



## The Growing Western Interest in the Black Sea

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**Abstract:** This article examines the impact of the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 on the strategies of the United States, United Kingdom, France, NATO, and the European Union regarding the Black Sea region. The author highlights how the invasion has emphasized the strategic importance of the Black Sea for the international order. In addition to analyzing official state actions, the author explores the academic and intellectual discourse in the United States, United Kingdom, and France to assess the region’s strategic significance.

**Keywords:** Black Sea, United States, Russia, NATO, European Union, Romania.

Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the Black Sea’s relevance as a key region for global security. Once dismissed as a backwater or considered of secondary or even tertiary importance for global security, the Black Sea now ranks among the critical regions where major security developments occur and international actors collide.

As a direct result of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022, the United States and some European allies started developing specific policy documents for the region.

### United States: From the Global War on Terrorism to the Russian Aggression on Ukraine

The United States became interested in the Black Sea during the Global War on Terror, as the region served as a strategic springboard for efforts against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. U.S. bases in Romania and Bulgaria played

an important role in the logistics of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Additionally, the United States has supported the democratic aspirations of the Black Sea countries, advocating for their integration into the Euro-Atlantic community.

A major turning point in the U.S. approach to the Black Sea region was the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. This event underscored the strategic importance of the Black Sea, highlighting the potential for similar situations to arise in the Indo-Pacific, where disputes among regional nations over maritime boundaries and territories in the South China Sea continue.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, U.S. forces have been deployed along NATO's Eastern Flank to deter potential Russian aggression. Prior to its assault on Ukraine, Moscow signaled its intent to disrupt the European security architecture and world order by demanding the reduction of U.S. military presence in Europe and a commitment that Ukraine would not join NATO. In Romania, the United States has stationed a brigade-sized unit on a rotational basis as part of efforts to deter potential Russian aggression.

In the U.S. Senate, a bipartisan bill introduced by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NJ) and Mitt Romney (R-UT) calls for the adoption of a comprehensive Black Sea strategy by the U.S. government. The Black Sea Security Act of 2022 (BSSA) urges national security and civilian institutions to adopt an integrated approach toward the Black Sea region. The primary objective of U.S. efforts under this strategy is to deter further Russian aggression while supporting American friends and allies in the area. The BSSA aims to safeguard the security interests of Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye. Additionally, the U.S. government should collaborate with NATO and the European Union to enhance the security and prosperity of the Black Sea region. The BSSA advocates for a holistic approach that extends beyond security considerations, recognizing the economic potential of the Black Sea and the aspirations of the six countries for development and prosperity. This approach expands the range of instruments available to the United States, NATO, and the European Union in addressing regional issues.

The adoption of the BSSA signifies that the United States has recognized the strategic importance of the Black Sea region in the current international context, acknowledging it as a key battleground between armed revisionism and the defense of world order.

One of the few positive outcomes of the war in the Black Sea has been the increased attention the region has received from the U.S. foreign policy community, along with the enhanced cooperation between the Romanian foreign policy academic community and its American counterpart.

In this sense, three reports published in 2023 by U.S. and Romanian think tanks deserve special mention. One notable report, *Strategic Nexus: The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War*,<sup>1</sup> is the result of

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<sup>1</sup> Seth Cropsey, George Scutaru, Harry Halem, and Antonia Colibășanu, *Strategic Nexus: The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War* (Yorktown

cooperation between the Romanian think tank New Strategy Center and the Yorktown Institute. The report underscores the Black Sea's strategic importance to U.S. foreign policy and security. It emphasizes that the region has become a focal point of great power competition due to its proximity to other strategically significant areas. Russia seeks to dominate the Black Sea and use it as a strategic launching point, while other external powers, opposed to U.S. policies and interests, have ambitions either centered on or linked to the region. The report also highlights that the Black Sea is crucial to the security and defense of Europe.

Furthermore, NATO's presence in the Black Sea provides the U.S. with a strategic opportunity to bolster its broader position in Eurasia. However, the Montreux Convention, which regulates the naval forces that non-Black Sea states can deploy in the region, limits the U.S. force projection capabilities in the region. Despite this, the report suggests that a dispersed, mobile, and aggressive U.S. force can exert leverage on both land and sea. The report concludes by calling for the U.S. to prioritize the formulation of a Black Sea strategy and establish a defense-industrial cooperation framework. To promote a successful strategy in the Black Sea, Washington will need to carefully navigate and balance the diverse interests and preferences of its European allies.

The Hudson Institute published the report "A New Black Sea Strategy for a New Black Sea Reality,"<sup>2</sup> authored by Luke Coffey and Can Kasapoğlu. This report outlines the specific challenges facing U.S. power projection in the Black Sea and calls for the integration of maritime lessons learned from the ongoing war into U.S. strategy for the region. It emphasizes Romania's potential role as an A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) base in the Black Sea, warning about the protracted nature of the conflict and the necessity for a long-term commitment. The report also highlights the strategic significance of Russia-occupied Crimea and its Black Sea Fleet as instruments of power projection toward the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. Additionally, it underscores Türkiye's role in the region and assesses the readiness of Russian forces.

The Atlantic Council of the United States has published a report calling for an urgent U.S. strategy for the Black Sea, authored by its Task Force on Black Sea Security, led by Richard D. Hooker Jr.<sup>3</sup> This comprehensive report identifies the major actors involved and the issues at stake. The Black Sea region is crucial for U.S. foreign policy, as developments there impact American interests on a global scale. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine raises significant concerns regarding

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Institute & New Strategy Center, 2023), [https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/YI\\_NSC\\_Monograph.pdf](https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/YI_NSC_Monograph.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Luke Coffey and Can Kasapoğlu, "A New Black Sea Strategy for a New Black Sea Reality," *Hudson Institute*, February 21, 2023, Policy Memo, [www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/new-black-sea-strategy-new-black-sea-reality](http://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/new-black-sea-strategy-new-black-sea-reality).

<sup>3</sup> James L. Jones and Curtis M. Scaparrotti, "A Security Strategy for the Black Sea," *Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-security-strategy-for-the-black-sea/>.

the rules-based international order championed by Washington, as well as global food security and international economic stability. The report identifies Russia as a threat to the security of the Black Sea and the Euro-Atlantic region, noting that the Kremlin aims to dominate the Black Sea to further its broader international objectives. Furthermore, Russia's actions have hindered the plans of certain states in the region to join the Euro-Atlantic community. The report offers recommendations for countering Russia's actions in the Black Sea across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic levels.

## The Policy of France towards the Black Sea

In 2019, France became the first NATO country to propose a strategic concept for the Black Sea, recognizing that the region had increasingly become a theater of competition among great powers.<sup>4</sup> The Black Sea is significant for French national security due to the prolonged conflicts affecting the region since the end of the Cold War. The Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine (particularly the events since 2014) and conflicts in the Caucasus, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, have shaped the security paradigm of the Black Sea region after the dissolution of the USSR. Over the years, some of these conflicts have escalated into major regional clashes, such as the wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh in 2020 and 2023.

In February 2022, the Kremlin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ultimately aiming to destroy Ukrainian statehood and eliminate the country's existence as an autonomous member of the international system. What makes the Black Sea particularly relevant for French strategy is the regions it borders and offers access to: the Western Balkans, Asia via the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. France has political, security, and economic interests in these areas. Additionally, the region is home to two European Union members and three NATO members – Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye. Meanwhile, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia aspire to join the European Union, with Kyiv and Tbilisi expressing their intentions to join NATO since the late 2000s.

European energy security is a significant concern in the Black Sea region. On the one hand, recent important gas discoveries in the Turkish and Romanian exclusive economic zones present new opportunities. On the other hand, the region has a history of regular energy crises, particularly between Russia and Ukraine, as Russia has sought to circumvent Ukraine as a major transit point for gas destined for Western European markets.

As a maritime power, France is committed to promoting freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. The Russian blockade of Ukraine's coast and attacks on port

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<sup>4</sup> Directorate General for Information Relations and Security (DGIRS), "France and Security Issues in the Black Sea," February 19, 2021, <https://archives.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/action-internationale/enjeux-regionaux/la-france-et-les-enjeux-de-securite-en-mer-noire.html>. – in French

infrastructure have underscored the region's critical role in global food security. The wheat and corn produced in the Black Sea region are vital for many countries in the Global South and maintaining stability in the global food market.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 rekindled Russia's appetite for power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The Kremlin's interventions in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars would not have been possible without the support of its bases in the Black Sea. As a result, Russia has increasingly challenged France's influence in the Mediterranean basin, particularly in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon) and North Africa (Libya and Egypt). This geopolitical rivalry has also extended into the Sahel, further intensifying the confrontation between France and Russia.

Following the start of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, France decided to deploy troops to Romania under *Mission Aigle* as part of NATO's efforts to strengthen deterrence on the Eastern Flank. As a framework nation, France leads an Allied battlegroup composed of troops from Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and Luxembourg. In the future, France's presence in Romania could expand to brigade-level strength. France has already deployed a battalion of light infantry reinforced with Leclerc tanks and a SAMP/T (*Mamba*) integrated air-defense system to Constanța. Additionally, France has sent maritime patrol aircraft to the region to increase maritime awareness and support demining efforts in the Black Sea. In 2022, Romania and France signed a cooperation agreement for the modernization and development of the Romanian Naval Forces.<sup>5</sup> France plans to increase its military presence in Romania to brigade-level strength.

France's interest in the Black Sea region extends beyond Romania, with the Republic of Moldova occupying a particularly important position in its strategic approach. Paris is a strong advocate for Chișinău's aspirations to join the European Union and is actively assisting the Moldovan government in countering Russia's hybrid threats. Additionally, in light of numerous violations involving Russian cruise missiles and drones targeting Ukrainian civilian and military infrastructure, France is also supporting Moldova's efforts to protect its airspace. This commitment reflects France's broader strategic engagement in the region.

France has historically maintained a close relationship with Greece, and rising tensions between Athens and Ankara over maritime delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean have further involved Paris in the issue. In 2021, Greece and France solidified their cooperation by concluding a security partnership with a strong naval focus.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has heightened French interest in the stability of the South Caucasus, straining relations

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<sup>5</sup> Valentina Drăgoi, "Romania-France Agreement. Vasile Dîncu: The Romanian Naval Forces Are Receiving State-of-the-Art Equipment," *Capital*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.capital.ro/acord-romania-franta-fortele-navale-romane-primesc-echipamente-de-ultima-generatie.html>. – in Romanian

<sup>6</sup> Anna Whichmann, "The Entire France-Greece Defense and Security Agreement," *The Greek Reporter*, September 28, 2021, <https://greekreporter.com/2021/09/28/the-entire-france-greece-defense-and-security-agreement/>.

with Türkiye, which has been a strong supporter of Azerbaijan. France, in contrast, has backed Armenia and has provided military equipment to help prevent a potential invasion by Azerbaijan, which, with Turkish backing, seeks to establish a territorial connection to the Azeri exclave of Nakhichevan.

## The United Kingdom's Policy Towards the Black Sea

Traditionally, Great Britain has prioritized securing the northern end of NATO's Eastern Flank, which contains the Baltic Sea, the Baltic states, Poland, Denmark, and Jutland. This region is linked to the Eastern Approaches—the Denmark Strait and the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap—extending toward the strategically significant High North. The northern tip of the Eastern Flank also provides access through the German plain into Western Europe. During the Cold War, the Baltic Sea, the Denmark Strait, and the GIUK Gap served as strategic chokepoints to monitor and counter Soviet naval forays into the Atlantic Ocean and Western Europe.

Since 2014, the United Kingdom has shown increased interest in the Black Sea region despite not having formulated a specific strategy for it. Russia's annexation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine, and the Kremlin's full-scale and illegitimate aggression in February 2022 have transformed the Black Sea into a zone of conflict among major powers. It has also become a geopolitical space where revisionist actors, like Russia, are actively challenging the rules-based international order, further intensifying its strategic importance for global security.

As a NATO ally, the U.K. has actively supported its partners in the Black Sea region. The Royal Air Force has participated in air policing missions over the Black Sea,<sup>7</sup> while the Royal Navy has deployed warships to patrol its waters and participate in international exercises, demonstrating solidarity with Eastern Flank allies such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye. These efforts were intended to deter Russian aggression and promote freedom of navigation in accordance with the Montreux Convention. A notable example was the freedom of navigation operation conducted by HMS Defender on June 23, 2021 when it exercised its right of innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters near Crimea.<sup>8</sup> This mission, which took the ship two nautical miles off the Crimean coast, provoked a strong response from Russian occupation forces, who attempted to intimidate the British vessel with aircraft and ships. Unfortunately, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has since halted Royal Navy patrols in the Black Sea.

The U.K. has played a key role in supporting Ukraine's efforts to resist Russian aggression, emerging as one of Kyiv's strongest European allies. Prior to the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the United Kingdom and Ukraine had already

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<sup>7</sup> "RAF Typhoons Arrive in Romania to Resume NATO Air Policing Mission," *Royal Air Force News*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-typhoons-arrive-in-romania-to-resume-nato-air-policing-mission/>.

<sup>8</sup> "HMS Defender: Russian Jets and Ships Shadow British Warship," *BBC*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57583363>.

entered into a strategic agreement to rebuild Ukraine's naval capabilities, which had been significantly weakened by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This agreement, signed in Odesa on June 21, 2021, provided for the training of Ukrainian naval personnel, the acquisition of two decommissioned Royal Navy *Sandown*-class mine-hunters, and the construction of eight new small missile boats (fast attack craft) for Ukraine's navy.<sup>9</sup>

U.K. defense support has proven essential in strengthening Ukraine's ability to defend itself from Russian aggression. One notable effort is *Operation Interflex*,<sup>10</sup> a UK-led initiative focused on training Ukrainian armed forces. In addition, the United Kingdom has provided advanced weaponry, including *Stormshadow* air-launched cruise missiles, to bolster Ukraine's military capabilities. The United Kingdom and Ukraine are preparing a ten-year memorandum of understanding to enhance Kyiv's naval capabilities further and solidify the long-term defense partnership between the two nations.<sup>11</sup>

In the absence of an official Black Sea strategy, the U.K.'s foreign policy community has been putting forward some valuable ideas and recommendations. The London-based independent think tank, the Council on Geostrategy, published a report in March 2022 titled "Global Britain and the Black Sea Region,"<sup>12</sup> emphasizing the importance of the Black Sea to the U.K.'s strategic interests. According to the report, the Black Sea is vital not only as part of the U.K.'s outer defenses but also to London's broader goals in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>13</sup> The Black Sea's proximity to the Mediterranean and its role as a major transit route between Asia and Europe via the Caucasus and Central Asia make it strategically significant. The report also points out that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the European Union's Global Gateway highlight the Black Sea's future as a key trade and infrastructure hub. Additionally, the report emphasizes the U.K.'s obligations to NATO allies on the Eastern Flank, including the Black Sea nations,

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<sup>9</sup> "Framework Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ukraine on Official Credit Support for the Development of the Capabilities of the Ukrainian Navy," Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs by Command of Her Majesty, London, November 12, 2021, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619670cde90e07043f2b965d/CS\\_Ukraine\\_1.2021\\_Framework\\_Agreement\\_Credit\\_Support\\_Navy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619670cde90e07043f2b965d/CS_Ukraine_1.2021_Framework_Agreement_Credit_Support_Navy.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Defence, "Explained: Inside Operation Interflex," *Medium*, October 28, 2022, <https://defencehq.medium.com/explained-inside-the-uk-led-training-program-me-for-ukrainian-recruits-277d630e4073>.

<sup>11</sup> Nate Ostiller and The Kyiv Independent news desk, "Telegraph: UK to Sign 10-year Pact on Naval Security Commitments for Ukraine," *The Kyiv Independent*, December 19, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/telegraph-uk-to-sign-mou-on-long-term-naval-security-commitments-for-ukraine/>.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Lanoszka and James Rogers, "'Global Britain' and the Black Sea Region," *Council on Geostrategy*, March 29, 2022, Policy Paper, [www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/global-britain-and-the-black-sea-region/](http://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/global-britain-and-the-black-sea-region/).

<sup>13</sup> Lanoszka and Rogers, "'Global Britain' and the Black Sea Region."

and its strong relationship with Ukraine. A Russian victory in Ukraine would threaten U.K. interests, and the report calls on London to do everything possible, short of direct involvement in combat, to prevent such an outcome. The report's recommendations include restoring freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, assisting Black Sea states in deterring existential threats, promoting new Black Sea regional initiatives, preparing for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, and sharing lessons from the ongoing war.

### **NATO's Growing Support for Black Sea Security: Allied-Partner Cooperation against Russian Revisionism**

With the NATO accession of Romania and Bulgaria two decades ago, the Alliance has significantly expanded its role in enhancing Black Sea security. With three NATO allies—Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye—and three partner nations—Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova—NATO has brought an atmosphere of stability and cooperation in a region long marked by Cold War tensions and mistrust. Through partnership programs with Moldova and membership preparation efforts for Romania, Bulgaria, and now Georgia and Ukraine, NATO has actively supported reforms that aim to strengthen democratic governance and bolster robust security and defense systems. These efforts include countering cyber and hybrid threats, enhancing interoperability among member and partner nations, and promoting bilateral and regional cooperation on air data exchange and airspace security. Additionally, NATO has focused on the protection of critical infrastructure and regional energy security, further deepening cooperation with its partners in the Black Sea region.

The 2004 NATO Summit in Istanbul marked the first time Allied leaders formally acknowledged the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for Euro-Atlantic security. At the summit, they committed to supporting both Allied and regional initiatives aimed at bolstering security in the area. This recognition has been reaffirmed at every subsequent NATO summit, underscoring the Black Sea's ongoing relevance to the Alliance's security priorities. At that time, NATO's partnership and cooperation offers, extended to Russia, fostered optimism that the Black Sea could evolve into a zone of stability. The hope was that, despite differing national statuses, the countries in the region could unite under a shared desire for peace and cooperation.

Unfortunately, Russia's actions over the past two decades have shattered the hopes for peace and cooperation in the Black Sea region. The 2008 invasion of Georgia, the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the conflict orchestrated by Russia in Eastern Ukraine marked a shift away from collaboration toward a policy of revisionism and revanchism. This revisionism includes redrawing borders through military aggression and political, economic, and energy-based coercion. The culmination of this aggressive policy was the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – an unprecedented act of warfare that no civilized nation in Europe believed could occur in the 21st century.



While Russia's revisionism targets the entire European and international order, it has primarily manifested in the relatively small Black Sea region. Along with its littoral Allies and Partners, NATO has stood firm against this strategic backsliding by Moscow's leadership into confrontation.

Even after the attack on Georgia in 2008, NATO countries extended a new opportunity to Russia. Through the NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the 2010 Lisbon Summit, NATO offered Russia the chance to develop a genuine strategic partnership. Instead, Russia chose to annex Crimea, fuel separatism in Eastern Ukraine, and ultimately launch a brutal, unprovoked invasion of its neighbor.

Since the annexation of Crimea, the significance of the Black Sea region as a zone of peace, security, and adherence to international norms has only increased. The war that Russia continues to wage against Ukraine poses a threat not only to other countries in the region but to all of Europe. How the Euro-Atlantic community addresses this war will serve as a test for the legitimacy of the post-World War II international order and Russia's role within it.

After the Crimea annexation, NATO gradually reinforced the defense of its member states. The Alliance has developed a deterrence and defense posture aimed at protecting its most vulnerable members along the Eastern Flank. This includes a strong forward presence in these Eastern countries, enhanced air policing, and improved air defense capabilities. Eight battle groups have been established along the Eastern Flank, including two located in the Black Sea region, in Romania and Bulgaria, which can be upgraded to brigade-level strength. At the Black Sea, NATO has heightened its vigilance, continuously monitoring the situation while supporting its Allies in air policing and maritime surveillance efforts.

In addition to concrete measures, the Alliance has strengthened its political and conceptual approach to the Black Sea. The strategic importance of this region for Euro-Atlantic security was emphasized in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept. At the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023, NATO leaders pledged to support regional efforts to uphold security, safety, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. Furthermore, NATO has adapted its defense plans to address the specific security needs of this region.

In this context, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Republic of Türkiye have agreed to establish a Mine Counter Measures Task Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea) – a naval group focused on clearing drifting mines that threaten the safety and security of navigation. This is a significant step in revitalizing regional security cooperation and realizing the vision of a peaceful, secure, cooperative Black Sea region. It also provides a framework through which NATO and its Allies can contribute to demining efforts and enhance regional security.

Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye are playing a key role in implementing NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, the Vilnius Summit Communiqué, and previous Summit commitments regarding the Black Sea. Despite the ongoing war, this project offers hope for re-establishing security and cooperation in the Black Sea. It signals

that the Black Sea should be about principle-based cooperation and good neighborliness rather than conflict.

This initiative not only allows the Alliance to contribute to mine clearance efforts but also serves as a platform to emphasize cooperation and renew calls for Russia to cease its attacks, withdraw its forces from Ukraine, and respect international law. Together, NATO and its littoral Allies and Partners have the opportunity to transform the Black Sea from a test case of Russian revisionism into an example of their ability to resolve conflicts, uphold the law, and restore peace.

### **The E.U.'s Role in Fostering Security in the Black Sea Region**

The European Union plays a key role in ensuring stability and security in the Black Sea region. As a promoter of the rule of law and democratic values, the E.U. has witnessed the benefits of peace and economic development brought by European integration to the old continent. Given the Black Sea's proximity to the European Union, fostering peace, democracy, and economic growth in the region is of strategic importance. However, Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has significantly disrupted security in the Black Sea, jeopardizing freedom and safety of navigation. This conflict has presented the European Union with a critical challenge: the need to deliver a substantial and decisive strategic, political, and financial response.

The E.U.'s approach to the region has included the following key dimensions:

- *Support for economic and democratic reforms* through the Eastern Partnership initiative;
- *The enlargement perspective*, offering a path to E.U. membership for some regional countries;
- *Financial support and a strong operational footprint* through the E.U.'s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).

These dimensions have gained even greater significance today. In the context of Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, the E.U.'s agenda and resources have been significantly reoriented towards Ukraine and the most vulnerable partners in the Black Sea region. The *Strategic Compass*, adopted in 2022, just a month after the Russian invasion, outlines a more ambitious and engaged European Union in supporting its partners during times of crisis. This vision has been translated into concrete actions, with enhanced E.U. assistance and a stronger presence in the wider Black Sea region. It serves as a clear demonstration that, in times of need, the European Union is both capable and willing to assume a central role in promoting regional stability.

The E.U.'s efforts have prioritized strengthening economic and democratic resilience, including combating disinformation. The strategic opening of trade and transit routes towards and from Asia must involve the Black Sea rather than bypass it. Increased interconnectivity between Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean is vital for the E.U.'s growth – whether in terms of goods flow,

transportation networks, energy production and transit, or data exchange. The recent decision by E.U. leaders to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova marks another key step in the E.U.'s strategy to build a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Black Sea region.

On security and defense, alongside the United States, the EU has been a major provider of support for Ukraine in its efforts to repel Russian forces and liberate the territories occupied by the Kremlin. Through the European Peace Facility (EPF), the European Union has become one of the most prominent actors assisting Ukraine. Additionally, the E.U.'s operational footprint in the region has increased since the conflict began. The already existing civilian CSDP mission (EUAM Ukraine) has extended its mandate to help Ukraine investigate war crimes, while a new military mission, EUMAM Ukraine, was launched to support the consolidation of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

The key to stability and cooperation in the Black Sea region lies in ending Russia's aggression against Ukraine, grounded in respect for international law, including the principles of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Romania has been one of the strongest advocates and promoters of E.U. support for Ukraine.

The security, stability, and prosperity of the Republic of Moldova are vital components of Black Sea security. The launch of the E.U. Partnership Mission (EUPM) in Moldova marks a significant step forward in strengthening the EU-Moldova relationship, particularly in light of the growing challenges Moldova faces due to Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Romania is a strong contributor to this mission, offering political support and practical cooperation, with a highly experienced Romanian diplomat serving as the Head of Mission. Romania also provides concrete assistance to address the immediate needs identified by authorities in Chişinău.

Additionally, Romania maintains a robust presence in other E.U. missions in the region, such as the continuous CSDP civilian mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia) and the newly launched mission in Armenia (EUAM Armenia), both of which are aimed at enhancing stability in the broader Black Sea region.

Maritime security has become a growing focus for the European Union, especially as it aligns with the Union's global role and relevance. This is particularly crucial in the Black Sea region, where maritime security challenges have intensified. The E.U.'s recent steps forward, notably the updated Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) and Action Plan, strengthen its profile as a key promoter of international peace, security, and the rule of law. The updated strategy, approved by the General Affairs Council on 24 October, is tailored to today's dynamic security environment and is aligned with recent E.U. policy frameworks and instruments, including the Strategic Compass.

The EUMSS centers on six major priorities: increasing awareness, enhancing actions, training, risk and threat management, boosting capabilities, and strengthening cooperation with partners. Among these priorities, the focus on cooperation with partners is especially relevant, particularly in regard to NATO.

As natural partners, the E.U. and NATO have significant opportunities to deepen coordination in the maritime domain, working together to promote stability while avoiding redundant efforts. This cooperation is essential for addressing current maritime security threats and ensuring a secure and rules-based maritime order in the Black Sea and beyond.

The revised E.U. maritime security strategy outlines several key objectives specifically aimed at enhancing security in the Black Sea region.<sup>14</sup> These objectives include:

- Promoting regional cooperation initiatives
- Supporting synergies from the Facility for Blue Growth
- Combating crime in the Black Sea basin
- Fostering multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Additionally, the European Union promotes the cooperation and exchange of information among the border guards of the Black Sea littoral states, enhancing collective security efforts. Through initiatives like the Black Sea Synergy, the European Union is also working to develop the region as an energy hub by facilitating alternative energy connections between Black Sea countries and Europe. This strengthens energy security and contributes to regional economic development and stability.

## Conclusions

The importance of the Black Sea for Russia, its aggression against Ukraine, and the broader dynamics of globalization and China's rise in Euro-Asia have endowed the Black Sea with newfound geopolitical centrality. Once considered a peripheral region in Western interests, the Black Sea has become a focal point with multiple and highly significant geopolitical stakes.

The future of Moscow's relations with the West will indeed be shaped by developments in the Black Sea region, where Western resilience and commitment to defending certain values are being tested. Likewise, China's aspirations to become a European power could be gauged by analyzing its actions in this region. Beijing's proposed peace plan for Ukraine, though yet to be fully embraced, suggests its geopolitical interest, and it would not be surprising if the military conflict between Kyiv and Moscow eventually stabilizes along the lines suggested by China.

Furthermore, the E.U.'s strategy for strengthening connections with Central Asian countries will heavily depend on Brussels' ability to navigate the complex

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Annex to the Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan 'An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats'," page 3, March 10, 2023, [https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6a9a5e6b-8a10-4233-9bd5-115de4a1fc2\\_en](https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6a9a5e6b-8a10-4233-9bd5-115de4a1fc2_en).

political landscape of the southern Caucasus, ensuring at least a “tout azimuth” foreign policy, if not one that leans towards pro-European orientation. Finally, the future of the Black Sea cannot be fully assessed without considering the evolving nature of Türkiye’s relations with the West, especially in light of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan’s recent visit to Beijing, which signals Türkiye’s growing engagement with China.

After years of neglect, the Black Sea has now emerged as a matter of significant strategic interest. The growing attention from Western capitals is a positive development, with some countries already adopting national concepts or visions for the region. However, the time has not yet come for a fully unified Western strategy for the Black Sea. There remains considerable work to be done in terms of coordination, policy alignment, and addressing the complex challenges facing the region.

## **Disclaimer**

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## **Acknowledgment**

*Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 22, 2023, is supported by the United States government.

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