

SECURITY DYNAMICS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION: ANALYZING THE INTERSECTION OF NATO POLICIES, RUSSIAN INFLUENCE, AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS

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Abstract *The Black Sea has re-emerged as a central theater of geopolitical competition where NATO's defensive posture, Russia's revisionist ambitions, and the geoeconomics of energy and trade are locked in a complex, dynamic interplay. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shattered the post-Cold War security architecture, creating a precarious new reality. This article analyzes the key drivers of instability, assesses the shifting balance of power, and evaluates strategic prospects. It argues that while Ukrainian asymmetric warfare has checked Russian naval dominance, the region remains acutely vulnerable to hybrid threats and escalation, demanding a more coherent, resourced, and integrated strategy from Western actors.*

Keywords Security policy, Black Sea, Russia, NATO.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Black Sea's enduring strategic importance is rooted in its geography as a maritime crossroads linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Cambridge University Press, 2025; CSIS, 2025; Expedition Magazine, 2025). For millennia, it has been a contested space for empires, from the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines to the Ottomans and Russians, who fought twelve wars across four centuries largely for control of Crimea and the wider region (Cambridge University Press, 2025). The sea served as a terminus for the Silk Road and a vital source of grain, fish, and timber for the great Mediterranean empires, making it a center of international commerce and cultural exchange (Expedition Magazine, 2025). Throughout this long history, a consistent geopolitical truth has held: control of the Turkish Straits—the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles—is the key to regional dominance, granting or denying access between the Black Sea and the world's oceans (Britannica, 2025). This geographic chokepoint has been the subject of centuries of diplomatic maneuvering and conflict, from the Ottoman Empire's consolidation of control in 1453 to the great power rivalries of the 19th and 20th centuries (USNI Proceedings, 1952).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a period of relative tranquility, a historical anomaly that saw the Black Sea recede from the forefront of global security concerns (USIP, 2023). This era was marked by attempts to build cooperative frameworks, most notably the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, founded in 1992 with Turkish leadership to foster trade and dialogue among the littoral states (BSEC, 2022). However, this interregnum proved fragile and short-lived. The re-emergence of the Black Sea as a security hotspot began with Russia's 2008 war against Georgia and was cemented by Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (USIP, 2023). These acts of aggression systematically dismantled the post-Cold War status quo, transforming the region from a secondary concern into a central theater of military conflict that directly

threatens the security and stability of the entire Euro-Atlantic community (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

Today's security dynamics in the Black Sea are defined by the intense and volatile intersection of three primary forces. First is the collective security posture of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which seeks to deter aggression against its three littoral members—Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey—while supporting its embattled partners, Ukraine and Georgia (NATO, 2023). Second are the revisionist ambitions of the Russian Federation. Moscow seeks to re-establish a dominant sphere of influence, roll back NATO's presence, and leverage the region as a critical springboard for projecting military and political power into the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Third is the fierce geoeconomic competition over energy and trade. The region is both a critical conduit for global food supplies and an arena for competing energy transit corridors, pitting Russian-backed pipelines against Western-supported alternatives designed to enhance Europe's energy security (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

These overlapping and often conflicting dynamics are governed and constrained by a unique legal framework, principally the 1936 Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits. This treaty grants Turkey sovereign control over the Straits but also codifies rules for passage, most critically by limiting the size, number, and duration of stay for naval vessels of non-littoral states (Britannica, 2025). The Convention is not merely a historical artifact; it is a central, active variable in the current conflict, profoundly shaping the military options available to both Russia and NATO and elevating Turkey's role as the indispensable guardian of the gate (Atlantic Council, 2022).

The convergence of these factors makes the Black Sea more than just a regional flashpoint; it is a microcosm of a fracturing global order. The conflict there is not simply a territorial dispute but a direct challenge to the foundational principles of the post-Cold War international system (Chatham House, 2023). It simultaneously tests the inviolability of borders through Russia's annexation of Crimea, the principle of freedom of navigation through its naval blockades, the laws of armed conflict through its deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, and the efficacy of collective security alliances through NATO's response (Cambridge University Press, 2025). The competition unfolds across multiple domains, involving not just conventional military force but also sophisticated hybrid warfare, economic coercion, and legal maneuvering around the Montreux Convention (RAND Corporation, 2023). Consequently, the Black Sea has become a laboratory where the rules, norms, and power dynamics of a new, more contested global era are being forged and fought over. The outcome of this struggle will have precedent-setting implications for other contested regions and for the future of international security architecture.

2. THE ALLIANCE'S EASTERN BULWARK: NATO'S EVOLVING BLACK SEA STRATEGY

The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to NATO in 2004 and 2007, respectively, fundamentally altered the strategic map of the Black Sea, extending the Alliance's eastern flank directly to its shores (Baranets, 2022). For the first decade of their membership, NATO's military posture in the region remained relatively light, focused more on integration and partnership than on hard deterrence. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a strategic watershed moment, compelling the Alliance to undertake a significant reinforcement of its southeastern flank (NATO, 2023).

At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO leaders responded by establishing a Tailored Forward Presence (tFP) in the Black Sea region. This initiative was designed to be a defensive, proportionate, and adaptable response to Russia's growing military assertiveness (NATO, 2023). While distinct from the more robust enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups deployed in the Baltic states and Poland, the tFP shared the same strategic objective: to signal Alliance resolve and deter aggression by demonstrating that an attack on one Ally would be met by forces from across the Alliance.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO dramatically accelerated its force posture adjustments. In an extraordinary summit in March 2022, Allies agreed to establish four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. This decision effectively doubled the number of battlegroups and extended a continuous forward military presence along the

entirety of NATO's eastern flank, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south (Lutsevych & De Waal, 2023). The land component of this reinforced posture in the southeast is centered on the multinational framework brigade headquartered in Craiova, Romania, to which numerous Allies, including Italy, Poland, and Portugal, contribute forces (NATO, 2023). This land presence is complemented by enhanced air policing missions, with Allies like Canada and Italy augmenting the efforts of the Romanian and Bulgarian air forces, and a more persistent maritime presence (NATO, 2023).

For years, NATO and its regional allies have used joint military exercises as a primary tool for enhancing interoperability and signaling political resolve. Annual exercises such as Sea Breeze, co-hosted by the United States and Ukraine since 1997, and Sea Shield, led by Romania, have been staples of the regional security calendar (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023).

In the wake of the 2022 invasion, the focus and intensity of these drills have shifted decisively. They have evolved from partnership-building and confidence-building activities into complex, multi-domain operations designed to hone high-intensity warfighting skills. A clear example of this adaptation is the heightened focus on mine countermeasures (MCM). Russia's widespread use of sea mines has rendered large parts of the Black Sea unsafe for navigation, disrupting commerce and threatening civilian vessels (USIP, 2023). In response, exercises like Sea Breeze 25-2 have been specifically designed to improve collective capabilities in mine hunting, explosive ordnance disposal, and the use of unmanned underwater vehicles (Romanian Ministry of National Defense, 2024). This practical focus has yielded tangible results, most notably the establishment in 2024 of a joint Mine Countermeasures Task Group by the three littoral NATO allies: Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria (Turkish Ministry of Defense, 2024). This initiative represents a significant step towards littoral-led security solutions, demonstrating a regional commitment to addressing shared threats directly.

A defining and unalterable feature of the Black Sea security environment is the 1936 Montreux Convention. The treaty grants Turkey full sovereignty over the Turkish Straits but imposes strict limitations on the passage of warships belonging to non-Black Sea states. These rules limit the aggregate tonnage of foreign naval vessels that can be in the Black Sea at any one time (45,000 tons), the tonnage of any single vessel (15,000 tons), and the duration of their stay (21 days) (Kucera, 2023). For a major naval power like the United States, these restrictions are profound; they preclude the deployment of an aircraft carrier and limit its presence to, for example, just three Arleigh Burke-class destroyers at once (U.S. Naval Institute, 2023).

Since February 2022, Turkey has invoked Article 19 of the Convention, which allows it to close the Straits to the warships of belligerent powers during wartime. Ankara has applied this impartially, preventing Russia from reinforcing its beleaguered Black Sea Fleet with vessels from its other fleets, but also blocking NATO allies from sending their warships into the Black Sea (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). This strict enforcement, while contributing to the de-escalation of a direct naval confrontation between NATO and Russia, effectively neutralizes NATO's overwhelming conventional maritime superiority.

This legal reality creates a powerful strategic dependency on the navies of the littoral allies. With external naval power severely constrained, NATO's ability to project force, protect sea lines of communication, and deter aggression in the maritime domain rests almost entirely on the shoulders of the Turkish, Romanian, and Bulgarian navies (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023). While Turkey possesses a large and modern fleet, the naval capabilities of Romania and Bulgaria have historically been limited and reliant on aging, Soviet-era platforms (IISS, 2023). This capability gap is not merely a local or national concern; it represents a critical vulnerability for the entire Alliance's deterrence and defense posture on its southeastern flank. This elevates the strategic importance of national modernization programs, such as Romania's planned acquisition of new corvettes and submarines, from domestic priorities to essential components of NATO's collective security (Romanian Ministry of National Defense, 2024). Consequently, U.S. and broader European support for the naval modernization of Romania and Bulgaria is not simply a matter of assistance but a strategic imperative to shore up a critical Alliance weakness (U.S. Naval Institute, 2023).

NATO's "Open Door" policy remains a cornerstone of its approach to the region. At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the Alliance made the landmark declaration that Ukraine and Georgia "will become

NATO members," provided they meet the necessary requirements (NATO, 2008). This promise, while a powerful symbol of Euro-Atlantic solidarity, is also a primary driver of Russia's perception of threat and its aggressive actions to prevent further NATO enlargement into what it considers its historical sphere of influence (Charap & Shapiro, 2021).

Beyond political declarations, NATO provides significant practical support to both partners. The Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) are the primary vehicles for this cooperation. These tailored programs are designed to strengthen defense institutions, enhance the interoperability of their armed forces with NATO standards, and support broader security sector reforms (NATO, 2023). Key initiatives under the SNGP include the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) in Tbilisi, which serves as a hub for multinational training and contributes to regional stability by improving the capabilities of Georgian forces (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2020). Through these packages, NATO aims to bolster the resilience of its partners, enabling them to better defend themselves and continue on their path toward eventual membership.

3. THE REVISIONIST POWER: RUSSIAN AMBITIONS AND ACTIONS

The Kremlin's overarching strategic objective in the Black Sea is to transform it into a de facto "Russian Lake" or, at a minimum, a region where its military and political dominance is uncontested (Gorenburg, 2022). This ambition is not new but is a continuation of centuries of Russian imperial policy aimed at securing warm-water ports and projecting power southwards. In the contemporary context, this doctrine entails several core goals: establishing undisputed military supremacy, controlling key trade and energy corridors, preventing Ukraine and Georgia from integrating into Euro-Atlantic security structures like NATO, and using the region as a vital logistical and operational springboard for power projection into the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023). Russia's military intervention in Syria, for example, would have been logistically untenable without its naval bases and access through the Black Sea (Kozhanov, 2021).

To achieve these strategic aims, Russia has engaged in the systematic weaponization of geography through military force. The 2014 annexation of Crimea was the pivotal event in this strategy. By seizing the peninsula, Russia not only secured the home base of its Black Sea Fleet (BSF) in Sevastopol but also transformed Crimea into a formidable military fortress (Howard, 2023). It became a bastion saturated with advanced military hardware, including long-range air defense systems (S-400), anti-ship coastal missile batteries (Bastion), and a host of air and ground forces. This created a powerful Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) "bubble" that allowed Moscow to project force across the entire Black Sea basin and hold its neighbors at risk (Harding, 2023).

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine represented the violent culmination of this strategy. A primary military objective of the invasion was to conquer Ukraine's entire southern coastline, from Mariupol to Odesa. This would have achieved multiple strategic goals simultaneously: rendering Ukraine a landlocked and economically crippled state, creating a "land bridge" connecting mainland Russia to occupied Crimea, and extending Russian control westward to the border of Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria, where Russian troops are already stationed (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023).

Parallel to its conventional military actions, Russia has waged a relentless and sophisticated hybrid war against the states of the Black Sea region (Giles, 2021). This multi-faceted campaign blends overt and covert instruments to destabilize societies, undermine governments, and weaken Western influence. Key components of this playbook include:

- **Information and Cognitive Warfare:** Russia deploys a vast and well-resourced propaganda and disinformation apparatus to manipulate public opinion. This "cognitive warfare" seeks to sow discord, erode trust in democratic institutions and Western alliances, promote anti-liberal and anti-Western narratives, and legitimize Russia's own aggressive actions (Giles, 2021). The 2008 war in Georgia served as an early and effective testing ground for these information warfare tactics, which have since been refined and scaled up (Pomerantsev, 2022).

- **Economic Coercion:** Energy has long been a primary weapon in Russia's arsenal. Moscow has repeatedly used its control over natural gas supplies to blackmail and exert political pressure on

dependent countries in the region, cutting off supplies or manipulating prices to achieve political ends (Mitrova & Yermakov, 2021).

- **Cyberattacks:** State-sponsored hacking groups conduct persistent cyberattacks against government websites, critical infrastructure, and financial institutions to disrupt economies and sow chaos (Giles, 2021).

- **Exploitation of "Frozen Conflicts":** Russia actively maintains and manipulates the "frozen conflicts" it helped create in the post-Soviet space. Its military presence in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and in Moldova's Transnistria, provides Moscow with perpetual leverage, allowing it to destabilize these countries at will and effectively veto their Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations (Howard, 2023).

4. THE BLACK SEA FLEET: FROM ASSUMED SUPREMACY TO CONTESTED WATERS

At the outset of the 2022 invasion, Russia's Black Sea Fleet (BSF), having been significantly modernized in the preceding decade, was widely considered the dominant and uncontested naval power in the region (Gorenburg, 2023). However, the war has produced one of the most stunning naval upsets in modern history. Ukraine, a nation with a negligible conventional navy, has successfully challenged and neutralized this superior force through the innovative application of asymmetric warfare (Watling & Reynolds, 2023).

Leveraging a combination of domestically produced Neptune anti-ship missiles, which famously sank the BSF's flagship, the cruiser *Moskva*, in April 2022, and a growing fleet of sophisticated unmanned surface vehicles (USVs), or sea drones, Ukraine has inflicted devastating losses on the Russian fleet (Gorenburg, 2023). A significant portion of the BSF's warships have been sunk or severely damaged, forcing a fundamental change in Russian naval strategy. Ukraine's capabilities have effectively created a "sea denial" zone in the northwestern Black Sea. This has compelled the BSF to adopt a largely defensive posture, withdraw its most valuable assets from the vulnerable port of Sevastopol to the safer, more distant port of Novorossiysk, and largely cease offensive operations in the western part of the sea (Howard, 2023). The BSF's role has been relegated primarily to launching long-range *Kalibr* cruise missile strikes from the relative safety of the eastern Black Sea and protecting its own bases and infrastructure from Ukraine's relentless drone attacks (Gorenburg, 2023).

These military setbacks at sea have had profound geopolitical consequences, inadvertently accelerating the very trends Russia's aggression was meant to prevent. The Kremlin's primary goal was to establish unchallenged dominance and halt Western integration and influence in the region (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023). However, its failure to secure control of the northwestern Black Sea and the severe degradation of its fleet created a power vacuum that other actors have rushed to fill (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). This enabled Ukraine to defy Russia's blockade and establish its own "humanitarian corridor" for grain exports, restoring a vital economic lifeline and undermining Moscow's attempts to weaponize global food supplies (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, the demonstrated vulnerability of Russian naval power has emboldened regional actors. It has cemented Turkey's position as the preeminent regional naval power and spurred NATO allies Romania and Bulgaria to accelerate the development of their own offshore energy projects, which are in direct competition with Russian gas exports (Kirişci, 2023). In effect, Russia's tactical military failures have triggered a strategic blowback. By failing to create its desired "Russian Lake," Moscow has unintentionally catalyzed the very outcomes—a more resilient and defiant Ukraine, stronger regional cooperation among its rivals, and a clearer path toward regional energy independence from Russia—that its war was designed to forestall.

5. THE GEOECONOMIC BATTLEGROUND: ENERGY, TRADE, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The Black Sea region is a critical nexus for competing energy transit strategies, representing a geoeconomic battleground between Russia and the West. For decades, Russia has strategically promoted pipeline projects designed to bypass Ukraine, solidify its grip on the European energy market, and extend its

political leverage. Key among these are the Blue Stream pipeline, operational since 2003, and the more recent TurkStream pipeline, both of which traverse the Black Sea to deliver Russian natural gas directly to Turkey and, from there, to Southern and Southeastern Europe (Mitrova & Yermakov, 2023). These projects were conceived not only as commercial ventures but as geopolitical tools to increase dependency on Gazprom and marginalize Ukraine as a transit state.

In direct opposition to this strategy, the European Union and the United States have backed the development of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). This monumental infrastructure project, consisting of the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCPX), the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), is designed to transport Caspian gas from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Turkey into the European market (Umbach, 2022). The explicit strategic purpose of the SGC is to diversify Europe's energy supply, thereby reducing its vulnerability to Russian energy blackmail. This "pipeline race" is a clear manifestation of the broader geopolitical struggle for influence in the region.

Beyond transit routes, major offshore natural gas discoveries are poised to fundamentally reshape the regional energy map and further challenge Russia's dominance. The discovery and development of Turkey's massive Sakarya gas field (with estimated reserves of 540 billion cubic meters) and Romania's Neptun Deep field (around 100 bcm), along with Bulgaria's potential Khan Asparuh field, promise to transform these nations from net energy importers to significant regional producers and exporters (Oktav, 2023).

These projects hold immense strategic significance. For Romania, Neptun Deep could make it the largest natural gas producer in the European Union, ensuring its own energy independence and allowing it to export to neighbors like Moldova, Hungary, and Austria. For Turkey, the Sakarya field will drastically reduce its heavy dependence on Russian gas imports. For Bulgaria, developing its offshore reserves would secure its domestic consumption and turn it into an exporter. Because these indigenous energy sources directly compete with Russia's economic and political interests, the offshore platforms, pipelines, and exploration vessels associated with them are considered high-risk targets for Russian hybrid interference, including naval harassment, GPS jamming, and potential sabotage (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023).

Table1: Tangible nature of the energy competition

Project Name	Type	Key Stakeholders	Status	Capacity/Reserves	Strategic Significance
TurkStream	Gas Pipeline	Russia (Gazprom), Turkey (BOTAS)	Operational	31.5 bcm/year	Bypasses Ukraine; solidifies Russian supply to Turkey & SE Europe.
Blue Stream	Gas Pipeline	Russia (Gazprom), Italy (Eni), Turkey	Operational	16 bcm/year	Diversified Russian export route to Turkey, predating TurkStream.
Southern Gas Corridor (TANAP/TAP)	Gas Pipeline	Azerbaijan (SOCAR), Turkey, BP, EU	Operational	16 bcm/year (expandable)	Key non-Russian supply route to Europe; enhances Turkey's transit role.
Neptun Deep	Offshore Gas Field	Romania (OMV Petrom, Romgaz)	Development	~100 bcm	Will make Romania largest EU gas producer; enables regional exports.
Sakarya	Offshore Gas Field	Turkey (TPAO)	Production started	~540 bcm	Drastically reduces Turkey's import dependency, especially on Russia.
Khan Asparuh	Offshore Gas Field	Bulgaria (OMV Petrom)	Exploration	~60 bcm	Potential to make Bulgaria energy self-sufficient and an exporter.

This data illustrates the tangible nature of the energy competition. The significant reserves of fields like Sakarya and Neptun Deep represent a long-term structural shift away from dependence on Russian pipeline gas. The operational status of TurkStream and the Southern Gas Corridor highlights the parallel infrastructure networks that define the region's energy politics. The "Strategic Significance" column translates this technical data into direct geopolitical impact, clarifying the stakes for regional and global actors. This juxtaposition makes the abstract concept of a "pipeline race" concrete, showcasing a geoeconomic landscape in profound transition.

6. THE GLOBAL BREADBASKET UNDER SIEGE

The Black Sea is a vital artery for global food supplies. Russia and Ukraine are among the world's top exporters of wheat, corn, barley, and sunflower oil, with dozens of countries in the Middle East and Africa critically dependent on these shipments for their food security (Dandashly & Öztürk, 2023). Russia has systematically weaponized this dependency as part of its war effort. Its naval blockade of Ukraine's ports, deliberate missile strikes on grain terminals and agricultural infrastructure, and temporary withdrawal from the UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative were all calculated actions designed to cripple Ukraine's economy, create global food shortages and price spikes, and generate political instability in import-dependent nations (Mitrova & Yermakov, 2023).

A major strategic success for Ukraine and its partners has been the establishment of a "humanitarian corridor" in August 2023. This shipping lane hugs the coastlines of NATO members Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, using their territorial waters as a shield against Russian interdiction. This corridor has proven remarkably effective, allowing Ukraine to restore its grain exports to near pre-war levels and demonstrating the practical limits of Russia's naval blockade in the face of determined regional cooperation (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023).

The war has starkly illuminated the extreme vulnerability of the region's critical infrastructure. This extends beyond ports and grain silos to include offshore energy platforms, subsea gas pipelines, and underwater fiber-optic data cables. These assets have become legitimate targets in a multi-domain conflict. They are vulnerable to both direct kinetic strikes from missiles and drones—as evidenced by attacks on Ukrainian port facilities and the Tavrida drilling rig—and to more insidious hybrid attacks, such as cyber intrusions, GPS spoofing and jamming, and covert sabotage by special forces or unmanned underwater vehicles (Umbach, 2022). The targeting of this infrastructure poses a severe risk of economic disruption and environmental disaster and represents a dangerous rung on the escalation ladder.

7. CASE STUDIES IN REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

7.1 UKRAINE: THE CRUCIBLE OF CONFLICT AND ASYMMETRIC INNOVATION

Ukraine stands as the undeniable epicenter of the Black Sea conflict. Its national survival and sovereignty are at stake, and its resistance has reshaped the regional and global security landscape. The defining feature of Ukraine's military effort has been its remarkable success in asymmetric naval innovation. Facing a vastly superior Russian navy, Ukraine leveraged ingenuity and Western-supplied technology to develop and deploy a formidable arsenal of anti-ship missiles and, most notably, unmanned surface vehicles (USVs). These "sea drones" have proven to be a cost-effective and highly lethal tool, capable of overwhelming the defenses of large warships (Gorenburg, 2023). This strategy has not only inflicted crippling losses on the Russian Black Sea Fleet but also provided a powerful case study in modern naval warfare, with global implications for how smaller nations can counter larger maritime powers (Herpen, 2023). Beyond its military successes, Ukraine's ability to establish and maintain a grain export corridor, in cooperation with its neighbors, demonstrates its strategic acumen and resilience, ensuring its economic viability and mitigating Russia's attempts to weaponize food (Mitrova & Yermakov, 2023). The future trajectory of Ukraine is the single most critical variable determining the long-term security architecture of the entire Black Sea region (Sloan, 2022).

7.2 TURKEY: THE INDISPENSABLE BALANCER AND GUARDIAN OF THE STRAITS

Turkey's role in the Black Sea is uniquely complex and pivotal. It navigates a multifaceted balancing act, simultaneously acting as a committed NATO ally, an ambitious regional power, a cautious rival to Russia, and a crucial economic and diplomatic partner to both sides (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023). Ankara has armed Ukraine with critical weaponry like Bayraktar drones while refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia (Candar, 2023). This policy is underpinned by its strict and impartial enforcement of the Montreux Convention, a position that both contains Russian naval reinforcements and limits NATO's direct maritime presence, thereby preserving Turkey's central role as the gatekeeper of the Black Sea (Umbach, 2022).

Ankara's foreign policy is increasingly driven by a desire for strategic autonomy, articulated through concepts like the "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, which calls for a more assertive naval presence to protect its maritime interests (Herpen, 2023). The significant degradation of Russia's Black Sea Fleet has, by default, made Turkey the undisputed strongest naval power in the region, further enhancing its strategic weight (Gorenburg, 2023). Its indispensable role in energy transit (hosting both TurkStream and the Southern Gas Corridor) and its leadership in regional security initiatives, like the trilateral Mine Countermeasures Task Force with Romania and Bulgaria, make it an unavoidable and essential player in any future security arrangement (Yermakov, 2023).

7.3 ROMANIA & BULGARIA: NATO'S FRONTLINE STATES AND EMERGING ENERGY PLAYERS

As the only EU members with Black Sea coastlines besides Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria are frontline states in the confrontation with Russia. They are central to NATO's deterrence posture, hosting multinational battlegroups, key air bases like Mihail Kogălniceanu, and other critical Alliance infrastructure (NATO, 2023). The war has thrust them into a new strategic role as vital logistical hubs for supporting Ukraine. Romania's port of Constanța, in particular, has become the primary gateway for diverted Ukrainian grain exports, handling a massive volume of trade that was previously shipped from Odesa and other ports (Umbach, 2022).

Beyond their military and logistical importance, both countries are on the cusp of becoming significant European energy producers. The development of Romania's Neptun Deep and Bulgaria's potential Khan Asparuh offshore gas fields will not only secure their own energy independence but has the potential to turn them into key suppliers for the wider region, offering a concrete alternative to Russian gas (Mitrova & Yermakov, 2023). This rising geoeconomic profile is matched by a growing security assertiveness, reflected in joint initiatives like the establishment of a Regional Special Operations Command (HQ R-SOCC) (Gorenburg, 2023). However, both nations remain vulnerable to Russia's hybrid warfare tactics and face challenges related to internal political fragility and corruption (Koval, 2023).

7.4 GEORGIA: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF "FROZEN CONFLICT" AND EURO-ATLANTIC ASPIRATION

Georgia's experience serves as a stark case study of Russia's long-term strategy for maintaining regional control. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and Russia's subsequent recognition and military occupation of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia established a "frozen conflict" on Georgian soil (Herpen, 2023). This has proven to be a highly effective tool for Moscow, creating a state of perpetual instability that allows it to exert leverage over Tbilisi and effectively block Georgia's path to NATO membership, as the Alliance is reluctant to admit new members with unresolved territorial disputes.

Despite overwhelming public support for integration with the EU and NATO, Georgia faces immense and continuous pressure from Russian hybrid warfare. This includes pervasive disinformation campaigns, economic leverage, and political subversion aimed at eroding democratic institutions and fostering pro-Russian sentiment (Sloan, 2022). These efforts have contributed to a significant democratic backslide in recent years, with the government adopting policies that have strained relations with Western partners and led to a suspension of its EU accession process (Koval, 2023). Russia's recently announced plans to establish a permanent naval base in Abkhazia represent a further escalation, threatening to cement its military footprint and project power further along the eastern Black Sea coast (Umbach, 2022).

8. CONCLUSION

The security landscape of the Black Sea has been fundamentally and irrevocably altered. The pre-2022 balance of power, which was characterized by Russia's clear military dominance and a relatively passive

Western posture, is broken. In its place, a new, more fluid, and intensely contested equilibrium has emerged (Candar, 2023).

Militarily, Russia's formidable land and air power in the region remains a potent threat, but its naval supremacy has been decisively checked by Ukraine's asymmetric capabilities. Turkey has emerged as the preeminent regional naval power, while NATO's land-based deterrence on its eastern flank has been significantly bolstered. However, the Alliance's ability to project maritime power remains severely constrained by the Montreux Convention (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023).

Economically, Russia's once-powerful energy leverage over Europe has been drastically curtailed. The rise of new regional energy producers like Romania and Turkey, coupled with the development of alternative transit routes such as the Middle Corridor, points toward a more diversified and resilient regional energy future. This emerging infrastructure, however, is itself a new and attractive target for Russian aggression (Mitrova & Yermakov, 2023).

Politically, the war has solidified a pro-Western bloc led by a defiant Ukraine and supported by frontline allies like Romania. Simultaneously, it has highlighted the complex and transactional balancing act of Turkey and exposed the acute vulnerabilities of Georgia and Moldova to sustained Russian political and hybrid pressure (Sloan, 2022).

The most immediate and probable danger in the Black Sea is not necessarily a direct, all-out war between NATO and Russia, but rather a series of deliberate escalatory steps within the "grey zone" of conflict, below the threshold of conventional warfare (Sloan, 2022). The primary risks on this escalation ladder include:

1. **Attacks on Critical Infrastructure:** The highest risk involves Russian hybrid or kinetic strikes against the region's emerging energy architecture. Sabotaging offshore gas platforms, subsea pipelines, or underwater data cables would be a calculated move to disrupt the region's economic diversification away from Russia, create economic chaos, and test Western resolve (Umbach, 2022).

2. **Miscalculation at Sea or in the Air:** The increased tempo of NATO surveillance flights and Russian military patrols creates a heightened risk of accidental or deliberate clashes between opposing forces, which could spiral into a wider crisis (Sloan, 2022).

3. **Horizontal Escalation:** Faced with a stalemate in Ukraine, Russia may be tempted to open a new front or create a diversion by escalating its pressure on more vulnerable states. This could involve engineering a crisis in Moldova via its proxies in Transnistria or further destabilizing Georgia to distract and divide Western attention (Umbach, 2022).

4. **Vertical Escalation:** While remote, the possibility of Russia using a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon to "de-escalate" a conventional conflict in which it faces catastrophic defeat cannot be entirely dismissed. Such an act, intended to shock and awe adversaries into submission, represents the highest rung of the escalation ladder (Sloan, 2022).

Navigating this perilous environment and fostering long-term stability requires a coherent, well-resourced, and unified strategy from the United States and its European allies. The current EU strategy, while well-intentioned, has been criticized as being largely declarative and lacking the concrete action plans and dedicated funding needed for meaningful impact (Brattberg & Sloat, 2023). An effective approach must be built on three pillars:

First, strengthening multilateral cooperation among littoral allies is paramount. The constraints of the Montreux Convention make regional, self-sustaining security formats essential. The West should actively support and seek to expand initiatives like the Turkish-Romanian-Bulgarian Mine Countermeasures Task Force and the Regional Special Operations Command (Rácz, 2022). These formats, led by the allies most directly affected, are the most credible and sustainable vehicles for ensuring maritime security.

Second, the West must commit to bolstering the resilience of frontline and partner states. This requires sustained investment in the naval and integrated air and missile defense capabilities of Romania and Bulgaria to create a credible regional deterrent. It also means continuing to provide Ukraine with the advanced weaponry it needs to maintain sea denial against the Russian fleet and protect its economic lifelines. Simultaneously, a robust strategy must be deployed to counter Russian disinformation and

support democratic institutions in Georgia and Moldova, hardening them against political subversion (Koval, 2023).

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that a truly stable Black Sea is impossible as long as Russia illegally occupies Ukrainian territory. A frozen conflict, with Russia retaining control of Crimea and other coastal areas, would guarantee perpetual instability, as Moscow would continue to use these territories as platforms for aggression and malign influence (Sloan, 2022). Therefore, the future security of the region is inextricably linked to the outcome of the war in Ukraine. A Ukrainian victory that restores its sovereignty over its internationally recognized 1991 borders, including Crimea, would dismantle Russia's primary power projection platform and represents the most durable path toward a secure, stable, and prosperous Black Sea region anchored in the Euro-Atlantic community (Koval, 2023).

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