled by 100% Russian oil, 85% of the natural gas comes from Gazprom, and Russia and Ukraine supply the coking coal. The Bulgarian market is relatively insignificant for giant companies like Gazprom, Rosneft, Lukoil, Rosatom and TVEL (the nuclear fuel division of Rosatom). Still, for most of their businesses, it is a more reliable gateway to Central Europe than the northern direction. Russia is weaponising Bulgaria's reliance on energy supply to achieve substantial political influence in Bulgaria and high-level objectives in Central and Western Europe.

A few years ago, the agents of Russian interests, both in Europe and locally, claimed that achieving energy independence from Russia was an impossible feat. However, it is expected to become a reality within two years as most of the Bulgarian journey has already been covered.

Gas import. On 27 April 2022, Russia abruptly halted gas supplies to Bulgaria with one day's notice. The official motive was that Bulgaria refused to pay for gas in rubles. The reason behind this is the massive military aid provided to Ukraine. The expected outcome was a government crisis and a return of the executive power to the hands of President Radev through a caretaker cabinet. However, Prime Minister Petkov's government was able to organise the delivery of liquefied gas from the US via Turkey within hours. In the following weeks, it negotiated gas from Azerbaijan via Greece. The shutdown of Russian gas did not affect gas prices, and a government crisis was averted.

Sofia responded to the Kremlin's new gas strategy by prioritising the construction of interconnectors with neighbouring countries. The Bulgaria-Romania interconnector has been in operation since 2017. It is an asset that helps to reduce the risks in cases of a gas delivery crisis. The Greece-Bulgaria interconnector has been operational since 2021. It provides gas to Bulgaria from the Caspian region as well as from current and future terminals for liquid natural gas in Greece. The Bulgaria-Serbia interconnector is operational from the Bulgarian entry side (January 2024).

Oil import and manufacturing. On 22 December 2023, the parliament adopted amendments to the law that allowed derogation from the restrictions imposed by the

EU on the import and processing of Russian oil. The amendment enables Lukoil Neftohim Burgas to switch to other sources of oil until 1 March 2024. According to international sources, Bulgaria has already (January 2024) begun to replace Russian sources with crude oil from Kazakhstan, Iraq and Tunisia (Reuters, 2024).

Nuclear energy. The project for constructing a second nuclear power plant called Belene, backed by Russia, has been fully cancelled. The government decided to build the 7th and 8th reactors at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant using Westinghouse's pressurised water reactor technology instead. The necessary financial resources for this project have been provided. In May 2024, Russian nuclear fuel will be gradually phased out in the Kozloduy plant. The replacement process will begin with the 5th unit, fuelled by Westinghouse's nuclear fuel and is planned to be completed by 2027. From the same year, the fuel replacement process for the 6th unit will begin, with 25% of the fuel being replaced every year.

Military equipment. Some Soviet-era combat systems will continue to be used until they are replaced with NATO-compatible ones.

Neutralising Russian covert operations and propaganda. With the assault on Ukraine, Russian espionage, covert operations and diversions in Bulgaria intensified. The Government responded by consecutively expelling two, ten, and 70 Russian diplomats for threatening national security and reciprocity with the Bulgarian diplomatic missions in the Russian Federation. The Russian consulates in Ruse and Varna were closed. The Council for Electronic Media, an independent authority that oversees media and video-sharing platform services by the law and EU regulations, has implemented the updated EU regulation 833/2014 concerning electronic assets used for Russian propaganda in the war against Ukraine. As a result, RT, Sputnik, Rossiya RTR, TV Centre International, NTV, REN TV, Pervyi Kanal and their subsidiaries are prohibited from any transmission.

7.4 Developing Regional Economic Partnerships

Bulgaria's leading trade and investment partners in the Black Sea region are Russia, Turkey and Romania. The relationships with Russia are the source of crucial energy dependence and generate a high trade deficit due to the traditional restrictive import policy and the ongoing sanctions. The size of the trade deficit varies widely, depending on the market oil and gas prices, but it is generally between €2.5 and €5 billion. Even before the 2014 sanctions, Russia systematically refused negotiations to balance the trade deficit between the two countries.

Turkey is a comprehensive market and a gateway to other regions for Bulgarian stocks and Turkish production toward Europe. Turkey's economic and financial stability has been shaken during the last several years; however, Bulgaria's trade balance remains positive. The 2022 annual turnover between the two countries was above $7 billion, and the Turkish direct investments in Bulgaria surpassed $3 billion.

Romania is Bulgaria's fastest-growing economic partner, not only in the Black Sea context. After the COVID pandemic, the annual turnover between the two countries oversized $7 billion and the direct investments grew by more than 300%, making Romania the third global trade partner of Bulgaria. Several trans-Dunabe infrastructure projects are in progress that will further empower economic relations.

Tourism is among the Bulgarian economy's most important sectors, with a share of 12–18% of GDP. Bulgaria is the most popular tourist destination on the Black Sea.

8 Conclusions and Outlook

Bulgaria's experience in security policy is typical of Eastern European countries, which continue the consolidation of democracy and good governance. It provides arguments for several conceptual and policy conclusions. The first is that a broad approach to security has no alternative. More than narrow solutions are needed in the age of complex relations between states and societies and hybrid threats and opportunities. Classical sectoral and multi-dimensional approaches are essential sources of ideas, but their interpretation should create a platform for a workable policy. Comprehensive security requires vast resources and complex management.

Further, the outdated and ineffective notion of comprehensive security is being rapidly supplanted by the more flexible but less strategic securitisation approach. The big problem with securitisation is that the persistence of the Bulgarians' ambivalent identity is astonishing and cannot be put as a footnote. Securitisation has become a battleground of identities, political populism and hybrid operations. When securitisation dominates, there can be no strategy.

The third conclusion is that the practical application of comprehensive security presupposes an appropriate political and organisational culture. Comprehensive security is a cooperation model, a framework for doing things collaboratively horizontally and vertically between government agencies, local authorities, businesses and civil society.

The steps undertaken by the Petkov and Denkov governments are going in the right direction. Still, these are political episodes, not a consolidated strategic line of conduct. With a 378 km coastline and a major energy hub, Bulgaria must fulfil its role as a centre point for the new EU, NATO and US strategy toward the Black Sea region.

While supporting Ukraine, Sofia must capture the European and transatlantic security mainstream by adopting a modernised comprehensive security approach. A new National Security Strategy must address the new realities in the wider Black Sea area, security developments along EU's and NATO's eastern borders, and regarding Russia.

Bulgaria must continue its struggle for mental and energy emancipation from Russia, fighting the Kremlin's malicious propaganda, interference in political affairs, and espionage. Enhancing political and economic cooperation with neighbours,

diversifying energy suppliers, and using European resources to counter Russian hybrid threats will contribute to Bulgarian security and development and positively impact the entire region.

In the framework of NATO's adaptation to the deteriorating strategic situation in Eastern Europe, Bulgaria must accelerate its defence modernisation, improve military cooperation and integration with the regional allies, use NATO security investments for building common air and coastal defence systems and strengthen the allied rabid response capabilities on the national territory and waters.

Defence coordination and cooperation with the US is crucial and must be enhanced toward transferring advanced technology, management and command and control know-how. Simultaneously, Bulgaria must participate in building a European integrated defence industrial base and military operational capabilities and support the EU as a sovereign security actor.

It is hard to predict how the combat in Ukraine will end, but its place, as well as of Moldova, is in the EU and NATO. Bulgaria and its Black Sea neighbours envisage a stable European region secured by a collective system based on NATO and engaged in intensive economic cooperation and trade. This would be a long way to go, but the change began.

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Moldova Develops a Black Sea Focus

Vlad Lupan

1 Introduction

Moldova faced a number of challenges since its independence from the USSR in 1991, reflected by internal development issues, economic crises, political instability and tensions, external coercion from Russia and difficulties with the Kremlin-supported breakaway Transnistrian region. Moldova's foreign policy priorities shift with each new government, often aligning with either pro-Russian or pro-Western political parties. For this reason and partly due to its limited access to the Black Sea shoreline, Moldova's focus has been primarily on Moscow or Brussels, with less attention paid to the Black Sea region. As a new state, the country's international relations had an inward focus on benefits and threats rather than on regional or international trends (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2023). A major threat emerged on the day the country was accepted as a United Nations member in 1992: a Russian-backed war erupted in the Transnistrian region to the east that remains a frozen conflict to this day (Rosa, 2022). A few years later, in 1995, Moldova became a member of the Council of Europe and NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

As a landlocked state near the Black Sea with a frozen conflict on its territory and internal economic hurdles, Moldova has shown commercial interest in the Black Sea region since the late 1990s. It secured access to the Danube River through a deal with Ukraine, building its only port at Giurgiulești, ensuring access to the Black Sea. However, the arrival of a pro-Russian government in 2001 delayed attention to the port project. The collapse of the 2003 arrangement with Russia regarding the Transnistrian conflict shifted the government's focus toward the West and the Black Sea region in 2004 (Popescu, 2006). A joint group of international governmental and

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civil society experts, including from Moldova, emphasised the broader importance of the region in 2004, highlighting the international implications that the Black Sea could have on regional security—from the Middle East to the United States (Asmus et al., 2004).

The successful resistance against the second invasion of Ukraine in 2022 catalysed a new shift in Moldova's governmental focus that included the Black Sea. Despite some initial insistence about its self-declared and non-guaranteed neutrality at the beginning of 2022, in November of the same year, Moldovan President Maia Sandu eventually ordered a new National Security Strategy (NSS), which was tabled almost a year later in October 2023. It included several mentions of the Black Sea region from a security perspective and underscored the growing importance of sea trade routes for all regional countries, although it did not specifically link the Black Sea with regional partnerships. The NSS made sure to state that their country appeared on Russian attack maps in 2022, recalled incidents of overflights and crashes of Russian Black Sea fleet cruise missiles on neutral Moldovan territory and highlighted Russian subversive activities in the country.

This chapter shows that the appearance of the Black Sea in the Moldovan political and governmental priorities happened when the country had administrations that interacted more actively with the West or encountered a direct security threat coming from within the region. The second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the invitations made to Kyiv and Chișinău to join the EU that same year served as the main motivations for the authorities to pay attention to the Black Sea region. Chișinău was granted EU candidate status in June 2022 (having signed an association agreement in 2013). This marks a considerable shift from previous attitudes when Moldova had not prioritised such engagement.

2 Location and Access to the Black Sea

Moldova's border in the south-west of the country is approximately 60 kms from the Black Sea. The same distance separates Moldova from the city of Odessa, Ukraine, a major seaport Russia attempted to blockade. In 1999 the two countries reached an agreement by which Moldova received 430 m of access on the Danube River for a port that can handle deep-water vessels in exchange for Ukraine receiving exclusive transit rights through the south that connects Odessa with Reni and Izmail. Henceforth, Moldova's Giurgiulești port opened in the mid-to-late 2000s for passengers and commerce to and from the Black Sea.

The Giurgiulești port developed at a slow pace until it was purchased in 2021 by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which had been investing in the area since 1995 (Gillet, 2015). The prior attention suggests a commitment to regional infrastructure development and economic growth before the conflict (Bennet, 2022a). The EBRD reported that cargo volume doubled in 2022 with increased petroleum imports going to Moldova and higher grain exports from Ukraine, including Ukrainian grain transshipments that helped solve that year's

global food security crisis (Bennet, 2022b). The bank's 2023 statements showed a further 18.6% increase in transshipments and the promise of more investments into port infrastructure and equipment (Gifp, 2024). It is a useful outlet for Ukraine in the short term and has the potential to become a major Moldovan economic asset in the long term. In 2023, Romania expressed interest in purchasing the Giurgiulești port, although no follow-up discussions seem to have occurred.

Security concerns in the Giurgiulești area surfaced following threats of retribution attacks from the Russian-appointed governor of Ukraine's Crimea-bordering Kherson region. Concerns and vulnerability were highlighted after Ukrainian forces attacked a bridge in Kherson in June 2022 (RFE/RL Moldovan Service, 2023). From June to December 2023, Russia launched repeated attacks over the Ismail and Reni Ukrainian ports on the Danube River, approximately 7 kms from Giurgiulești.

3 Perceptions in Moldovan Attitudes Toward the Black Sea

An enduring perception in Moldova that partly influenced its careful attitude toward the Black Sea was that Russia acted with impunity in the region. Examples of the Kremlin's activity abound, spanning political interference, military actions and economic embargoes (Khodorkovsky Center, 2022). Following the "local" wars in the 1990s in Moldova, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as the repeated Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008, Moscow then invaded Ukraine in 2014. The limited Western response contributed to the lack of debates about Black Sea security, resulting in an emphasis on the need for increased support from the EU and US.

Moldova's self-declared neutrality, as enshrined in the constitution, limited the country from joining a security alliance for protection (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). Constitutional neutrality also prohibits the stationing of foreign troops on its territory, a provision disregarded by Russia despite Moldova's calls for Russia to withdraw its soldiers that are still stationed in the Transnistrian region (Olaru, 2007). The fear of Russia and the Kremlin's aggressive rhetoric toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) likely slowed down Moldova's implementation of its security sector reform that was adopted in 2006 under an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO. Moldova's neutral stance corresponds to the perception of staying out of power struggles between influential international players. Since Russia views the Black Sea as an area it needs to control, it had no inclination to give other countries or organisations a say in the matter, NATO in particular (Dickinson, 2023). However, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine slowly started changing these perceptions.

One of the ways the Kremlin was able to exert leverage on Chișinău was related to the initial perceptions regarding limited options to solve the energy aspect of security. Russia's use of energy as domestic political leverage in Moldova reinforced the perception of Russian impunity, which was perceived before 2022 as limiting Chișinău's choices in having a more assertive and robust regional foreign

and security policy to avoid upsetting the Kremlin. Around 99% of Moldova's gas was imported from Gazprom via the Russia-friendly separatist Transnistrian region. That breakaway region consumed the gas without paying for it and produced electricity at a Russian-owned power plant, which it then sold to Chișinău. The separatists often threatened the Moldovan government with power disconnects if they were not supplied with fuel, including after the invasion (Jardan & Megrath, 2022). Moldova had faced gas pricing challenges with Gazprom as soon as the pro-Western Action and Solidarity party, or PAS, won elections in 2021—after its founder, Maia Sandu, won the presidency in 2020. Gazprom seemed to incorporate anti-EU "incentives" in its gas delivery contract, and pro-Russian political parties organised protests against PAS, blaming it for poor energy deals. These developments started to change after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

The EU granted a European perspective and candidate status for accession to Moldova in 2022, and provided additional funding for the energy crisis in November that year. With Western support, by the end of 2023, Russian gas supplies were replaced by direct purchases from European markets. The management of gas supplies shifted from MoldovaGaz, a subsidiary of Gazprom, to the state-owned Transgaz company in Romania, which is connected to the larger Romania-Bulgaria-Greece-Hungary gas lines, independent of Russia. The capability of Moscow pressuring Chișinău via energy contracts and flows appears to have been eliminated.

The perception of impending economic hardships during a time of war was also alleviated by the EU's political and financial support. Moldova dealt with the expensive inflow of Ukrainian refugees, economic disruptions and a decline in business. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a support package for Moldova in June 2023 for economic and administrative development and connectivity (such as participating in the EU common gas purchasing mechanism). The US has welcomed the EU granting candidate status to Moldova and has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in economic, security and humanitarian aid. With Western financial support, Moldova was able to register 0.7% economic growth in 2023 after a 5.9% decline in 2022 (Cemîrtan, 2023, 2024).

Domestic political perceptions determine the extent that the Black Sea region is on the governmental agenda. When Russia sees the Black Sea as its exclusive area of interest, pro-Russian parties in Moldova lack the motivation to discuss it (Dickinson, 2023). In contrast, pro-Western governments are interested in cooperation with the EU, leading to deeper involvement with Brussels. However, the pro-EU PAS party must consider the leanings of voters to maintain power.

Public Opinion Barometer polls conducted in June 2021 by the Moldovan Institute of Public Policies revealed that approximately 61% of Moldovans believed that the country had a good relationship with the Russian Federation, even though Moscow had led conflicts in the region (IPP BOP, 2021). A poll conducted in November 2022 showed that merely 20% believed that relations were good with the Russian Federation (IPP BOP, 2022). This significant difference indicates that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and related information had an impact on public opinions of Russia. Nevertheless, the poll did not specify whether respondents viewed this worsening of relations positively or negatively.

To better understand Moldovan public perceptions toward the deteriorating relations with Russia, a correlation between responses about Russia and NATO can be helpful. The perception of Moldovans having "good" or "very good" relations with NATO did not change significantly from 2021 to 2022, remaining around 51% in both cases. So, the invasion did not change Moldovan's views about Russia, their security and the region. What did change from 2021 to 2022 was the proportion of respondents within the "overall positive attitude" group. This indicates a shift of positive attitudes toward NATO within the already "positive attitude" group. Yet, the percentage of those who viewed NATO generally negatively did not change.

The closure of six Russian television stations in December 2022 for disseminating Kremlin propaganda and influencing the Moldovan public has not yet yielded results. Voters' perceptions depend on the information they receive from both the media and the government. While the PAS government shut down some Russian misinformation stations in an attempt to minimise manipulations (on voters), there remained gaps due to PAS's unsatisfactory strategic communications (Onisim, 2022). The EU sent a Partnership Mission to Moldova to "counter foreign information manipulation and interference", and the parliament approved the creation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation in 2023. All the while, presidential elections are scheduled for the fall of 2024, with Sandu seeking re-election, and parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2025. Depending on the outcome of the elections, Moldova could swing back to a pro-Russian government. That would partially depend on the current government's ability to convey the attractiveness of the EU to the public, the benefits of energy independence and to share and debate information about security and trade with all voters.

Public opinions reflect PAS' unsatisfactory communication strategy, its public fluctuations between the neutrality and cooperation with NATO in a region affected by war, its delays in communicating more openly about Moldova's interests versus Russia's goals in the region and its lack of debates about the role of Black Sea for the country. Although PAS has a specific section in its official 2023 NSS on "insecurity in the Black Sea basin", it did little to inform voters about it or motivate them to better understand the region.

4 Moldovan Governmental Priorities

PAS continues to maintain European integration as the first governmental priority. The party's governing program follows the Copenhagen Criteria for admission into the EU, which emphasises the development of democracy, economic welfare, free market, rule of law and anti-corruption (European Commission, 2024a). World Bank data shows that countries in Eastern Europe with protracted conflicts on their territories struggle economically and are among the poorest in Europe, and Moldova is no exception (World Bank, 2024). Developing the economy has been a priority for every Moldovan government. However, voters' dissatisfaction with past corruption scandals, such as Russian money laundering schemes and billion-dollar thefts from

the banking sector (Necsutu, 2023), have hindered the country's development and lowered economic development—favoring PAS in elections. When Sandu runs for re-election in the fall of 2024, PAS announced it will simultaneously organise a constitutional referendum on European integration, which is popular among Moldovans. In practical terms, the EU already supports Moldova on all primary concerns related to the war, the economy, energy, finances and other areas of cooperation. Considering these various factors, it is likely that the EU's popularity will assist Sandu in getting re-elected and will make European integration a constitutional clause.

European and US support, and Moldova's more assertive role since 2023, played a crucial role in preventing a war-related economic decline that could have led to internal discontent. Against the odds, as mentioned above, the government even achieved a modest economic recovery. However, further efforts are necessary in justice reform, anti-corruption and fighting organised crime to drive economic development (European Commission, 2023).

In 2021, the country's leading goals involved infrastructure and energy connections with Romania and Ukraine. One objective was to construct a European-gauge railway track to Chișinău because the country still uses the wider Russian imperial tracks, which means changes are needed at the Romanian border, slowing down transportation to and from the EU. Another priority was rehabilitating the Moldovan-Ukrainian railroad linking the two countries. After the invasion started, these priorities came to the governmental forefront. Since the invasion, the Giurgiulești port has increased its capacities, with Moldova and Ukraine extending their agreements through 2024 (European Commission, 2024b). Both countries had agreed in August 2023 to further develop border infrastructure such as bridges, joint checkpoints and railways (Eruygur, 2023).

The 2021 program aimed to complete the Iasi-Chișinău gas pipeline connecting Moldova with Romania. It was initially planned about 20 years ago to minimise Moldova's reliance on Russian gas. By 2023, one year after the war, the PAS government implemented sweeping changes in the gas supply sector. The Iași-Chișinău pipeline became operational in December 2023. This line is part of the larger Greece-Bulgaria-Romania-Hungary interconnect mentioned earlier, and Azerbaijan, another Black Sea country, is a supplier. Moreover, PAS ordered an external audit of the Moldovan gas debt toward Russia, which lowered the debt considerably from $800 million to $8.6 million (Reuters, 2023a). The PAS government decoupled from the Russian gas supply and purchased it directly on European markets (Reuters, 2023b). These measures, enabled by Western financial assistance, substantially diminished Moldova's dependency on Russia (Litra, 2023). The Russian-owned electrical power plant in the separatist Transnistrian region remains one of the unresolved problems in Moldova's energy portfolio. Nonetheless, interconnecting with European networks, notably through Romania, underscores Moldova's efforts to bolster its overall security by strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing its energy security and mitigating risks associated with Russian-controlled energy assets (Mosneag, 2024). Such efforts should help Moldova completely remove Russian energy blackmail.

Moldova shifted its trade from Russia toward the EU, which now accounts for about 60% of its exports. Romania alone imported more Moldovan goods than the

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (National Bureau of Statistics of The Republic of Moldova, 2024). After the invasion, Moldovan exports to Ukraine went up eight times compared to 2021 and are about 3.7 times higher than exports to Russia (ibid). The surge in Moldovan exports to Ukraine (and Bulgaria) and drop toward Russia can be seen in Fig. 1 and reflects the PAS government's economically supportive role toward Kyiv.

Moldova appeared on Russian invasion maps in March 2022, and Russian Black Sea fleet missiles flew overhead. President Sandu, however, ordered a new NSS only in November 2022, months after Ukraine was invaded and managed to repel Russia. Despite the delay between the invasion of neighboring Ukraine and ordering the new NSS, it was still tabled until October 2023, having had all the chances to quietly and swiftly increase their coordination with NATO. The draft was adopted by the parliament in December 2023, almost two years after the full Russian invasion of Ukraine. The NSS is the first official Moldovan policy document to directly reference the Black Sea Region, stating (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023):

> The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine has significantly increased the level of insecurity in the Black Sea region and substantially impacted maritime economic activities, which has a direct impact on the economic interests of the Republic of Moldova. Multilateral regional cooperation formats are weakened and security issues (armed 12 conflicts, regional rivalries, mining of sectors in the Black Sea, dangerous interceptions of airplanes in the airspace over the Black Sea, arms and drug trafficking, etc.) have come to the forefront.

Further objectives of the NSS are "contributing to re-establishing peace and stability in the Black Sea Basin" and "participating in regional efforts to restore peace and stability in the Black Sea region" (ibid). It identifies a security threat as the escalation of "chronic conflicts in neighboring States in the Black Sea Region" (ibid). The strategy places greater emphasis on the development of Moldova with European integration while framing Russia as an opponent of Moldovan independence. It reiterates the need for Russian forces to withdraw from the Transnistrian region and for increased security cooperation with NATO.

Moldova has been cooperating in a variety of regional and bilateral security and economic structures. It received EU support via the European Peace Facility in 2022 (EEAS, 2023), became a member of the Ramstein format in June of that year and received assistance from Germany in 2023 (German Federal Ministry of Defense, 2023). Moldova-Romania-Ukraine signed in 2023 a trilateral cooperation agreement to strengthen security in the Black Sea region and counter Russian threats (Mcgrath, 2023) and Ukrainian security services worked with their Moldovan counterparts to stop Russian intelligence from orchestrating a coup d'état in Moldova (AP News, 2023).

In January, Moldova announced its intention to upgrade its partnership with NATO to an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme. Before the Transnistrian separatists held another congress to ask for Moscow's support in February 2024, NATO warned Russia that it would continue to support Moldova if Russia intervenes in the Transnistrian region (Sava, 2024). In March 2024, France agreed to increase its military cooperation with Moldova (Reuters, 2024). Due to Moldova's limited radar capability, Chișinău intends to purchase a second radar to augment its outdated Soviet

			thousand USD
	2020	2021	2022
EXPORT - total	**2,467,106.08**	**3,144,504.54**	**4,332,145.12**
of which:			
CIS countries [2] – total	**376,962.60**	**466,207.47**	**1,043,042.14**
Armenia	1,288.48	1,105.76	3,311.42
Azerbaijan	3,071.78	4,333.60	4,862.16
Belarus	65,881.91	67,811.32	81,160.67
Russian Federation	216,833.64	276,067.08	190,090.61
Kazakhstan	13,841.56	13,978.16	28,542.69
Kyrgyzstan	716.01	1,740.40	4,917.21
Tajikistan	294.44	270.17	243.98
Turkmenistan	698.57	623.75	1,403.68
Ukraine	69,480.89	92,766.58	720,033.45
Uzbekistan	4,855.30	7,510.65	8,476.27
European Union countries [3),4)] – total	**1,640,367.53**	**1,919,531.97**	**2,537,508.51**
Austria	22,723.79	22,005.81	21,281.17
Belgium	12,522.16	20,868.26	17,851.27
Bulgaria	58,158.28	77,766.04	142,130.83
Czechia	80,461.43	79,000.74	104,112.41
Cyprus	10,139.71	13,608.30	18,901.60
Croatia	2,360.31	2,137.79	3,799.10
Denmark	962.63	1,421.12	1,450.11
Estonia	5,809.45	5,013.77	3,971.13
Finland	1,276.47	1,731.84	446.31
France	29,629.17	32,473.90	37,930.45
Germany	225,600.62	245,445.89	230,789.26
Greece	27,039.62	44,501.65	33,041.69
Ireland	516.18	876.25	855.95
Italy	213,726.24	240,059.08	331,143.47
Latvia	7,399.21	7,213.99	6,866.45
Lithuania	7,698.80	8,435.73	16,645.93
Luxembourg	31.77	9.79	90.51
Malta	6.98	92.48	13.19
Poland	109,764.00	108,508.16	122,380.45
Portugal	9,251.72	16,304.18	22,389.85
Netherlands	35,958.31	35,829.53	64,271.27
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	-	-	-
Romania	706,674.11	833,476.93	1,240,798.38

Fig. 1 Exports of the Republic of Moldova (2020–2022) (USD). *Source* By the author from "Exports by Countries (1997–2022)" annual data by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova

locator base (Dermenji, 2024). All of these developments occurred as an outcome of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

5 Moldova's Strengths and Weaknesses

Moldova's size and small population of 2.8 million is both a strength and a weakness. Its small size makes Moldova vulnerable to threats from larger states such as assertive Russia. The country is sensitive to trade, economic and security fluctuations in the region. At the same time, its modest size makes it easy to reform and integrate into regional European economic and energy frameworks, as well as Euro-Atlantic security structures. Its small size gives it the capacity to adapt fast if external support and expertise are provided. For example, Moldova quickly became a transit country for Ukrainian goods going to and from the EU via Romania (European Commission, 2024b).

A weakness was the Moldovan government's delay in needed security reforms (until 2023). Russia had been previously linking energy pressures with political demands to avoid integration with Western structures. Additionally, the Russian army and separatist military loyal to the Kremlin operated in the Transnistrian region. The West was not as involved in Moldova as it was after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, while PAS may have underestimated Russia's willingness to invade Ukraine in 2022. When the invasion happened, it probably misread international developments and insisted on neutrality—even though "neutral" Ukraine was attacked twice by Russia, one of its own supposed territorial integrity guarantors. It took PAS nine months to request a new NSS and one year to complete it. Moldova's unprotected neutrality, a small army that cannot guarantee the maintenance of such neutrality, outdated military equipment and the slow pace of the security sector reforms continue to be weaknesses despite the fast-track support Moldova started to receive, particularly in 2024.

Moldova's past dependency on Gazprom, which used energy as leverage, and the lack of alternative energy sources posed considerable challenges until 2023, keeping the Moldovan government weak. However, as of 2023, competent measures are being implemented to eliminate such leveraging. Steps are also underway to ensure the diversification of electricity away from the Russian-owned power station in the Transnistrian region. However, Moldova has extremely limited sources of its own energy, making the limited domestic production a partial weakness.

Neither President Sandu nor Prime Minister Dorin Recean has formal training in national security. Recean previously served as Sandu's national security adviser and earlier as interior minister in the 2014 Alliance for European Integration government. The responsibility to advise them would fall on their qualified national security counsellors. Training the governmental upper management officials in comprehensive security aspects would be beneficial. A lack of security and good governance training may have been a weakness contributing to the slow security decision-making process. It also may have prevented the leadership from taking decisive cooperative

steps with the countries in the Black Sea region, which would have helped Moldova's security and development. Additionally, the relatively small size of the modestly funded Moldovan government, a high migration rate that contributes to the reduction of personnel, combined with a lack of quality training in good governance, affects efficient governance beyond security.

The economy, poverty and corruption led to the last election's voting results. Poverty and lack of education among voters in the country should be considered a vulnerability. A certain level of support for pro-Russian parties could be attributed to the "poverty vote", as the parties send social electoral gifts to voters and open "mobile social-services shops" that create the impression of care for the people (Ciobanu, 2021). Many recall the major incident when Ilan Shor and his pro-Russian Șor party were implicated in the 2014 $1 billion theft from the Moldovan banking system. Since corruption is usually a Kremlin foreign policy tool, pro-Russia parties have been sanctioned twice for being facilitators of negative Russian influence in Moldova. The absence of non-corrupt, socially oriented left-wing political parties in the country represents a weakness that can be fixed. Opinion polls confirmed experts' criticism that the PAS government failed to communicate efficiently with the public. The outcomes of the 2024 and 2025 elections partially depend on the current government's ability to share and debate information.

PAS was voted in because the judicial system suffered from corruption and lack of competence. The Russian Laundromat scandal between 2010–2014 that moved tens of billions out of Russia, often through Moldova and Latvia, demonstrated Chișinău's susceptibility to governmental and judiciary corruption (OCCRP, 2017). After all, former president Igor Dodon remains free after being videotaped in 2019 discussing receiving regular funding from Moscow for his pro-Russian Socialist Party. Such leeway is of utmost concern, marking political (and economic) weakness and showing that rule of law and anti-corruption programs are obligatory.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Only in recent years was Moldova able to reduce Russian energy dependencies, financial frauds, disinformation and political manipulations—all the while, it has been an open Kremlin target. The country's Black Sea policy depends on the orientations of the political parties in power. Pro-Russian parties avoid the topic to strengthen the Kremlin's hand while being tempted by the profits emerging from the Giurgiulești port. The pro-Western parties embrace it, sometimes on their own or with an external stimulus, with the Giurgiulești port's importance going beyond mere profits, making it a part of Moldova's security-development relationship.

The upcoming 2024 presidential and 2025 parliamentary elections will determine the political outcomes and power sharing in Moldova. PAS' past failures in public communication may lower the percentage of votes given to them, as well as the lack of corruption convictions for past scandals. Despite shortcomings, pro-Western

parties need to be in power to have a more active European integration path and deeper trade and security connections with the states of the wider Black Sea.

President Sandu's popularity and the organisation of a popular referendum to join the EU at the same time will boost her already good chances to be re-elected, yet it is unclear if PAS is poised to retain power. A group of several pro-Russian parties may also enter the parliament and form a majority coalition. Such a coalition will slow down Moldova's European integration path and will reduce the focus on the Black Sea. The two electoral campaigns in Moldova will take place for almost a year, bringing a certain level of unpredictability. Western support might prove crucial for the pro-Europeans to prevail. The previous election also showed that the Moldovan diaspora gives important electoral support to the Sandu government. In turn, Chișinău could support them better with consular processes and investment guidance before elections.

Polls showed that governmental popularity depends on explaining economy, energy, security and European integration concerns to the public and that PAS' support dropped when it failed to organise information campaigns and to use media to communicate about these important topics. With EU Partnership Mission support, the Moldovan government's Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Misinformation in 2023 needs to be more active to compensate for these shortcomings.

Moldova's size and location imply the possibility of a speedier reform and European integration progress. However, voters need tangible benefits from economic and ethical governance to feel that the government is working to help them personally and to understand how such positive outcomes are connected to European integration. Concrete results in anti-corruption efforts may help change Moldovan popular belief that everyone in government is corrupt and no one is punished. The government was elected on an anti-corruption mandate, so such corruption cases need to be finalised and publicised.

While regional trade and economy are influenced by demand and supply, the government can step up its efforts to ensure greater trade facilitation. Further development of the Giurgiulești port will have long-term trade benefits, while short term, it can provide relief for Ukraine and Moldova. Fears about Russian bombings of the port can be abated with new radars. Western help in acquiring actual air defence capabilities will be very important.

For its security, Moldova relied on its self-declared, non-guaranteed neutrality, which does not offer protection yet continues to be popular among voters. To eliminate this vulnerability and better access Western security alliances, current leaders will need to change public opinion significantly. Moldova's tailored NATO programme must not suffer from neglect or indecisiveness. Its 2023 Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative with Moldova is supporting the modernisation of security, defence and cyber entities, to name a few. Moldova has had relations with NATO since 1992, Chișinău has a NATO Liaison Office and Moldova will move to NATO's Individually Tailored Partnership Program from 2025. By this and other factors, the tragic Russia-Ukraine war is helping Moldova toward Euro-Atlantic and Black Sea cooperative systems. Meanwhile, Chișinău signed a

multilateral security cooperation agreement with Romania and Ukraine; it might consider bilateral defence treaties with these countries for better regional security cooperation and as a temporary measure to protect itself until closer Euro-Atlantic security adaptation. Chișinău should also continue to develop its bilateral military relations with the US, UK, Germany and France.

High-level governmental officials from Moldova can benefit from national and international security training. Romania offers such specialised training and can extend that help. NATO's Liaison Office in Chișinău and its Professional Development Programme for institutions and civil servants can be of assistance in this respect.

Strides have been made to address energy security concerns and additional steps were made to tackle reliance on the Russian-owned electrical power station. Diversifying the energy mix toward domestic renewables or outside nuclear energy and leveraging expertise from developed partners in this field are longer-term avenues worth exploring.

Implementing these recommendations would help steer Moldova further along its European integration path, develop deeper connections with Black Sea countries, take advantage of the region for trade and enhance security partnerships.

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Navigating Uncertainty: Georgia's Black Sea Strategy in a New Environment

Kornely Kakachia

1 Introduction

Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and occupation of its sovereign territories since 2014 is reshaping the geopolitical landscape of Europe and sending ripples of apprehension across the wider Black Sea region. As war made the region's strategic importance more visible for Western actors, governments in this region are now compelled to make national and regional security their paramount focus. The ongoing instability has led to a reassessment of defence strategies and cooperation among neighbouring nations, including Georgia. For Georgia, a country that has historically navigated complex regional dynamics, the situation in Ukraine holds particular significance. As a frontline state in the "grey zone" outside NATO's security umbrella, Georgia has faced the daunting simultaneous tasks of pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, strengthening its democratic resilience, preserving sovereignty and avoiding Russian aggression. Moreover, situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, Georgia's strategic location makes it vulnerable to the spillover effects of the conflict in Ukraine. As a result, this situation propels Tbilisi to adapt its security policy in this ever-changing geopolitical landscape continuously.

Georgia sees the Black Sea region through its strategic interest prism and seeks to enhance its security and stability via its continued pursuit of NATO and EU membership. Although the prospect of Georgia's memberships for both organisations might seem distant, Georgia's political class has faith that integration will serve as an important guarantee for the country's economic and political development, further foster the democratic process and strengthen the country's market economy, security and stability. As the conflict in Ukraine has underscored the importance of this objective, it also demonstrated it could bring unexpected security challenges as well. The war

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against Ukraine has presented obstacles, generated momentum for the EU enlargement process and opened a historic window of opportunity for Georgia. Despite the Georgian government's ongoing reluctance to implement the EU Commission's twelve recommendations and align the country's foreign policy with the EU, a pivotal decision was made at the European Council in December 2022, granting Georgia candidate country status. This newfound status, which aligns Georgia with Ukraine, Moldova and the EU's aspiring Balkan states, is perceived by the Georgian public not just as the irreversibility of its Europeanization project but also as a means to bolster the country's political and economic security. Contestation between Russia and the West continues over territory, influence and ideas in new and old post-Soviet arenas.

In this chapter, I argue that amid current security challenges and geopolitical uncertainties, Georgia is backsliding in terms of democracy. While still pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, it has gradually shifted its main focus away from the West. As the Georgian government is engaging in major projects like the Middle Corridor by forging strategic ties with China (welcoming Chinese investment in Georgian Black Sea ports), it hopes to play an important role in connectivity projects strategically linking China and the EU. However, it is premature to conclusively characterise this as the emergence of a multi-vector foreign policy as Georgia quivers between authoritarian governance and democracy/pluralism. Tbilisi's denunciation of "value-based" foreign policy impacts its Western strategic interests, democratisation and reform process.

2 Georgia and the Black Sea

Georgia's geopolitical significance in the context of the Black Sea region is a complex and multifaceted issue shaped by historical, political, economic and security factors.[1] Being surrounded by great powers and positioning oneself as an edge of Europe, the Black Sea has played an important role in Georgia's foreign policy and national identity discourse for decades. Primarily, this could be explained by geographical fact as its strategic location between East and West, as well as its proximity to Russia, the Middle East and Central Asia, has made it a focal point and kind of pivot state[2] for various geopolitical interests and conflicts. While for Western European countries, the Black Sea is, in a way, a margin, an imaginative *limen* defining its eastern "continental" frontier, for Georgia, the Black Sea serves as its geographic compass,

[1] Georgia has a Black Sea coastline of around 132 kms. It claims the standard 12-nautical miles of territorial waters and 200-nautical miles of exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The limits of the EEZ are not yet fully agreed with Georgia's neighbours, and the maritime claims are complicated by the status of occupied territories (Kuimova & Wezeman, 2018).

[2] Pivot states generally possess military, economic or ideational strategic assets and are coveted by great powers. They are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence of multiple great powers as measured by associations that consist of ties that bind military and economic agreements as well as cultural affinities.

strategically linking it with the Euro-Atlantic community as the geopolitical gateway to Europe (Kakachia et al., 2022). It stands out as the sole region providing Georgia with direct geographic connections to EU and NATO member states such as Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania. Moreover, no longer willing to be labelled merely as a post-Soviet state, nor wishing to be identified with the volatile and fragmented Caucasus region, the Georgian polity sees its ties with the Black Sea community as a way to become affiliated with the Transatlantic community and leave the South Caucasus as a traditionally Russian sphere of influence (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015). By leveraging the Black Sea pivot, Georgia has been trying over the last decades to effectively disengage from the post-Soviet space. It wanted to establish symbolic and physical links with Eastern European states and charter a course of "returning to Europe". The notion of returning to the "European family" contains a strong ideational meaning for both the Georgian public and political elite. It has been a significant part of the mythos of Georgia's national identity, which even predates territorial conflicts in Georgia and conflictual relations with Russia (German & Kakachia, 2022).

Georgia's Black Sea strategy revolves around enhancing its security, boosting economic development, ensuring energy security, fostering connectivity and regional cooperation and pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration. Thus, the Black Sea has always been the focus and cornerstone of modern Georgia's national security and/or foreign policy strategies (Agenda.ge, 2019). Strategic documents from the Georgian government highlight the significance of the Black Sea region as a source of economic exchange, investments and tourism. The National Security Concept, adopted in 2011, underlines the aspiration of the Georgian people to achieve fully-fledged integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU and to contribute to the security of the Black Sea region as a constituent part of the Euro-Atlantic security system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, no date). In this regard, the 2019–2022 Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia emphasises that Georgia's sovereign choice to integrate into NATO and the EU is driven by the fact that as a Black Sea country, it is a member of the European cultural, political and geographical space (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, no date b). The National Security Concept also contains two subsections devoted to partnerships with Ukraine and Turkey—two large Black Sea countries and strategic partners of Georgia. The document speaks of Ukraine as the key player in providing stability to the region and European Security, as well as an ally on its own path of European integration (ibid). Similarly, Turkey is a vital partner for Georgia, a key partner in security and defence matters with its neighbouring NATO border. Georgia also serves as a vital linkage point between Azerbaijan and Turkey, as most of the transit routes between the two pass through it.

Because the wider Black Sea identity is a stepping-stone to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, Georgia's security concerns figure into its relations with regional structures. Sharing a Comprehensive Security approach promoted by global and regional powers, Georgia has been actively engaging in regional initiatives, such as Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), BLACKSEAFOR and GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova). In the last decades, these platforms provided opportunities for Georgia to collaborate with neighbouring countries in addressing shared soft security concerns (social-political, environmental challenges, trafficking and

organised crime, illegal migration, trade and maritime cooperation, tourism development, blue economy perspectives, transport facilitation and management of frozen conflicts) and promoting stability in the region. As Russia's unjustified war with Ukraine curtailed these and other regional initiatives in order to strengthen regional security (based on a comprehensive security approach for the indefinite future), surprisingly, the war also expedited new opportunities for the region in terms of projects related to connectivity, infrastructure and energy that do not involve Russia.

3 The Ukraine War and Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy in Flux

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 again illustrated that the Russian Federation is willing to use direct military aggression against its neighbours in order to restore its hegemony in the region. The Kremlin's revisionist foreign policy had a significant impact on regional security as well as Georgia's vital national interest. With a tradition of friendly and strategic relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv, Georgians saw the struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty as an analogue of their own fate. Many in Georgia believe that the actions of Russia in Ukraine are a repeat of what happened in Georgia in August 2008. However, unlike ordinary Georgians, the policy on Ukraine that the Georgian Dream (GD) government pursued during the war was a significant departure from the approach its predecessors adopted. While Tbilisi has underlined its full support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and referred to Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories as a land grab, the reaction from the Georgian government was extremely cautious and self-restrained. Believing that the geopolitical stand-off between Russia and the West over Ukraine left little space for any meaningful incentives for Georgian diplomacy, Tbilisi issued carefully worded statements that sought to avoid irritating Moscow.

Despite voting against Russia in the United Nations General Assembly and the Council of Europe, it refused to join any Western sanctions against Moscow, dismissing them as unproductive. The reaction amounted to mild appeasement of Russia and deepened Georgia's estrangement from the West. Georgia's allies in the US and Europe were surprised by Tbilisi's rather passive foreign policy after the Russian invasion, especially considering that Moscow had demanded that NATO close the door on Georgia's future membership as well as Ukraine's. This, along with its ambivalent position over the war in Ukraine, raised the question of whether the Georgian government is heading toward self-imposed Finlandisation—the policy of strict neutrality between Moscow and the West that Finland followed during the decades of the Cold War (Kakachia & Kakabadze, 2022).

Even with the show of Western resolve over Ukraine, Tbilisi tried to maintain a low profile in international politics and stay off Russia's radar. The government's policy created the impression that under "normalisation" politics, Tbilisi's self-imposed restrictions would outweigh the benefits it would potentially receive under a more

active "value-based" foreign policy. It seemed that narrowly defined national interests based on party interests and short-term political gains were guiding Georgia's Ukraine and Black Sea policy, making its key focus rather vague and creating strategic ambiguity. This positioning of decisionmakers in Tbilisi also went against the wishes of the absolute majority of Georgians, as 96 percent of those polled stated that the war concerns Georgians as well, and 87 percent think it is their war, too (Civil Georgia, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d). It also needs to be noted that after the US and EU, Ukraine is perceived by the Georgian population as its main political ally (International Republican Institute, 2023). Additionally, a Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) 2022 opinion poll suggested 61 percent of Georgians think that their government should do more to support Ukraine, and 66 percent that Georgia should join all or at least some of the established sanctions on Russia (Civil Georgia, 2022a). Strong support for the Ukrainian cause among Georgians is also illustrated by the existence of the Georgian National Legion that is comprised of volunteers fighting in the war zone. While public attitudes and opinion polls keep the Georgian government's overall foreign policy trajectory in check, Tbilisi has officially been focused on short-term economic and subsequent domestic political gains. Those imply closer cooperation with illiberal actors, especially China, with Georgia's Black Sea ports playing a crucial role in emergent trade and transport routes.

4 The Black Sea and Georgia's Security Challenges

The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 became a pivotal moment for the transatlantic community to re-evaluate its approach and strategy toward the wider Black Sea region (Melvin & Seskuria, 2022). In both its 2022 Strategic Concept (NATO, 2023a, 2023b) and the 2023 Vilnius Summit communiqué (NATO, 2023b), NATO labelled Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." These documents also underscored the "strategic importance" of the Black Sea. The US, NATO's largest military member, echoed these sentiments in its 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (US Congress, 2024). It emphasised the imperative to strengthen defences in the region and enhance cooperation on Black Sea security, not only bilaterally with regional partners like Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Georgia but also with NATO and the EU. This approach aims to minimise the risk of redundancy and improve interoperability. The US is also leading the Maritime Domain Awareness in the Black Sea project (US Department of State, 2022), in which Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia are participants. Thus, the conflict opened new opportunities for non-NATO countries like Georgia or Moldova to draw more attention to their security concerns and to work closer with Western allies to mitigate challenges. This interest in increased engagement is reciprocal because it is not only about Georgia benefiting from security guarantees, it is also vital for NATO and the EU to maintain an alternative transit route that bypasses Russia via the Black Sea region, beyond Kremlin control and influence.

Russia's growing military presence on NATO's southern flank and its expanding naval power in the Black Sea restrict Western access to the Caucasus region, potentially hindering efforts to counterbalance Russian influence. Nonetheless, Georgia actively supports NATO activities in the Black Sea, viewing this collaboration as crucial to maintaining regional stability (Ministry of Defense of Georgia, 2017). In the last decade, NATO has endorsed a set of measures to enhance the situational awareness of the Black Sea basin, increasing support for both Georgia and Ukraine. This included activities such as training maritime forces and coast guards, conducting port visits and joint exercises and facilitating the exchange of information (NATO, 2019). After February 2022, NATO agreed to follow the example of the Baltic States after 2014 and establish multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary (countries of the wider Black Sea region) (Hamilton, 2023). These developments create a window of opportunity for Tbilisi to be more actively involved in Black Sea security matters, as well as advance on its Euro-Atlantic path. Georgia's Batumi, Poti and Anaklia (under construction) ports can play a major role in developing the Black Sea security strategy. Yet, a lot will depend on to what extent Georgia can position itself as a provider of security, align its EU and NATO integration path together with that of Ukraine and remain committed to pluralism, domestic resilience and democratisation (ibid). The last aspect is also closely interlinked with Georgia's European integration process.

The major weakness and challenge for Georgia in the region is geographical proximity and having no land border with the EU. Turkey, despite giving Georgia its full support for Alliance membership (and sharing its only NATO border), maintains close relations with Russia. Ankara shares the interest with Moscow to keep non-Black Sea powers outside of the region, attempting to turn it into a Russian-Turkish condominium (Melvin & Seskuria, 2022). While Moscow has been building up its Black Sea military infrastructure as a tool of power projection in the wider region, Georgia's present Black Sea approach lacks strategic thinking and long-term planning. As a result, Georgia remains increasingly vulnerable to Russian threats, on top of its low military spending. Moreover, Tbilisi's policies so far have been that of reacting rather than proactively addressing security concerns and vulnerabilities. In this proactive approach, restoring damaged relations with Ukraine will be of vital importance. In the post-war security architecture that will be formed around the Black Sea, Kyiv's role will be fundamental, and hence, restoring their strategic partnership should be the key priority of Georgia's foreign and security policy toward the Black Sea region. Supporting Ukraine is not just about Kyiv's security but also about Black Sea security and Euro-Atlantic security.

5 Russia's Maritime Expansion in the Black Sea and Georgia's Naval Security Challenges

In the aftermath of the conflict in Ukraine, Georgia has faced heightened challenges in naval security. The pressing need for a comprehensive naval security strategy is underscored by the evolving geopolitical landscape and the challenges posed by Russia's assertive naval presence in the Black Sea since 2014 when Russia occupied Crimea. The elimination of the Georgian Navy after the Russian 2008 invasion and its subsequent transformation into a coastal patrol force left the country with limited maritime defence capabilities. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent reinforcement of their Black Sea military presence intensified the need for robust naval security measures for Georgia.

Georgia is reliant on external partnerships to bolster its naval security. Therefore, a new challenge arises with the possibility of Russia establishing a permanent naval presence at Georgia's Ochamchira base that may impede Western investments in the Anaklia seaport. The ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive forced Russia to pull out much of its Black Sea fleet from the Crimean Peninsula and look for safer options; it sought this base to shelter its navy away from Ukrainian attacks at Sevastopol and Novorossiysk. Although the Ochamchira port is not deep enough to accommodate large Russian warships, it can harbour smaller vessels that could support wartime supply and logistics operations, which increases sea-born security risks for Georgia. It can also sabotage the developing port at Anaklia (Interpressnews, 2023).

Russia's maritime activities at Ochamchira strengthen Russian-backed separatism in Abkhazia and manifest Moscow's persistent efforts to undermine, destabilise and exert enduring influence over Georgia (Lomsadze, 2023). Moscow has the potential to transform the region into an additional theatre of conflict if it uses that versatile strategic asset for endeavours against Ukraine, possibly extending the impact of the conflict into the rest of Georgia. The acquisition of the Ochamchira base not only grants Russia the capacity to launch assaults from Georgia's shores but also heightens Georgia's susceptibility to retaliatory actions from Ukraine (Blank, 2023). Because the establishment of a permanent Russian naval base enhances the Russian Navy's capability, the development of regional projects promoted by the EU or China via Central Asia and the Caucasus, such as the Middle Corridor, may be impeded. If implemented, Russia's actions, corruption and undermining of democratic governance threaten not only Georgia's status as a global east–west connectivity hub but also security in the wider Black Sea region. This situation highlights the persistent challenges and vulnerabilities of Georgia's maritime defences, prompting concerns about Georgia's ability to independently address its naval security needs in the face of regional threats.

6 Georgia's Connectivity and Geopolitics of the Middle Corridor

Joining the EU and NATO has been a longstanding goal for Georgia; however, the second goal was also considered as a means to achieve the first. The geopolitical upheaval resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine compelled the EU to venture beyond its customary boundaries in pursuit of exceptional decisions, potentially including an eastward expansion of the EU. While there are diverging views on the EU's strategic interests in the neighbourhood among member states and its role in the post-Ukraine-war international order, Georgia is confronted with a historic opportunity. Geopolitical developments and societal pressure after February 2022 forced the inward-looking Georgian government to follow Moldova and Ukraine and apply for EU membership rather than wait for 2024, as initially planned. Granting Georgia candidate status and the potential for further integration into EU structures took one-step further the country's European integration process that includes Association and Free Trade agreements and a visa-free travel regime.

As Georgia seeks integration with the EU, its significance in developing transit and energy routes between Europe and Asia grows. Therefore, key objectives for Tbilisi include enhancing its transit capabilities with the EU, leveraging benefits from European Energy Union membership and actively participating in the Trans-European Transport Network. Georgia has been a part of various international transportation corridors, including TRACECA, Lapis Lazuli, the Black Sea-Caspian Sea International Transport Corridor and the Middle Corridor. The war against Ukraine prompted Georgia to be more central in alternative transit routes bypassing Russia—Moscow's isolation makes overland trade routes traversing Russia politically challenging for international shippers. As a result, some cargo has been redirected along the Middle Corridor connecting China to Europe through Central Asia, the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. It is a mega network of sea and land freight routes accessing lucrative markets in Europe (and beyond) supported by the EU, China and international banks. However, for the project to succeed, it requires substantial political support for funding, must address capacity limitations and needs to find solutions to compete with the Northern Sea Route and other maritime transport in terms of costs.

Georgia's strategic location on the eastern edge of the Black Sea has made it particularly crucial for the Middle Corridor to take off and has pushed connectivity to the top of the country's foreign policy agenda (Standish, 2022). Consequently, Georgia has enthusiastically embraced its newfound transit role and has openly tried to take advantage of it, including initiating new infrastructure projects and a "strategic partnership" with China, which considers the Middle Corridor as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Georgia's strategic location and the fact that, as of this writing, it is the only country in the region with free trade agreements with both China and the EU makes it an attractive route. For instance, in comparison to 2022, in the first five months of 2023, trade turnover between Kazakhstan and Georgia increased by 227% (BPN, 2023), while the transit of goods from China to Europe through Georgia within the same time period increased by 77% (Accent News, 2023).

While the Georgian government is optimistic about the project, some of the assertions regarding this route are exaggerated. A recent study by the World Bank found that although the Middle Corridor offers Central Asia and the South Caucasus an avenue to diversify trade routes and engage with various partners, transportation costs of the Corridor are high and more importantly, unstable (World Bank, 2023). Substantial geographic, political, economic and governance challenges may hinder the success of the project. Consequently, given its proximity to Russia and the associated vulnerabilities, it is unlikely that it will evolve into a major corridor linking China and Europe. It can be seen as an additional corridor that might one day play a greater role in connecting the South Caucasus with Europe while fostering regional development. The increasing relevance of Georgia as a transit corridor carries some potential risks as well. For example, increased engagement, business and investments with authoritarian China implies economic, political and security stumbling blocks.

7 Energy Connectivity and Controversies Surrounding the Anaklia Port

Georgia's strategic geographic location makes it a natural bridge between the West and the East, serving as a gateway for eight landlocked countries of South Caucasus and Central Asia. The advancement of strategic connectivity in the South Caucasus, especially in energy infrastructure, transportation and digital connectivity, holds significant advantages for Georgia. The process also reinforces the resilience of Georgia by reducing reliance on Russia and creating new economic prospects. Strategic connectivity serves as a factor that can improve security, support economic development, foster regional cooperation and positively contribute by offering alternative routes for energy, transportation, trade and data connection to Western markets (Kutelia & Sikharulidze, 2021).

Tbilisi is an important tether between Central Asia and Europe for the reduction of dependencies on Russia. As of this writing, about 70% of Georgia's energy comes from hydropower, making the country a potential source of green energy for Europe (Ristau, 2023). The German state-owned investment and development bank, Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), is already looking into investing in expanding the power grid, while the Georgian state electricity producer (GSE) expects Georgia to expand the capacity of regenerating renewable energy from existing 4,600 megawatts (MW) to 10,000 MW by 2033 (ibid). The export of green energy from Georgia to Europe is planned to be achieved through a power line that is supposed to run 1,100 kms through the Black Sea. While this cable is expected to be operational by 2029, green energy could also be transmitted to Europe via Turkey, which would require Georgia to decouple from the Russian power grid and connect to the Turkish-European grid, forming contracts between Ankara and Brussels (ibid).

Meanwhile, in the face of uncertainty and geopolitical instability in the Black Sea region caused by Russia's invasion, Brussels has displayed increased interest

in endorsing strategic infrastructure initiatives, such as China's BRI, while simultaneously aiming to compete with it and propose alternative options. According to different estimates, the EU will invest some €300 billion on infrastructure and other projects as part of Global Gateway, which cuts Russia out of its trade networks (Standish, 2022). In addition, under the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), the EU will mobilise around €1.2 billion in public and private investments, including for flagship projects such as Black Sea Connectivity (digital and energy connections with the EU) and for enhancing physical connections between Georgia and the EU through feeder/ferry lines and refurbished ports (European Commission, no date). For example, the Poti-Constanta ferry service was launched in 2023 between Georgia and Romania as a replacement for the Poti-Chernomorsk ferry service between Georgia and Ukraine that was interrupted due to the war (Civil Georgia, 2023). This is the first ferry service that carries both passengers and cargo between the EU and Georgia.

Capitalising on the opportunity, Georgian authorities have taken decisive steps. Due to Georgia's perceived transit limitations and absence of a deep-sea port facility, Tbilisi has revived the Anaklia deep-sea port project, previously terminated amid controversy related to legitimate concerns about its geography, rising costs and complex logistics, with the state now assuming a majority share.[3] Private investments are being sought to supplement funding. Once complete, according to Georgian government estimates, the port will serve as the primary entry point for imports for around 17 million residents of landlocked countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia and will also provide critical supply routes for nearly 146 million people living within the immediate region (SMEC, 2023). Consequently, it has the potential to transform Georgia's position as a crucial bond between Europe and Asia, alleviating the country's reputation as a linchpin in facilitating global trade. Nevertheless, the absence of a Western company participating in its construction could result in reduced Western influence in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region.

To beef up the project, the Georgian government is expeditiously working on finishing the construction of the nation's primary East–West highway and modernising the government-owned railway system, aiming to enhance capacity for handling increased international cargo. The Anaklia project is entangled in a geopolitical rivalry involving China, the US and Russia, spanning the entire Eurasian continent. The US has been actively opposing China's expansion of influence over crucial infrastructure elements such as roads, ports, railways and natural resources. Given Anaklia's strategic location, which aligns with Chinese logistical interests, the US has unsuccessfully endeavoured to limit Beijing's involvement in the project. As of this writing, a Chinese-Singaporean and Swiss-Luxemburg consortia are among the finalists in the Anaklia Deep Sea Port private partnership selection competition. In certain perspectives, the outcome of the bidding process for the Anaklia port is viewed as a crucial indicator of whether Georgia will align more closely with the EU

[3] Anaklia Port Company and Dutch investor Bob Meijer are seeking arbitration with Georgia at the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) over the project's cancellation.

and Western nations or if it will pivot toward reinforcing connections with Russia and China.[4]

A notable achievement in recent endeavours was the initiation of Black Sea Digital Connectivity, an underwater cable project connecting European and South Caucasus electricity systems, enabling the export of electricity from the region. As the EU decided to turn its back on Russian fossil fuels and diversify toward reliable energy partners, the Georgian government considered a 1,200 km submarine HVDC cable connection with Romania. In late 2022, a joint agreement was signed with Hungary and Azerbaijan, with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in attendance (Civil Georgia, 2022b). Bulgaria and Armenia expressed interest in the endeavour, and the EU pledged €2.3 billion for its construction. Georgia and the EU see the Black Sea electric cable as connecting both sides of the Black Sea and with the Caspian Sea region, opening prospects for digital communication and energy (Civil Georgia, 2022c). Tbilisi sees the project as a new transmission route full of opportunities that could transform Georgia into an electricity and digital hub integrated with the EU internal electricity market. Brussels hopes it will reinforce the security of European supplies while harnessing electricity from renewable sources (European Commission, 2022). However, according to a study by the German Economic Team (Staske & Stubbe, 2024), while the project attracted a high level of investor interest, its economic viability remains unclear, and construction and financing challenges may pose significant hurdles before implementation. Another aspect of the project is the security risk, as the cable would be physically vulnerable to sabotage and easily accessible by the Russian Navy, for instance. This issue could also create problems related to insurability.

In general, while acknowledging the positive aspects of the assorted projects, there are concerns about the Georgian government leaning toward authoritarianism. A fear exists that the Georgian Dream government perceives its own heightened geopolitical significance amidst the Ukraine war, sees the value of the corridors for numerous actors, and feels Europe may overlook democratic backsliding in the country in the process. Lately, Tbilisi seems inspired by Azerbaijan's example, where the absence of democracy has neither hindered EU cooperation nor the signing of energy agreements (O'Byrne, 2022). As the Georgian government, to some extent, benefits from the geopolitical approach of the EU, from a Brussels perspective, the challenge is how to finally balance geopolitics and geoeconomics with values, forming an integral part of the EU's foreign policy interests in the region (Gabritchidze, 2023).

[4] Interestingly, Georgia has forged stronger ties with China amid a backdrop of increasingly strained relations with the West and generally accommodating policies towards Russia since the onset of the Ukraine war.

8 Future Prospects

The Russia-Ukraine war revealed a high degree of vulnerability emanating from Russia's dominance in the Black Sea area, limiting Georgia's foreign policy options. The war weakened Russia's regional influence. It caused an erosion of trust in the Kremlin as a dependable actor while eroding its resources to exert power in the neighbourhood. The Georgian government's ambivalent standing toward the war and reputational damage has decreased Georgia's resilience and increased its military and security liability to Russian threats. The Black Sea will remain a contested area for years to come.

The war also highlighted the need for increased cooperation and coordination between the countries of the region, which must work together to address common security challenges, such as terrorism and organised crime, while also seeking to resolve existing territorial conflicts peacefully. Despite the acute challenges brought by the war, there is an anticipation that the Ukraine crisis might prompt Western leaders to take assertive measures to enhance the Western integration of the region, including Georgia. Tbilisi's future prospects will hinge significantly on how the new balance of power in the broader Black Sea region is reshaped as a result of the war. Turkey, as of now, the only NATO member that shares a border with Georgia, will remain an important partner for Georgia in the foreseeable future. Yet, Ukraine's possible membership in NATO is going to further tilt the balance in the region, limit Russia's military capabilities in this area and reduce its access to the Black Sea. With continued sanctions and international isolation of Russia, Georgia's role as a vital link in trade and connectivity between Europe and Asia may increase even further. Nevertheless, the extent to which Georgia can sustain Western strategic interest will hinge significantly on its success in the democratisation and reform process.

If Tbilisi manages to successfully use this window of opportunity that appeared as a consequence of the war in Ukraine and considerably advances on its Euro-Atlantic integration journey, it will have major repercussions for the South Caucasus and the wider Black Sea region. If developments take this turn, Georgia could become an important outpost and a window for the West into Central Asia (dominated by illiberal actors) and provide the resources Europe needs without Russia. Although it remains uncertain when the war will end and what its outcome might be, the diminished position of Russia currently in the Black Sea could potentially be filled by increased engagement from the EU and NATO. Their involvement could play a crucial role in stabilising the Eastern European neighbourhood while countering any malign influences from China and Russia. Georgia, with its strategic location and aim to become a regional transit hub, could acquire an important role in the EU's Global Gateway strategy that is aimed at counterbalancing Beijing's BRI.

However, there is also the possibility that the trajectory will go in the opposite direction. With increasing illiberal trends in Georgia, its pursuit of a transactional foreign policy and the wedge between Kyiv and Tbilisi widening, there is a risk of Georgian policymakers aligning with the geopolitical authoritarian basket of China, Russia, Turkey and Iran. Should this scenario unfold, it could potentially disrupt

the existing Associated Trio and defer Georgia's Euro-Atlantic membership indefinitely. In this context, there is an urgent need to develop a clearer understanding of the security dynamics and challenges facing the wider Black Sea region and to explore opportunities for more EU involvement. Both Brussels and Washington have vehemently condemned Russia's illegitimate and violent actions in Ukraine's territorial waters, the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. Despite its grey-zone NATO status, Georgia is in a position to tune and collaborate on initiatives by and between Western partners on Black Sea regional security issues. Particularly, the Tbilisi-Brussels connection must be continuously enhanced, considering the recent signing of association, trade and visa-free travel agreements. Georgia can also provide mutually beneficial international communication, business and transportation opportunities involving China, Central Asia and the Middle East—without diminishing values-based politics.

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Comprehensive Security in the Wider Black Sea Region: The Connection with the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea

Stefan Meister

1 Introduction—Geopolitics in the Wider Black Sea Region

Black Sea security must be analysed as part of a broader security, connectivity and geopolitical complex. The wider Black Sea region is not only connected with the Mediterranean but also comprises the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and parts of the Middle East as well as Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The South Caucasus is an interface between Russia, Iran, the Middle East, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. First, the regional context with the three South Caucasus States—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—needs to be analysed with their conflict zones and connections with direct neighbors. Second, the wider geopolitical context is important, where different players like Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel and the EU are involved.

The interconnection between internal and external security is crucial for the region. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a precondition for its military buildup and dominance in the Black Sea region, and a springboard for its military campaign in Syria since 2015 (Bartsch et al., 2020). The Second Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) War in 2020 and Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022 have had a major impact on the geopolitics and security of the wider Black Sea region, including the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. Both events not only changed the geopolitical and security balance in the South Caucasus but also impacted connectivity, human security and regional conflict zones in the wider region.

In striking a ceasefire agreement between Baku and Yerevan in the Second NK War, Russia tried to keep its position as the main negotiator and actor in regional security (President of Russia, 2020). It deployed "peace forces" in the disputed region, leading it for the first time in decades to have a troop presence in all three South Caucasus countries. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine weakened Russia's security capabilities in the South Caucasus. It had to focus its military resources on Ukraine, but

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it also increased its interests (and connectivity) with Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran. Therefore, Moscow has become more flexible toward the interests of Ankara and Baku, which weakens Armenia's bargaining position in conflict settlement. Azerbaijan is ambitious to become a key security actor in the South Caucasus, shaping the regional order and benefiting from trade and supply of hydrocarbons and renewable energy to Europe via the Black Sea as well as between Russia and Iran. Iran seeks connections northward via the South Caucasus and the Black Sea and has deepened its relations with Russia since 2022 in many areas. It wants to increase trade, mainly in hydrocarbons, and decrease the influence of the US and Israel in its neighborhood (Manoucherhri, 2016).

The US was particularly active in the 1990s and 2000s in the South Caucasus and Caspian region in security, energy and connectivity. Washington's support of building pipeline infrastructure from the Caspian Sea via the South Caucasus to Europe made Azerbaijan and Georgia more independent from Russia. But in the past ten years, there was decreasing engagement by Washington in the wider region, and shifting priorities toward the Asia–Pacific region.

For the EU, the South Caucasus and Caspian region were never a priority. Brussels invited the three South Caucasus states to its Eastern Partnership policy in 2009 but was never interested in offering membership. This only changed with the 2022 war, when Brussels offered Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia candidate status as a reaction to the new security and geopolitical environment. While Georgia always expressed interest in joining the EU, this was never the case with Armenia and Azerbaijan. In terms of regional conflict zones, the EU was present with a monitoring mission in the Georgian conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but NK was managed by the OSCE Minsk group. Here, co-chairs France and the US defaulted on their leadership and accepted the dominant role of the third co-chair, Russia.

Both the US and the EU did not learn their lessons from the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and did not react adequately to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. As a result, Russian leadership did not expect a major Western reaction to its large-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. For a long time, EU member states underestimated the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus and Caspian region for European security and energy supply. They did not define their interests in the regions properly. Only Russia's large-scale invasion has brought back some attention of Western actors in the wider Black Sea area, without answering the question of what is their strategic goal or vision for the region.

The focus of this chapter is to analyse how security and connectivity in the wider Black Sea region are closely interlinked with geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus and, to some extent, the Caspian region. The geopolitical and security changes in this region in the past decade have strongly impacted relations between Russia and the West, trade, connectivity and human security in the wider Black Sea region. This article focuses particularly on the regional interaction of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia and Turkey, as well as the EU and the US. The main thesis is that a new regional order is in the making, where smaller states like Azerbaijan will play a more prominent role due to the absence or weakening of a hegemonic power (Russia). There is an absence of a critical mass of "hegemonic pull factors" from any actor,

combined with a lack of any common value or identity system that could underline confidence in connectivity and a new regional security order. This makes extended disorder likely, with the "power of the strong" undermining the idea of security through connectivity.

2 The Security Complex in the Wider Black Sea Region

Referring to the theoretical chapter in this book, this chapter is based on the concept of comprehensive security, which looks beyond traditional hard security into human security, energy security, connectivity and trade (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2020). That does not mean that hard security is not of importance for the South Caucasus, as the Second NK War and the military takeover of NK by Azerbaijan in 2023 have shown. But there are few regions where connectivity, trade, energy and human security, as well as hard security, are so interconnected as in the wider Black Sea region. Georgia is the only South Caucasus state that is directly situated on the Black Sea (cf. Kakachia in this book). It has become an important transit hub for oil and gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe and for cargo between Russia and Armenia. Therefore, it is closely connected with Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey and the EU. It is a key country in the South Caucasus but also for the post-Soviet region.

At the same time, regional conflicts and different strategic interests undermine security and connectivity in the region. Therefore, we need to analyse how interconnections and regional conflict zones impact regional security. The South Caucasus security complex is discussed in the framework of ethnic conflict studies and post-Soviet conflicts. But it is also a playground for great power struggles and crucial for the interlink between Europe, the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Russia and the Middle East (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

Focusing on Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran in the context of wider Black Sea security, access to the Black Sea and broader security are of fundamental importance for all three states. However, none of the countries have a specific Black Sea policy or policy documents that discuss their role in the region. Critical for all of them is connectivity with the Black Sea for access to Europe. Here, the Russian war against Ukraine is of prime importance because it changes the regional balance of power and creates more insecurity for the entire region. Ongoing interactions with Russia, Turkey, the EU, the US and NATO are imperative for all three countries.

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as a part of the former Soviet Union, have traditionally been dominated by Russia, a Black Sea and Caspian Sea country. Turkey's role in the region has been growing due to its investments and security engagements. As a close ally of Azerbaijan, supporting the Second NK War, Turkey is a geopolitical competitor of Russia and Iran. At the same time, all three countries share the interest of keeping Western countries out of the region. The Second NK War, though, destroyed the regional security balance, and no new regional security order has emerged. Russia has guaranteed regional stability since the fall of the Soviet

Union even while it instrumentalised conflict zones in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Azerbaijan (NK) (Meister, 2021a).

For some time, Russia will remain a key actor in the South Caucasus; its interest in trade and connectivity in the region has grown since 2022. But, the war against Ukraine may further weaken Russia militarily and economically, impacting its power position in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. We can observe a reshuffle of the regional order where "third powers" like Turkey, the EU, Iran, Israel and China are playing a growing role, with Azerbaijan also striving to shape regional security.

Iran has not been a key factor in the South Caucasus for the past three decades. It was comfortable for Teheran that Moscow guaranteed authoritarian stability in the South Caucasus and the Caspian region and limited Turkish and Western influence (Kaleji, 2023a). The agreement of the Caspian littoral states is an example of how cooperation between Russia, Iran and other regional countries can work. By making concessions on the division of the Caspian Sea, Russia pushed for an approach whereby the neighboring states solve their own problems without external actors, especially without the West. Moscow agreed to divide the Caspian Sea into national sectors in return for non-littoral countries not gaining access to the Sea and not being able to deploy military infrastructure. In this bargaining, Russia had largely dropped its resistance to the construction of a Trans-Caspian infrastructure for the acceptance of its military dominance by littoral states (Meister, 2021b). For Iran, this was in line with its interests since its priority was that neither the US nor Turkey was active at the Caspian Sea. Furthermore, with its huge Azeri minority of up to 20 million people mainly living in the north, Azerbaijan is a threat to Iranian territorial integrity, which is further fuelled by military and intelligence cooperation between Baku and Israel (Souleimanov & Kraus, 2017).

Besides Turkey, Israel played a key role in the military performance of Azerbaijan in the Second NK War. It is an important supplier of modern weapons to Azerbaijan, has increased its oil purchase from the Caspian country, benefits from this cooperation in weakening Iran's position and improves ties with Turkey as a supporter of Baku (Aharon, 2023, p. 1). This cooperation has increased tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran for a short period of time (Scollon, 2023). Azerbaijan, as a moderate Muslim country, has no interest in the activities of Islamic groups on its territory and understands Iran as a possible threat. Simultaneously, Armenia has become an important partner for Teheran on transit and energy cooperation. This cooperation has increased since the Second NK War (Gavin, 2022). Iranian leadership also welcomed the 3 + 3 format for the South Caucasus, proposed by Turkey to deal with regional questions without the West, which brings the three South Caucasian states, Russia, Turkey and Iran, together. This format can be understood as an attempt to reorder the region after the 2020 NK conflict without external actors or multilateral organisations like the OSCE (Smolnik & Sarjveladze, 2022). However, it has never really been active since Georgia has no interest in participating (because of Russia), and Armenia feels uncomfortable in a format with Azerbaijan and Turkey without Western participation. The loss of trust in Russia after Azerbaijan's military takeover of NK further contributes to Yerevan's distancing from the format. Therefore, bilateral and trilateral formats and transactional bargaining increasingly dominate regional relations.

What we observe is a transition from a model of competing hegemonic regionalisms dominated by Russia and the EU in the past 30 years toward an illiberal regionalism that would keep the West and multilateral institutions out of the region. But there is no value basis for it, resulting instead in a series of strategic triangles (Dittmer, 1981), which is what makes the geopolitics of the region so complex and contradictory.

Azerbaijan's military takeover of NK opens opportunities for ending the conflict over the disputed region with a peace agreement and increasing connectivity in the region. For the first time since the First NK War (1988–94), the reconstruction of Soviet railway lines is discussed (Dreyfuss & Hugot, 2021) with the aim to open borders and facilitate trade in and outside the South Caucasus. However, it also creates the risk of further escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The dominance of Azerbaijan in regional security and its ability to dictate an agreement with Armenia (because of a power asymmetry) creates the threat of revenge and humiliation, which undermines any peace agreement. Armenia's dependency on Russian security guarantees makes the country particularly vulnerable in times of shifting Russian interests. With the Second Karabakh War in 2020 there is a collapse of any deterrence to use force in the region to enforce interest policy.

3 Connectivity, Trade and Human Security

The wider Black Sea region linking the South Caucasus, Caspian Sea and Iran is an intersection of transport routes. It provides an east–west axis between Asia and Europe, the Transcaspian International Transit Route or so-called Middle Corridor (OECD, 2023) and the North–South Corridor between Russia and Iran (and the Indian Ocean). A network of oil and gas pipelines connects the Caspian Sea via the South Caucasus and the Black Sea with Europe (Litvishko et al., 2022, p. 1246).

In Soviet times, all South Caucasus countries were closely interconnected with today's Russia and with each other. This changed with the end of the Soviet Union and particularly with the First NK War when all connections between Armenia and Azerbaijan were cut off, and Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in support of Azerbaijan. While the northern railway connections from Armenia to Georgia and Azerbaijan to Russia continued to work, Iran's railway lines with the Caucasus were severed, and cargo along the borders with its South Caucasian neighbors dropped (Kaleji, 2021). As a result, Iran was much less engaged and relevant for developments in the South Caucasus.

Georgia became the key transit country for the entire region, connecting the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan with Turkey and the Black Sea as well as Russia and Armenia. With the construction of the Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC) and the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline (SCP) via Georgia (with US support), Azerbaijan has become independent from the Russian pipeline network and improved its bargaining position toward Moscow and the EU (Shaffer, 2018).

For Azerbaijan, Armenia and partly Iran, it is important to get access to the Black Sea and further to Europe via Georgia. Europe is not only a potential market but also crucial to diversify trade. Besides Iran and Armenia, India has a growing interest in developing the International North–South Transport Corridor as well as the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor (Kaleji, 2023b). Several agreements with Iran on corridors might increase its role in the region in the next years. Iranian trade with Russia has grown since the 2022 war on Ukraine, which increases the interest of both sides in better trade connections via the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea (Kaleji, 2023a).

The 2020 victory of Azerbaijan theoretically opens opportunities for transit through the territory of Armenia to its exclave Nakhchivan and then further to Turkey, as well as a border opening between Armenia and Turkey if a peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan is signed. In the 2020 ceasefire agreement, it is written that all "…economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western region of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic…" (President of Russia, 2020). The ceasefire agreement includes a connection between Azerbaijan and its exclave, Nakhchivan, via the territory of the Armenian Meghri district. However, control of the railways, highways and border regime is disputed, even if they should be overseen by the Russian border service according to the ceasefire agreement (ibid.). Both sides interpret the minimalist language of the agreement differently. The demand for a so-called extraterritorial Zangezur Corridor by Azerbaijan is a maximalist interpretation of the agreement, while Armenia does not agree to give up control of its borders or territory and offers just transit via its territory.

The main problem is that many of these new connections, trade routes and investments will not become reality as long as there is no sustainable peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Currently, we observe the weaponisation of transit routes and infrastructure. The blockade of the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijan in 2022/23, leveraging the status of Lachin with the Zangezur Corridor and the threat to take the corridor via Armenian territory by force has a disruptive effect (Kucera, 2023b). Azerbaijan refuses checkpoints on the Armenian border, and Baku has the impression that with its military dominance, it can enforce its goals whether Armenia likes it or not (De Waal, 2021, p. 5). However, for Yerevan, to give up control of its national border would lead to a further loss of sovereignty. It creates vulnerabilities and threat perceptions in the Armenian society and supports the overall trend of securitisation of all policy areas and relations in the region. It undermines the very idea of trade and connectivity as incentives for development and peaceful conflict solution. As long as there is no functioning peace agreement, there will be no serious private or international investment in infrastructure. Obviously, Iran will not accept that Turkey or Israel via Azerbaijan is gaining more influence in the region, as the escalation between Teheran and Baku shows (Isayev, 2023). But it will also not go into a military conflict with Azerbaijan because of Armenia. As a result, constant bargaining among all key players in the region is taking place, and the growing cooperation of Iran and Russia in the context of the war against Ukraine will impact the compromises Iran is willing to make.

Russia's increasing interest in the North–South Corridor via Azerbaijan and its close military cooperation with Iran and Turkey on circumventing Western sanctions has changed its policy (Politi et al., 2023). For Moscow, Armenia is less important now, while the South Caucasus has become more important as a trade route and access to other markets. Despite its focus on Ukraine and weakened security footprint in the region, it has become more active in the South Caucasus (also in Georgia) on trade and economic relations while it has increasingly competes with Turkey, Iran and the EU on influence.

The Azerbaijani initiative to link its mainland with its exclave Nakhchivan via Iranian territory (the so-called Arras Corridor) would give Teheran the opportunity to improve links with the Black Sea (Rahimov, 2023). For Iran, connectivity to the South Caucasus and the Black Sea is of crucial importance to its isolation as a result of Western sanctions (Manouchehri, 2016, pp. 100–101). The corridor via Iranian territory, as an alternative to the Azerbaijani demand for a corridor via southern Armenia, would give Russia less impact on east–west transit but could further isolate Armenia. At the same time, it is not an alternative to the Zangezur Corridor for Baku but rather an additional route and bargaining chip toward Iran (Rehimov, 2024).

With Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine, the EU has become more active in the South Caucasus. With the limitations of the northern transit route between Asia and Europe as a result of the Russian invasion (Eldem, 2022), the Middle Corridor has gained more importance for EU member states. It is the shortest land route between Asia and Europe and has the potential for more cargo transport. However, it is more expensive due to the multi-modal character of the route, and it needs huge investments in port, railway and road infrastructure (European Bank for Reconstruction & Development, 2023). In terms of costs, it will not be able to compete with the northern and maritime routes.

Additionally, China's activities and interests in the region will increase (Kalkschmied, 2022). Azerbaijan is critical here because it would be the main entry point for cargo from the Caspian Sea while circumventing Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan and Georgia are key for transporting more resources from Central Asia via the Caspian and Black Seas to Europe. The discussion about a trans-Caspian link and pipeline interconnection has emerged again after the 2020 NK war, especially with the Russian 2022 war (Bryza et al., 2020). Here, the connections via the Black Sea are essential—and raise questions about investments in Georgian port infrastructure. Azerbaijan and Georgia also want to capitalise from electricity export via a power cable through the Black Sea to southern Europe. Baku wants to develop the export of renewable energy to Europe and has proposed to transport electricity through the Zangezur Corridor (Gabritchidze, 2022). The route via southern Armenia to Nakhchivan and then possibly further to Turkey is, from an economic perspective, less important. First of all, it serves Azerbaijan's access to Nakhchivan and its geopolitical interests in the region.

The area of human security is not sufficiently reflected in this debate. As Laurence Broers argues, the state-centric discussion about connectivity is very much driven by geopolitics and imperial thinking. "An alternative vision of connectivity would

emphasise de-securitisation and the advancement of a regional governance infrastructure predicated on rights and citizenship" (Broers, 2023, p. 6). However, the external powers mostly dictate the rules for infrastructure investment, perceiving the South Caucasus as a transit region for east–west and north–south corridors. Infrastructure and connectivity do not serve local needs in this context but are part of a grand bargain about access to resources, trade routes and power structures between state actors.

Russia's power projection in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea aims to serve its role as a regional and global power. As an actor in both regions and using the Volga-Don canal connecting the Caspian and Black Sea for the war against Ukraine and for power projection in the wider region, infrastructure is crucial for security and geopolitical competition. Regional conflicts, the war in Ukraine, and even Russian "peacekeeping" in NK serve to keep control in its traditional "sphere of influence" and to persist as the regional hegemon. Azerbaijan uses connectivity and energy supply to improve its bargaining position toward Europe for its policy against Armenia. The EU, with its mediation role in regional conflicts, liberal peace approach, norms and standards in infrastructure, has a human rights and people-centric approach. However, this has not been successful in the South Caucasus in the past 30 years or in Ukraine now.

4 A New Regional and Security Order in the Making

The Black Sea is the EU's access to the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. Dominating the Black Sea impacts transit routes through the South Caucasus to Asia and provides a better position for bargaining about the future European security order. Because of the lack of a common strategic approach and vision of the EU member states toward the wider Black Sea region in the changing security situation, the EU might be sidelined as a relevant actor in the bargaining about new regional orders in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. A convincing example is the current state of negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where, for the first time, the EU has engaged in conflict settlement on NK through a facilitation platform organised by the president of the European Council, Charles Michel (European Parliament, 2023). Beside the support of the US government, it is lacking the engagement of key EU member states except France. Despite several rounds of negotiations and the deployment of an EU monitoring mission at the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan, no breakthrough in the negotiations has been achieved (Kucera, 2023a). The ability to build up leverage on both conflict parties can only be achieved by more support and ownership of EU member states with the willingness to be an honest broker (Meister, 2022). Here, we observe the limits of the EU as a geopolitical actor, where especially bigger member states either do not act in the EU context or their action does not strengthen the EU as a foreign policy actor. The refusal to use hard power in a very difficult context limits the EU's ability to impact the situation on the ground.

France's support is rather instrumental because of its sizeable Armenian diaspora. Germany lost track of the South Caucasus after the bankruptcy of its post-Cold War *Ostpolitik* and with the Russian war against Ukraine (Meister & Jilge, 2022). Most EU member states are absorbed by the war in Ukraine and are not willing to connect Ukraine's future and Black Sea security with the important links between the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. Another obstacle is the absence of a common vision and relevant EU strategy for Turkey, a key state and still an EU candidate country.

Azerbaijan has increased its leverage toward the EU with an agreement to double the volume of gas to member states by 2027 and promises to become an important hub for the Middle Corridor (Euronews, 2022). While Azerbaijani resources do not play a decisive role for the EU as a whole, providing only about 4 percent of its gas and 5 percent of its oil imports, the supply of gas is crucial for EU member states like Italy, Greece and Bulgaria, and likewise the supply of oil for the Czech Republic, Croatia and Italy (Bayramov & Wagenmakers, 2022). For Azerbaijan, the Black Sea remains an important transport link with the EU. Through Georgia and Turkey, Baku has built economic and political relations with Europe (Valiyev et al., 2022, p. 19). For Armenia, the EU candidate status of Georgia is significant because it can connect the country via the Black Sea with the EU.

Armenia, as the main loser of the new geopolitical and security reality, has no alternative than to cooperate with Iran and Russia, which undermines the trajectory of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which was about the democratisation of the country (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). The new reality challenges the territorial integrity of Armenia, as questioned by Azerbaijan (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022). At the same time, since the beginning of the 1990s, Armenia has occupied around 13.6 percent of the territory of Azerbaijan (De Waal, 2021). Yerevan was not able to use its fleeting military dominance to negotiate a more favorable agreement or increase the security of the Karabakh Armenians. The loss of NK, the exodus of Karabakh Armenians and the deadlock with Azerbaijan are primarily the result of political decisions made before the Velvet Revolution. Since Russia's role has been weakened in the South Caucasus, relations with the EU are becoming more important for Yerevan, which might strengthen the link with the Black Sea region (EEAS, 2024).

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will decide which actor will play a larger role in the new security order in the South Caucasus, Caspian and Black Sea regions. It will decide if Russia stays as the main security actor in the region or if it increasingly loses influence to Turkey, Azerbaijan and the EU. Moscow's war against Ukraine and maintaining its regional dominance are about its future as a regional and global actor. Russia's invasion since 2022 has served to accelerate the end of its hegemony, a rather painful and long-term process.

The increasing role of the Middle Corridor for trade between Asia and Europe, the importance of infrastructure and energy links circumventing Russia will enhance the connectivity between the Black Sea Region, South Caucasus and Caspian Sea. Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are interested in diversifying their energy markets to Europe, bypassing Russia. Especially Kazakhstan wants to become less dependent on Russian infrastructure to export oil and gas to Europe

(Avdaliani, 2023). Turkey has not given up the goal to become a hub for oil and gas to Europe and will invest more in transit connections. With the goal of replacing Russian oil and gas resources, Caspian and Central Asian entities have become more relevant for EU member states. Since connectivity has become more important in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood policies, it must update its connectivity strategies in line with its other policies (European Commission, 2021). The compartmentalisation and pillarisation of EU policies need to be replaced by more links between different regional policies. The increasing structural approach and new initiatives in the framework of EU connectivity efforts (like Global Gateway) can become ever more important tools for Brussels regarding the wider neighborhood if it is better funded and member states truly define their interests (European Commission, 2023).

5 Outlook

This chapter has analysed the close interconnection between hard security, energy, human security, and connectivity in the wider Black Sea region. Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War have destroyed the security balance in the South Caucasus of the last 30 years. Azerbaijan and Turkey are shaping the regional security order beyond NK and Armenia in a bargaining and competition with Iran, Russia and, to some extent, the EU. Countries in the wider Black Sea region are interconnected through trade, (energy) infrastructure and security challenges. Geopolitical and geoeconomic interests are drivers of regional security and bargaining in a state-centric approach. They tend to securitise energy, connectivity and human relations.

The conflict on NK and between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a prime example of the links between security and connectivity, the weaponisation of corridors and infrastructure. Here, regional and subregional actors play a role due to their growing interest in keeping the EU and US out of the region. Key questions are raised that need more research in the next years. How will the new regional security order look based on current trends? What role of regional players like Turkey and Iran? How can the EU adapt its neighborhood and enlargement policy and become a more geopolitical actor in reality?

Analysing wider Black Sea security with a comprehensive security approach helps to understand how securitisation works in the twenty-first century in the post-liberal order. Transactionalism is taking over multilateral arrangements, and the rise of middle powers will shape regional orders. A new EU neighborhood, connectivity and security policy is in the making—even while Brussels is absorbed by the war in Ukraine. Since the US is less active here, the EU has to develop a vision and policy with Turkey, Iran, Russia and (to some extend) Azerbaijan about competition, cooperation, influence, norms and standards.

We are entering an era with more unstable, mostly hard-power-driven regional relations. The interest of several regional actors to keep the EU out of any bargaining, as well as the EU's lack of a more strategic approach, might weaken its influence in

the region. The EU needs multiple instruments to become an actor with leverage on regional conflict resolution and security in the wider Black Sea region. It also needs to focus on human security while investing in regional infrastructure and economies. The EU's norms, standards and focus on human security are the only alternative to authoritarian states shaping the regional order. Despite the announcement of a geopolitical Europe, EU member states appear to lack a common vision and political will to be such a player (European Commission, 2019). Therefore, it is quite likely that we will see extended instability and more transactionalism among the regional countries. There is an absence of a common value or identity system that could improve intraregional cooperation and integration. Changing coalitions between countries and with the "power of the strong" are undermining the very idea of security through connectivity. Therefore, in the Wider Black Sea region extended disorder is likely within the next decade.

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Conclusions

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is redefining the regional order in the Black Sea region, altering its geopolitical identity and producing profound implications for global and especially European security dynamics. The conflict is reshaping relations between the states within the wider Black Sea area, significantly transforming European and post-Soviet connections. The regional security balance started to fundamentally change with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its massive military build-up in Crimea and the Black Sea region. Several important EU and NATO member-states maintained a limited interest in Black Sea regional security despite those developments for a long time. The absence of a cohesive EU and NATO regional strategy underscores this inadequate interest. Constrained Western action toward Russia's military build-up in the region contributed to, and even invited, the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

While the outcome of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine remains unclear, the far-reaching food and energy crisis emanating from it plainly demonstrates that Black Sea security is a policy with deep repercussions beyond the vicinity. The region's strategic importance is now more visible to policymakers and the epistemic community. After decades of US-American indifference or lack of strategic vision toward the region, it garnered a notable standing in US national security policy in 2023 when the Biden administration adopted a Black Sea security strategy. This strategy contains five pillars: (1) increased bilateral and multilateral engagement; (2) regional security cooperation, buttressed by an enhanced NATO presence; (3)

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economic cooperation; (4) energy security; (5) democratic resilience (Dupuy, 2023). While it is a positive beginning, it is premature to discuss its effective implementation until the 2024 US presidential election cycle is complete. As for the EU, while Brussels has designed new strategies for the Arctic, the Sahel and the Indo-Pacific regions, for example, it has yet to release a comprehensive strategy for the Black Sea. Some have been uncertain as to whether the Black Sea region should be considered an integral part of Europe (Flanagan et al., 2020). We argue in this book that geography and geopolitics play a crucial role in European and Black Sea security, and it is increasingly the interconnection between different regions—South Caucasus, Caspian Sea and Central Asia—that will further raise the attention of different actors on the wider Black Sea region.

Russia's war on Ukraine has been bringing Black Sea regional security to the forefront of Euro-Atlantic policymaking, shifting it from the periphery to the centre of strategic discourse. Connections in energy, trade and commerce are growing here. It has become clear that the Black Sea region cannot be viewed in isolation but as an integral component of the broader European security and connectivity framework. The conflict is eroding the once prevalent concept of a Moscow-led regional security model. The return of large-scale war to Europe has reignited geopolitical competition in the Black Sea region. This, in turn, has prompted many European countries to reassess their security and defence policies with a heightened sense of vulnerability and realism. Russia is seen as the main threat to European security and cannot be a partner in the Black Sea region.

This edited volume has endeavoured to delve into the fundamental geopolitical and security shifts around the wider Black Sea region escalated by Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine in 2022. Kyiv managed to withstand and halt Russia's quick armoured advancement and even regain territories at the end of 2022 and 2023. In the meantime, the conflict is transforming into a war of attrition where Russia has increasingly an advantage. As of this writing, the war is ongoing, and its outcome remains to be seen. Nonetheless, some signs of what the future holds for the region are already visible. Undoubtedly, the security architecture of the wider Black Sea region will be drastically changed and become less stable.

One key outcome is the acceleration of the end of the Russian empire linked to the decline of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Consequently, the Kremlin has fewer resources to be the key security actor in different post-Soviet regions—while other regional players are increasingly competing for influence. With Russia's declining central role, China will assume a stronger role in Central Asia. Turkey (together with Azerbaijan) has already successfully gained geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus, the EU and Eastern Europe, where EU enlargement continues. The Black Sea is a hot spot for geopolitical changes to existing security paradigms. Consequently, this requires the EU, NATO and individual Western states to more substantially engage the region.

One of the central themes that emerged from this collection is that there are new types of threats along with more conventional ones in the region, thus creating the need for a more comprehensive approach. Comprehensive security was conceptualised in this book as something that goes beyond state and military-centric

approaches and includes political, societal, connectivity, economic, environmental and other sectors (Buzan, 1991, 1997; Buzan et al., 1998; Stone, 2009). This approach to security also implies three levels of analysis (individual, state and international). Hence, the diverse array of perspectives presented in this edited volume sheds light on the broader implications of the changing security structure in the wider Black Sea region and the new security architecture that will emerge after the ongoing war.

Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine was made possible, as **Andrey Makarychev** argues in his chapter, by the Kremlin's move away from its Black Sea governance paradigm toward self-assertion of its exceptional role and status in the region. From this perspective, Ukraine is a cornerstone in the imperial self-understanding of the Russian elites that their country is not an empire without Ukraine. At the same time, the war shows the limits of Russian military power; it is stuck in a war with Ukraine while NATO is enlarging in the north with Finland and Sweden on the borders of Russia. As suggested by **S. Neil MacFarlane**, these developments have ironically turned NATO, at least for the time being, into a major actor, including in the Black Sea region. However it remains unclear what role the alliance will play after the war, which depends significantly on US policy. **Sinikkuka Saari**, in her contribution, puts forward a similar argument, writing that Moscow's policies in the Black Sea region have changed the EU's "ontological security" framework, tilting it naturally back toward realism and cooperation. Furthermore, EU enlargement of Ukraine and possibly Georgia will give the alliance a much larger role in the Black Sea region.

The ongoing war has also impacted individual countries' foreign and security policy. As argued by **Robert Hamilton**, Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014 had, to a certain degree, reversed the Obama administration's foreign policy pivot toward Asia, keeping the US firmly anchored in Europe. However, as evidenced in **Tracey German's** analysis of the United Kingdom's policy toward the Black Sea, despite the region being put under the spotlight, the approach of some Western players remains more reactive rather than well thought through or strategic. The Black Sea region is also increasingly attracting the attention of the new global hegemon in the making, China. **Niklas Swanstrom** demonstrates in his chapter that the region is part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. However, China appears to be less successful with its investments and norm-setting than expected. For China, alignment with Russia creates obstacles for its role in the Black Sea region.

This book focuses on a country approach since they are the key elements shaping the Black Sea regional security order in light of the lack of a holistic Western approach. According to **Iulia Joja**, Romania is focused on Westernising and securitising the Black Sea region, supporting NATO and EU enlargement for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Romania has become one of the region's most active NATO and EU member states. Similarly, as evidenced by **Valeri Ratchev's** analysis, since February 2022, Bulgaria, the other Black Sea EU and NATO member, has provided Ukraine with substantial weapons and ammunition as well as contributed to deterring Russian threats in the region. This is seen as a major shift for the country since it has traditionally had close relations with Russia.

Maryna Vorotnyuk's contribution illustrates how the clash over the control of the Black and Azov Seas constitutes one of the key battlegrounds between Moscow and Kyiv. Ukraine has effectively compelled the Russian Navy to withdraw to the eastern part of the Black Sea—one of the big success stories of the war for Ukraine—creating a substantial impact on the security balance in the wider region. This heightens the discussion of what kind of principal security actor Ukraine will be after the war. **Vlad Lupan's** chapter explores Moldova's Black Sea foreign policy amidst its dependence on Ukrainian seaports and the challenges posed by the looming threat of the war's spillover. Moldova is particularly vulnerable due to the Russia-friendly separatist region of Transnistria, its strong energy dependency on Russia and its reliance on Ukrainian ports.

No less impactful is the war for the countries of the South Caucasus, with its shifting interests stemming from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. Since there is no longer a regional hegemon, argues **Stefan Meister**, transactionalism and the "power of the strong" will create a more unstable environment. Forms of connectivity will grow but also disruptions through war, conflicts and contradictory interests. Emerging transit corridors between the Black and Caspian Seas will further raise geopolitical competition. For Georgia, the war creates opportunities and challenges, observes **Kornely Kakachia**. While it accelerates Tbilisi's European integration and increases Georgia's importance as a new transit corridor, it pressures the government's balancing act between values-based and transactional foreign policies. As detailed by **Mustafa Aydın**, Turkey is the other key country on the Black Sea that tries to maintain cooperative and beneficial relations with Russia while also supporting Ukraine and keeping a selective distance from Moscow. Turkey is a NATO member, controls the Bosporus Straits and has the potential to be a major conduit for the region.

As we conclude this book, the new European security architecture will be negotiated in the Black Sea region connected to Russia's war against Ukraine. Since the former sense of security balance in Europe is destroyed, and multilateral institutions and arrangements have become quite dysfunctional, the regional security order will be more transactional, power-based and volatile. The Black Sea region will remain one of the most contested places in the world due to its geopolitical and geoeconomic importance. Its important location at the intersection of Europe, Asia, Russia and the Middle East will draw more attention from a variety of players over time. The EU (with its enlargement policy) and NATO can play a more prominent role in generating regional stability and security. We see the global environment changing, US leadership diminishing and multipolarity growing. There might be no stable regional order for some time as quarrels continue between Western countries and Russia, China and Iran.

We hope the detailed analyses of Black Sea policies collected in this book contribute to academic and policy debates, offering valuable insights for future research and policy planning. Further inquiry and discussion on the Black Sea as a vital part of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture is justifiable now more than ever, with particular attention on crosscutting topics like connectivity, energy flow and human security.

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