

# The Changing Geopolitical Tides of the Black Sea

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## Abstract:

The Black Sea is a strategically important connectivity hub in the wider region and beyond. This paper examines the interests and priorities of the key stakeholders in the new geopolitical landscape, focusing on areas such as military security, strategic connectivity, and the use of non-military means of power to promote peace and stability. The paper adopts a conceptual approach based on the three pillars of future Euro-Atlantic security architecture, which are closely linked to the security context of the Black Sea. It is crucial for the future that these stakeholders work together to address the challenges and opportunities in this region.

**Key words:** Black Sea, Strategic Connectivity, Military Security, Non-Military Means of Power, Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of revanchist Russia, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia have become primary theatres for Russia's policy of forcibly establishing its own sphere of influence. This strategic space could be described in terms of the four pivotal seas: the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea. In addition to instigating armed conflicts, occupations, and annexations, one of the pillars of Russia's influence operations has been cultivating and supporting other authoritarian regimes. This strategy aims not only to squeeze Western democracy out of those geopolitical regions, but also to prove that liberal democracy, and the solidarity it fosters, are not effective.

In the last 30 years, the area encompassing the four seas has experienced both integrative and disintegrative processes: the Russian-dominated idea of Eurasianism based on various forms of authoritarian rule opposed

to the idea of the free and peaceful Western-led Europe based on liberal democratic rule. As geopolitical theorist Halford Mackinder noted, “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world” (MacKinder 1919). This space has once again become a key area for defining the future global order.

To achieve primacy in its neighbourhood with limited resources, Russia has skilfully developed blackmailing capabilities to deceive adversaries into concessions. The core of Russia’s hybrid warfare narratives is based on the argument that its national security depends on securing a sphere of exclusive influence in the former Soviet space, also known as the so-called Primakov doctrine. Some specific narratives in this group include claims that NATO humiliated and threatened Russia through an illegitimate intrusion into the Russian sphere of influence. Russian officials have made numerous statements condemning the violation of an imaginary agreement on not expanding NATO eastward. Even though there is no recorded credible evidence to prove the claim, such unsubstantiated claims often resonate even in Western academic and political circles. In contrast, NATO’s open-door policy is enshrined in the Alliance’s founding treaty of 1949, and numerous NATO summit declarations since the early 90s have emphasised the importance of this policy as one of three the key pillars of the Alliance.

Many other similar narratives, myths, and conspiracy theories have been developed to support the argument that the West has a responsibility to avoid provoking Russia (NATO 2022). However, what happened is that Russia failed to liberalize, and Soviet captive nations found European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the only option to secure their statehood and prevent revenant revanchist Russia from claiming back its imperial ambitions. Countries that were not able to get strong security guarantees yet (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova), have been under constant and direct attacks last 30 years by Russia; even the ones led by political elites loyal to Kremlin are under constant threat. Russia has chosen the wider Black Sea region as a theatre for its hybrid operations with a heavy military focus on Ukraine. Even according to the Russian official narrative, Russia launched this War in response to the West’s failure to clearly answer written ultimatums and accept the spheres of Russia’s exclusive influence in its ‘near abroad’.

Strategic competition in the wider Black Sea region has witnessed changing tides of Russia’s aggressive revisionism for the last 14 years, starting with the 2008 Russian war against Georgia and culminating on February 24 with

Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This decade has been marked by a pattern of intensified nuclear rhetoric by Russia for achieving its geopolitical goals: in 2008, it was directed against the Allied missile shield in Poland, and as a result of the US 'Reset Policy,' Russia obtained undeserved compromises. The next wave of nuclear rhetoric could be observed since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, aiming to obtain another unjust compromise. While not obtaining concessions similar to those in 2008 or 2014, Putin's rhetoric has been at high intensity until 2020. This led to the preparations and eventual military intervention in Ukraine, followed by the same pattern of high-pitch nuclear blackmailing. This time, Russian terrorist tactics were met with the strength, bravery, and resilience of the Ukrainian people and Western unity. As a result, geopolitical tides are turning against Russia.

To enable and increase the effects of military coercion, Russia has been using other means of coherent hybrid warfare strategy across multiple domains. A recent example of how Russia gradually builds a blackmailing pattern is the short-term timeline leading up to the war in Ukraine. Firstly, Russia began raising tensions by simulating the use of nuclear weapons and occupation of NATO territories in the scenario of the September 2021 'Zapad.' In the same month, after completing the controversial NS2 pipeline, Russia continued raising tensions through the manipulation of energy prices. In October 2021, Russia exploited its proxy Lukashenko for introducing a human dimension into the hybrid mix by instigating a migration crisis at the borders of the Baltic states and Poland. After exploiting different domains to lay the groundwork for the crisis, Russia began to build up its military presence on the Ukrainian border, culminating in ultimatums to NATO (Agreement on measures 2021) and the United States (Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees 2021). Russia's demands were fully in line with the Primakov doctrine. This proved that Russia is coherently moving towards achieving its strategic goal of regaining the sphere of influence since the early 1990s (The "Primakov Doctrine": Russia's Zero Sum Game with the United States 1997). In both instances, Russia sought to use its actions to persuade the West to make three strategic concessions: preventing the further expansion of NATO to the east, ensuring Russia's pre-eminence by prohibiting a US military presence in territories formerly belonging to the USSR but not part of NATO, and refraining from deploying armed forces and armaments in the post-Soviet region, including as part of military alliances.

Russia did not interpret the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a loss of the right to claim a sphere of exclusive influence. Analysis of declassified materials reflecting exchanges between US President Bill Clinton and the first president of independent Russia, Boris Yeltsin, proves that the defeat in the cold war was not perceived by Kremlin as a loss of the status of the world's super-power and did not result in the ending its imperialistic ambitions (NATO Expansion – The Budapest Blow Up 1994 2021). Later, Putin publicly confirmed that, for the Kremlin, the break-up of the Soviet Union was seen biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century (YouTube 2005). Sergei Medvedev explains that the bloodless dissolution of the Soviet Union failed to end the Soviet period of modern Russian history because the Kremlin assumed it still had sufficient tools of influence and blackmail embedded in the post-Soviet area to keep the area under control (YouTube 2022). With the war in Ukraine, Russia hoped to finally legitimise the sphere of its exclusive influence. Today, the future of the whole strategic geopolitical area is at stake in Ukraine, and only Russia's major defeat in Ukraine can mark a delayed, but real collapse of the Soviet empire.

The far-reaching consequences of the war in Ukraine emphasised the importance of security and stability in the Black Sea region. The disruption of vital transportation, trade, and energy routes that connect Europe with the eastern and southern markets have the potential to cause severe crises in multiple critical areas, affecting millions in various regions. A diverse spectrum of actors among the littoral states, the wider region, and external stakeholders are affected by the security deficit and constrained connectivity through the Black Sea. As a result of the turbulent changes in the region, various actors feel the urgent need to adapt to the new geopolitical realities and shifting balance of power.

The Black Sea has acquired many strategic significances in Euro Atlantic security, including economic, energy, military, and political ones. This paper will discuss the interests and priorities of the key stakeholders in the new wider geopolitical equation within the framework of the following major areas: military security, strategic connectivity, non-military means of power, and projecting peace and stability. The paper will follow a conceptual approach based on the three pillars of future Euro-Atlantic security architecture, which are directly linked with the Black Sea security context. Firstly, the US military presence in the region is necessary for exercises and deployments in a fluid security situation, to win time for reform and development processes (Testimony of: Admiral James Stavridis, 2013; Skelton

2010). Secondly, the EU is the main driver of democratization, modernization, economic prosperity, and a credible security actor for providing political deterrence. Finally, further integration of regional countries into NATO is crucial as it is the only military and security organization that can deter Russian military aggression.

## **Military and Political Deterrence**

The situation in which Russia was extending its influence through hybrid warfare while taking advantage of the West's efforts to engage in constructive dialogue has been changing slowly after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. In 2016, the NATO Warsaw Summit Communiqué identified Russia as the source of regional instability that “have damaged Euro-Atlantic security, and threaten our long-standing goal of a Europe whole, free, and at peace” (Warsaw Summit Communiqué 2016). Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, NATO allies began a slow process of rearranging their defence posture, with minor increases in defence spending and symbolic military deployment on their eastern flank. The importance of the Black Sea has been recognised on the agenda of European security, as reflected in the NATO strategic concept: “Black Sea region is of strategic importance for the Alliance. We will continue to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the interested countries. We will enhance efforts to bolster their capabilities to address the distinct threats and challenges they face and boost their resilience against malign third-party interference and coercion” (NATO 2022).

The military reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank has been marked by increased deployment of US forces and discussions centred on the EU's strategic autonomy. The EU adopted its Strategic Compass, which also indicated European seas as the strategic priority: “Maritime security in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the North Sea, as well as of the Arctic waters, the Atlantic Ocean and the outermost regions is important for the EU's security, our economic development, free trade, transport and energy security” (A Strategic Compass 2022). These documents, adopted before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, provide a good framework for the practical implementation of the policy that became urgently necessary after 24 February 2022.

The West finally demonstrated that Russia does not enjoy a veto on NATO's decisions. After a recent visit to Kyiv, German President Steinmeier, one of the most vocal proponents of seeking compromises with Moscow even after the 2014 invasion of Crimea, finally admitted the failure of the decades-long European policy towards Russia that was aimed at avoiding conflict at all costs (Sam 2022). NATO is preparing for the historic moment of accepting Sweden and Finland as new members of the alliance. However, the real response to Russia's aggression will be demonstrated in the proven ability of Western institutions to respond to the aspirations of the people of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Any ambiguity and lack of cohesion in the Western approach to the entire Eastern Flank will encourage and ignite further military aggression from Russia, whether under Putin's leadership or that of someone else.

Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia officially applied for membership in the European Union. Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova means that the EU has liberated itself from the taboo of provoking Russia. As stated at the press conference, "the decision that we have taken today strengthens us all. It strengthens Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, in the face of Russian aggression. And it strengthens the European Union. Because it shows once again to the world that the European Union is united and strong in the face of external threats." Although the application is technically about membership, in essence, it is about the perspective of membership, i.e., a perspective of joining the European family when and if those countries satisfy the membership criteria. Joining the EU is a demanding process, but a clear message that the door to the free world is open is urgently needed now more than ever.

European and Euro-Atlantic integration is a civilizational choice made by the people, not just by specific governments. Even if at times Russia has backed regimes in transitioning countries, which turn their back on Western interests and values and have chosen the wrong side in the war in Ukraine, the West should stay on its strategic political course and not punish pro-democracy, freedom-loving peoples for the shortcomings of their governments. In this crucial moment, the answer from the West should be guided by wider strategic considerations. Therefore, NATO and EU member states should seize the momentum, as Russia's violent blackmail and opposition to the enlargement of the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions have been countered by the response to the unprovoked war in Ukraine, to develop a strategy of erasing grey zones in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Fourteen years since the Bucharest summit decision stating that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO, the strategic environment has changed significantly. With Putin waging an unprovoked war of choice against Ukraine and NATO, opening door to the new members, it is crucial to demonstrate that Russia enjoys neither a veto on enlargement nor on other countries' aspirations to join the Alliance. At the Madrid Summit, NATO recognised the strategic importance of the Black Sea region and decided to enhance "efforts to bolster their capabilities to address the distinct threats and challenges they face and boost their resilience against malign third-party interference and coercion" (NATO 2022, 11).

However, the stability and prosperity of the Black Sea region can only be secured with a significantly increased and conceptually redesigned Western military presence in the area. The primary goal of this military strategy should be to create Western political and military AA/AD against Russia in the wider Black Sea area by denying it the ability to blackmail and manipulate through aggressive and escalatory measures. In order to align this process with the declared strategic priorities, both the EU and NATO must move beyond the clichés, taboos, and paradigms of the last decade of an absence of political vision and bureaucratic entrenchment, and take tangible steps towards providing the entire Eastern flank with the sustainable security solutions.

### **Projecting Peace and Stability in the Wider Black Sea Region**

Since its attack on Ukraine, Russia has two futures: it will either be completely defeated by Ukraine and its allies, as anything less would enable Putin or anyone succeeding him to consolidate power, regroup, and engage in other military "adventures." In both cases, in foreseeable future, Russia will not have a stabilising or positive role in the new global security architecture. This makes every country in its neighbourhood a target of Russian aggression, exporting instability through undermining liberal democracy, subverting economic, trade, and energy supply networks, and provoking or instigating new or existing conflicts among different countries in the region. While these strategic challenges will have a far greater impact on global security and stability, for the European security architecture, the Black Sea strategy will play a crucial role as a strategic connectivity hub in the wider region and beyond to the east.

Georgia, with its consistent Euro-Atlantic aspirations and Western support, demonstrated the democratic successes. Georgia's geopolitical identity as an Eastern European democracy in the Black Sea region has been forged through a painful process of statecraft. Even the capture of its territories by the Russian military land capture and the subsequent occupation of these two regions were not enough to derail it from the Western course. It is the most pro-American country in the wider region, and European and Euro-Atlantic integration has 80 percent of public support. In the absence of Western policy, Russia already has been able to make some advances in Georgia by significantly damaging its democratic credentials and emboldening its pro-Russian oligarchic regime, altering its pro-Western foreign policy. These attempts became more noticeable after the invasion of Ukraine. The consequences of Georgia falling prey to the Russian hybrid offensive will further limit the Western ability to serve its strategic political, economic, and security interests, and project its smart power to nations willing to decouple themselves from Russian domination.

The Black Sea holds strategic significance for Azerbaijan and Armenia as a gateway to Europe. However, this can only be achieved if Georgia is able to overcome Russian state capture and find its place among the European family of democracies. On the other hand, this will allow the EU and the United States to successfully mediate the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, taking advantage of the window of opportunity provided by Ukraine's heroic defence and Western unity against Russia (Zolyan 2022).

The comprehensive sanctions on Russia have created significant challenges for supply chains in the region but also opened new opportunities for strategic partnerships. A new chapter in EU-Kazakhstan relations is a good example of this. At the COP27 conference in Egypt on 7 November 2022, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Alikhan Smailov, establishing a "strategic partnership" between the two sides (Romano 2022). Kazakhstan can provide all thirty critical raw materials that the bloc needs, according to a list adopted in 2020 (Critical raw materials n. d.), that are critical to the EU economy. To materialize this commitment secure and reliable supply chains are needed, which brings the necessity of a more comprehensive Black Sea strategy and connectivity to the Caspian Sea.

Russia's ability to disrupt strategic connections in the region remains a concern. This can be achieved through various military provocations or by politically subverting key countries such as Georgia. The cancellation of the



US-led Anaklia deep sea port project by the Georgian Dream ruling party (the informal ruler of the party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has close ties to Russia) is a clear demonstration of this. As has been the case in recent European history, the decisive victory for liberal democracy over the authoritarianism (i.e., Putin's "sovereign democracy") will require strong US leadership and strategic engagement. There is currently significant momentum for this, as evidenced by the strong bipartisan political support on Capitol Hill for the development of a comprehensive US Black Sea strategy. The new bill by Senators Shaheen and Romney urges the Biden administration to make "U.S. policy in the region a priority by developing an interagency report, followed by a strategy, to enhance economic ties, development, strengthen democratic institutions and bolster military assistance" and coordination between the United States, NATO, EU and Black Sea partners, among other provisions (Shaheen, Romney Unveil New Bipartisan 2022).

### **Strategic Connectivity: The Role of Non-Military Instruments of Power**

Russia's actions in Ukraine can be seen as an implementation of the strategy outlined by Gerasimov, who spoke of using all available instruments of power to defeat an adversary and undermine its will to defend itself. In this case, Russia has chosen to weaponise food in an attempt to exert pressure on the Ukrainian government and population, while also putting pressure on the international community. Historically, the use of food as a weapon is not a new phenomenon, but it has long been recognised as immoral and has been seen as a crime against humanity. In the case of Ukraine, this has taken several forms, including denying the export of grain and fertilisers, stealing grain, trying to sell this grain as its own product, destroying grain stocks, and setting grain fields on fire. This has had a devastating effect on the Ukrainian economy, and it has significantly impacted global export prices for wheat and corn, as prices reached record highs in May 2020, consequently putting the food security of many African, Middle East, and Asian nations at risk. Ukraine is among the world's leading producers of grain, particularly wheat, corn, and barley. According to the European Commission, it holds 10 percent of the global wheat market, 15 percent of the corn market, and 13 percent of the barley market, as well as majority in the sunflower oil market (Deutsche Welle A 2022). Russia's use of food

as a weapon has been compared to the Holodomor famine in Ukraine in the 1930s under Stalin, which was recently recognized as a genocide by a Bundestag Resolution (Deutsche Welle B 2022).

In February 2022, Russia's attack on Ukraine led to a block on grain exports, as the country was convinced of its rapid victory, posing a significant threat to global food markets and requiring swift solutions. In response, Turkey stepped forward as a mediator, saviour, and facilitator, playing a crucial role in brokering the Black Sea Grain Initiative agreement between the United Nations, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine on July 22. The Chief of the European Union Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell, directly acknowledged it to "Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu for Turkey's role in convincing Russia to remain in the grain deal" (TRTWorld 2022) to help people in need to access the global breadbaskets. The initiative garnered widespread international support as of urgency and prominence, and Istanbul's role was further emphasised by the establishment of a Joint Coordination Centre (JCC), involving Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Nations, to monitor the implementation around the clock. The 120-days agreement lowered price; by mid-September, over 100 ships left Ukraine with approximately three million tons of grain and other foodstuffs (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2022).

The role of Turkey was highlighted once again when Russia made the unjustified decision to suspend participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative on 9 October, based on a false accusation and in a "retaliatory move for what it says were Kyiv-ordered attacks on Russian vessels" (Macias 2022). This move was not so unexpected, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba wrote on Twitter, "we had warned about Russia's plans to ruin the Black Sea grain initiative. Now Moscow is using a false pretext to block the grain corridor that guarantees food security for millions of people. I call on all states to ask Russia to stop playing his games with hunger and to resume respecting his obligations" (The Odessa Journal 2022). President Erdogan and Turkish diplomacy were able to resume the initiative for another 120 days on 2 November. As of 17 November, the total tonnage of grain and other foodstuffs exported from the three Ukrainian ports reached 11,186,228 million metric tonnes (including corn 42 percent, wheat 29 percent, and rapeseed 7 percent) with a total of 941 voyages (470 inbound and 471 outbound) (Black Sea Grain Initiative 2022). Turkey's involvement in the initiative is important both internally and externally. It could be presented by President Erdogan to his people as a great success, which is very important due to

high levels of inflation and social discontent; he stated, “Although Russia acts hesitantly... we will resolutely continue our efforts to serve humanity.” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2022).

The humanitarian corridor along the Black Sea “from the ports of Chornomorsk, Odesa, and Pivdenniy to the rest of the world” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2022) has been reopened, but it is uncertain how long before Russia may again engage in even more destabilising activities. Continued pressure on important trade and transportation sea lines highlights the crucial role of Turkey in upholding the gateway to the blue waters. The recent agreement by the European Union on the next package of sanctions, including the price cap and also a ban on Russian seaborne crude oil imports, which is in force from 5 December 2022 (Cahill 2022), will affect the utilisation of these sea lines of communication. It will impact the role of Novorossiysk and other Black and Azov Sea ports used to export crude oil exports, as these ports have been mainly used to send crude oil to India, Greece, Turkey, and Italy, which imported some 2.4 million tons of this oil as of July 2022 (71 percent of the total volume of Russia’s oil exports from the Black and Azov Seas). (Exports of crude oil 2022) Additionally, the prohibition of maritime services, such as shipping insurance and financial services on any tanker carrying Russian crude oil, will limit sea transport options. These services are primarily based in the United Kingdom and the European Union, therefore the “ban would apply to virtually all tankers plying the world’s waters” (Northam 2022).

The decisions to ban the use of the Black Sea limits options for Russia to fuel its war machine. However, geographical factors still play a role, while some nations such as Hungary import Russian oil and gas through pipelines. The location of the Black Sea at the crossroads of Europe and Asia provides a natural connection for the import of gas, crude oil, and refined oil from Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Istanbul plays a key role in this process through the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) project, which starts at the Georgia-Turkey border. This pipeline is the most important section of the Southern Gas Corridor linking to the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), reinforcing the role of Turkey as an energy hub, which is of great importance for Europe (TANAP Natural gas Transmission Company n.d.).

It allows the connection of gas fields in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan with the European market and integrates Georgia into the wider Black Sea gas region (Sabadus 2021). This has been recognised by President von der

Leyen, who during a visit to Baku in July 2022 emphasized Azerbaijan's role as a crucial partner in expanding supplies through the Southern Gas Corridor. The expansion of capacity in 2023 to 12 billion cubic metres and 20 billion cubic metres in the future "will help compensate for cuts in supplies of Russian gas and contribute significantly to Europe's security of supply" (Statement 2022).

The potential for the expansion of gas supplies through the reopening of the Baku-Tiflis-Erzurum pipeline has been identified as a means of "cater[ing] to extra volumes from Azerbaijan to Türkiye" (Türkiye's Black Sea gas field 2022). Additionally, Blue Stream, a major trans-Black Sea gas pipeline, with a capacity of 16 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year from Russia to Turkey, could be utilised. However, the stability of this pipeline is uncertain, as was the case with Nord Stream 2, which could potentially disrupt supplies.

Kazakhstan has also announced plans to extend crude oil export to Europe using the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Approximately 3.5 million tonnes per year of Kazakh crude oil could start flowing in 2023 through another Azeri pipeline to Georgia's Black Sea port of Supsa (Kazakhstan to start oil sales via Azeri pipeline to bypass Russia 2022). Kazakhstan is already the EU's third-largest non-OPEC supplier, delivering over 70 per cent of its oil exports to the EU and, according to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, is ready to support overcoming regional and global energy security (Abbasova 2022). Future prospects are promising, as there is an overall consensus between the EU and five Central Asian nations. It was clearly expressed in the 'Joint press communiqué by Heads of State of Central Asia and the President of the European Council' by stating "Participants stressed the crucial importance of developing a regional vision of and cooperation in building sustainable connectivity between Central Asia and the EU, in line with the EU Global Gateway strategy and the national transport and transit development objectives of Central Asian countries" (Joint press communiqué 2022).

Turkey's role as mediator and guarantor of grain deals and regional energy hub could also be a part of a deal to allow for an offensive against the Kurds in Syria. While this goes against the Russian agenda, Moscow may be forced to accept it due its limited solutions and capabilities to influence the situation. For NATO, Turkey's geostrategic location, guarding the strategically important Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits, denies movement of the Russian navy and is crucial for Ukraine as it prevents reinforcement

from the Black Sea Fleet and possible amphibious operations against Odesa. The 1936 Montreux Convention openly refers to Russia aggression and ‘war’, denying Russian military vessels access to the Black Sea. This positive role could also impact the US approach toward Patriot missile sales and cooperation with the Turkish defence industry, and potentially even the re-inclusion of the nation in the F-35 program. President Erdogan’s ambition to be a global actor, based on balancing during the war in Ukraine, presents both an opportunity and a challenge for NATO cohesion and can be used as a tool to pressure the EU on visa policy and customs restrictions. Ukraine is grateful to Turkey when for its food exports, weapons deliveries (e.g., the famous Bayraktar TB2), and the closing of the Turkish Straits. Turkey’s interests with Russia still differ on issues such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria, but the war presents an opportunity for Turkey to rebuild relations with the Middle East. A dominant position in the Black Sea Region is important for Istanbul as it supports many facets of the national aims and ambitions.

A CEPA study recognised the Black Sea region as “the centre of four great forces: Democracy on its western edge, Russian military aggression to its north, Chinese financial aggression to its east, instability in the Middle East to its south” (Hodges 2021). This is particularly relevant especially when considering the current security situation in the region, which has been further complicated by the war in Ukraine and the weaponisation of food and natural resources. The Russian Federation has used a combination of instruments of power in an attempt to recreate the second Soviet Union through the forcible redrawing of national borders. This has included military aggression with the aim of conquering sovereign nations on short notice, as well as economic measures designed to prevent intervention from the West. However, the use of food and natural resources as weapons, as well as the exploitation of the Black Sea region as a means of creating a global food crisis and limiting gas and oil supplies, have not been successful in achieving these goals.

This is due, in part, to miscalculations toward Ukrainian capabilities and its will to defend and a wrong assessment of the West’s cohesion and dedication to support the attacked nation. For Russia, the Black Sea region has always been of great strategic importance, and the annexation of Crimea annexation was an attempt to dominate this maritime domain and gain access to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as to support its actions in Syria. However, the significance of the Black Sea goes beyond Russian interests, as access and security of sea lines of communications also affect NATO and EU members

(Romania, Bulgaria), as well as the partner nation of Georgia. Their trade is constrained by the ongoing war in general, but also by sea mines and unpredictable Russian actions. Furthermore, the export of grain using the land-based communication or inland waterways is less effective than using the Black Sea due to limitations on volume and inadequate infrastructure.

## **Conclusion**

In order to counteract Russian aggression in the wider Black Sea region, the West must establish a military and political Anti Access/Area Denial (AA/AD) zone. This strategy, based on a paraphrase of Secretary General Ismay's well known formula of "Keeping Russia down, China out, and Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in" should be implemented in the shortest possible time in order to serve as a deterrent and an indispensable element of containment policy and as an asymmetric pushback to the Russian advance.

To achieve this objective as well as Russia's strategic defeat in Ukraine, the West must take the following political and military steps. Firstly, the lend-lease concept should be expanded to all Black Sea partner nations, in parallel to providing support to domestic democratic forces to consolidate and reinforce democratic political modernisation. Secondly, economic transactions among regional countries should be boosted and secured through the establishment of a US/NATO logistical/transportation training centre and the implementation of permanent exercises to provide security for logistics and transportation. Thirdly, strategic connectivity should be reinforced through increasing investments in military and dual use, multi-modal infrastructure, and logistical infrastructure, making them rapidly expandable and interoperable for any possible contingencies. Fourthly, the development of soft infrastructure should be institutionalised through the unorthodox use and sharing of intelligence as a powerful weapon in both military and informational domains. Fifthly, the freedom and democracy agenda should be put on the offensive through the acceleration of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, with a clear roadmap for achieving this goal. Sixthly, democracy should be turned back on track and the geopolitical balance in the Black Sea region should be changed by imposing strong actions on the wider network of Putin's accomplices who obstruct democracy and state institutions. Lastly, EU candidate status and a membership action plan should be granted to Georgia as soon as possible, and

these tools should be used to prevent further democratic backsliding and to strengthen democratic processes in the country.

By implementing these steps, the West will demonstrate its credible commitment to further deter Russian aggression in the wider Black Sea region. Furthermore, this proposed course of action could serve as checklist against democratic backsliding in the entire region, undermining one of the most important propaganda lines of Russian hybrid warfare on Western inability or lack of desire to expand boundaries of freedom and democracy further in Russian sphere of influence. With these bold steps, the democratic West will jumpstart the process of completing the unfinished job of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace.

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