



**Revision of the Post-Soviet Space and Maritime Strategy in the
Contemporary Stage (Black Sea)**

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Abstract

The article analyzes the geopolitical situation and security issues of the Black Sea region through a multifaceted methodological approach. Using documentary analysis, it examines historical and contemporary geopolitical theories, factual data, and international events.

The research draws on international sources, political reports, and academic literature, with particular emphasis on post-Soviet documentation and the study of regional conflicts, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea and Turkey's role in the Black Sea.

Within the framework of strategic analysis, the Heartland and Sea Power theories were employed to assess the strategic importance of the Black Sea in global political processes. A comparative analysis was conducted to explore the strategies of geopolitical actors such as NATO, Russia, and Turkey.

The research findings highlight the global significance of ongoing events in the Black Sea region and their impact on the regional security architecture.

Keywords: Black Sea region; regional conflicts; security; post-Soviet space; naval strategy.

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the Soviet Union collapsed, leading to the sovereignty of new states in the post-Soviet space. Despite ongoing conflicts, particularly the tensions in the Black Sea basin, Soviet legacies have not disappeared and continue to manifest even in the 2020s.

The legal and geopolitical status of the Black Sea remains an open question, with the region characterized by a multipolar power dynamic rather than dominance by a single actor. Ongoing geopolitical shifts have further underscored this challenge, as no definitive security strategy has yet been established to guarantee the long-term stability and security of the Black Sea.

Black Sea security has emerged as a significant geopolitical challenge for both the region and Western states. The persistence of unresolved conflicts and ongoing military activities further exacerbates the situation. The evident militarization of the area continues to increase geopolitical risks, making the region particularly volatile.

In response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Europe has initiated discussions on reconfiguring its energy security architecture through the Black Sea, seeking to establish alternative supply routes and reinforce energy independence (Euronews, 2022). Consequently, devel-

opments in the Black Sea region remain at the forefront of European strategic considerations, influencing the broader framework of continental security and stability.

This **objective** of this article is to examine the Black Sea region's status as a newly evolving geopolitical entity. It evaluates the political transformations that have unfolded in the region since the post-Soviet era and investigates ongoing processes through an in-depth analysis of individual events, including conflicts, confrontations, and instances of consensus. Furthermore, the research aims to assess security concepts from a broad perspective and to contextualize both current and anticipated developments in the Black Sea region within diverse theoretical paradigms.

This study employs an interdisciplinary research **methodology** to explore the geopolitical landscape and security issues of the Black Sea region. The analysis is based on a comparative approach to primary and secondary sources, allowing for a cross-examination of materials produced over a given period with professional assessments, interviews, statistical data, and analytical reports. Furthermore, the research applies a modern historical analysis, which aids in understanding the impact of historical events on contemporary realities by integrating current theoretical perspectives into the interpretation of the past.

Theoretical Framework: The Heartland Theory, formulated by Halford Mackinder in 1904, posits that global supremacy hinges on control over the central region of Eurasia (Alcenat, 2008). This geopolitical doctrine underscores the strategic importance of the Heartland, where the interests of various states intersect, shaping the broader security architecture of Eurasia. Dominance over this region ensures access to extensive resources and a pivotal military advantage, enabling direct influence over key areas such as Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Mackinder's assertion encapsulates this idea: "Who controls Eastern Europe controls the Heartland; who controls the Heartland controls the World-Island; who controls the World-Island controls the world" (Shah, 2018).

The Heartland Theory provides a crucial framework for understanding the security dynamics of the Black Sea. As a pivotal geopolitical hub, the Black Sea bridges Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, serving as a key artery for international trade and energy transportation. In terms of energy security, the region is of paramount importance, as it facilitates the transit of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Basin to European markets via pipelines and maritime routes. The stability of these transit corridors is essential for two primary reasons: safeguarding Europe's energy security and mitigating its dependence on Russian energy supplies. Thus, the Heartland Theory underscores the Black Sea's overarching geopolitical and strategic significance in global affairs.

Admiral James Stavridis, in his book **Sea Power**, underscores the critical role of maritime dominance in shaping national security and global influence. The ability to control maritime domains, project power, secure strategically significant locations, regulate vital trade routes, maintain a strong naval fleet, and ensure access to key seas and ports all contribute to a state's geopolitical strength and economic stability (Stavridis, 2017). In the Black Sea region, dominant political players, particularly Russia and Turkey, endeavor to establish strategic superiority through the principles of sea power theory. Applying this theory to the security architecture of the Black Sea requires an evaluation of how maritime control affects both regional stability and the broader balance of power, particularly in the context of littoral states and external forces such as NATO's strategic imperatives.

Russia's naval strategy in the Black Sea adheres to Stavridis' principles. The Black Sea Fleet, headquartered in Sevastopol, Crimea, serves as a key instrument for bolstering Russian influence in the region. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 further solidified Russia's geostrategic position, enabling it to control crucial maritime corridors.

Turkey, on the other hand, holds strategic leverage over the Black Sea through its control of the straits. This positioning provides a significant advantage for regional dominance. As a NATO ally, Turkey employs a careful balancing act between competing powers. Its mar-

itime policy is primarily focused on upholding the Montreux Convention, thereby maintaining control over the straits and ensuring regional stability - an essential factor in safeguarding its national security and strategic interests.

NATO and the US - NATO's presence in the Black Sea is aimed at deterring Russia and ensuring the security of Eastern European countries. The US and NATO conduct regular naval exercises and partols in the region, and the stability of the region is important to them, since developments here primarily affect the security of the West.

Romania and Bulgaria - As NATO members, Romania and Bulgaria play an important role in regional security. Their naval forces contribute to NATO's collective defence efforts and participate in joint exercises.

Ukraine - After the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has prioritized the reconstruction of its naval forces and the enhancement of maritime security. In order to diminish Russian dominance and, most importantly, to achieve victory in the ongoing conflict, collaboration with NATO and other Western partners remains crucial for Ukraine.

According to the founder of realism, Hans Morgenthau, people are selfish by nature and they always strive for power. The international system is a struggle for power, where there is no arbitrator, therefore it is anarchic, and as long as sovereign states exist, they will fight for power in order to survive. However, early realists missed the fact that despite the anarchic nature of the international system, cooperation between countries is still possible (O. Brusylovska, V. Dubovyk and I. Koval, 2020). Structural realism developed by allowing cooperation in the international system explained by the theory of realism and revising other issues. Structural realism and observation of the national interests of states can also explain the political situation in the region at the modern stage.

Structural realism has recognized the inherently anarchic nature of the international system. Although it does not directly equate to Thomas Hobbes' concept of a "war of all against all," it does not dismiss

the possibility of such a scenario. The engagement of states in globalization, the expansion of the free market system, and other mechanisms enhance interdependence among nations. Since most states acknowledge the domino effect in politics, where the stagnation of one state could trigger crises in others, they are likely to pursue de-escalation strategies in times of heightened tensions.

The **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**, developed by **Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver** within the framework of the **Copenhagen School of Security Studies**, asserts that the security of states cannot be understood in isolation. In the modern world, interconnections and interdependencies among states have significantly increased, directly influencing regional security dynamics. According to this theory, regions are defined by the interdependence of security concerns among geographically proximate states that share historical, political, and economic ties. This theoretical approach is directly relevant to the security considerations of the Black Sea region as a distinct geopolitical entity (Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, 2003).

By understanding the theory and observing developments since the post-Soviet period, we can distinguish four levels of regional security dynamics:

1. Independent Politics (Confrontation) - The security dynamics of the Black Sea region are largely shaped by both historical and ongoing conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine and Russia-Turkey confrontations, as well as the broader geopolitical struggle between NATO and its adversaries. Key developments such as Russia's military intervention in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the prolonged conflict in Eastern Ukraine have led to increasing regional fragmentation, dividing states into opposing factions.

2. Collective Security – The collaboration among NATO allies, particularly Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, exemplifies a strong level of interdependence in the region.

3. Locality - Domestic political developments in the Black Sea countries affect regional security. Accordingly, a re-examination of the

status of the Black Sea is possible. It could completely change events and bring about a turning point in Black Sea security.

4. External Influences – The strategic interests of global powers such as the United States and the European Union significantly impact the Black Sea region. U.S. and NATO military deployments, joint exercises, and maritime operations help establish a security equilibrium. Simultaneously, the European Union's economic policies and sanctions against Russia act as deterrents to unilateral dominance in the region. Moreover, China's increasing focus on alternative trade routes adds another layer of complexity to the regional geopolitical equation.

Given these factors, Black Sea security and the management of regional dynamics are of paramount importance to the littoral states - Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Russia - as well as to other regional and global stakeholders who, despite lacking direct maritime access, remain actively engaged in Black Sea affairs.

Russia's Interests in the Black Sea Region

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cold War seemed to have ended and the subsequent period entered a completely different phase. However, the democratization of Russia, the legal successor to the USSR, turned out to be a complete illusion. The new Russian political elite could not accept the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially the loss of influence in the Caucasus, Eastern and Northern Europe.

Vladimir Putin (President of Russia from 2000 to 2008, and from 2012 to the present) soon entered into a confrontation with the West, more precisely with the USA. In 2007, he introduced Russia's new foreign doctrine to the world. During the Munich Security Conference, he assessed the collapse of the USSR as the geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, therefore, the author of the new doctrine seemed to care about restoring the influence of the Soviet Union (Dlugy, 2022). Russia, ideologized by imperialist, Eurasianist theory or sovereign democracy, struck its first blows at the Caucasus, at Georgia. By attacking Georgia in 2008, Moscow sent a clear message to the West, in

particular the USA, that Russia perceived the Caucasus as its sphere of influence and, accordingly, would not tolerate their joining NATO or rapprochement with NATO. As a result, to this day, Abkhazia remains occupied, covering 195 kilometers of Georgia's 310-kilometer-long coastline.

Russia was encouraged by the West's weak response in 2008, making Crimea its next target (Dickinson, August 7, 2021). Following the 2014 Euromaidan movement, Russia realized Ukraine was moving closer to the EU and NATO (Liklikadze, 2018). That is why it completely occupied the strategically important peninsula of Crimea in the Black Sea. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is consistent with its broader foreign policy objectives (Kuimova and S. T. Wezeman, 2018). Clearly, Russia aims to prevent Western encroachment on its borders and, above all, avoid being strategically cornered in the Black Sea (Batiashvili, 2021).

Today, the following are occupied in the Black Sea region: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Crimean peninsula, the territories of Luhansk and Donetsk, as well as Ukraine and Transnistria.

Russia's foreign policy follows two main objectives: securing dominance over its neighbours and expanding its influence against the West, both largely reliant on the Black Sea (Trenin, Aug 28, 2019). Since Russia lacks a natural western boundary, controlling the Black Sea or turning neighbouring states into buffer zones is crucial (Batiashvili, 2021). However, establishing such buffer zones through negotiations with the West is impossible because: I - Because it is unacceptable for the West to actually cede the Black Sea to Russia, Turkey will not tolerate this; II - The West respects and accepts the desire of the countries of the Black Sea region to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Another important circumstance is Russia's complete isolation from the Baltic Sea. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has ended its northern power projection, leaving the Black Sea as the only

region where it can still assert and expand its influence (Nicholas Lokker and Heli Hautala, 2023).

Although Russia has a sea outlet to the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, it also borders Ukraine. After the Euromaidan, the seizure of Crimea and the subsequent war were driven by Moscow's intent to safeguard its interests in the Sea of Azov. If Crimea falls into the hands of forces unacceptable to Russia, it will become completely defenseless, and if Russia controls Crimea, it will protect strategically important objects in the Sea of Azov, thereby creating a security guarantee.

Accordingly, Russia's aspiration to increase its control over the Black Sea can be explained by a combination of fear, the pursuit of its own security guarantees, and economic considerations - all of which are of vital importance to the Russian Federation.

Turkey's interests in the Black Sea region

The Turkish model of Black Sea security remains ambiguous - Ankara seeks to maintain significant influence on the sea through political maneuvering. On the one hand, it aims to prevent the strengthening of other actors in the area in cooperation with Russia; on the other hand, it attempts to take advantage of the existing circumstances to maximize its own strategic position in the region.

Against the backdrop of the current situation, Russia is seeking closer ties with Turkey, seize its maritime waters, aiming to exploit the maritime space and draw Turkey into deeper confrontation with the West. It is evident that Russia and Turkey have developed strong relations. One example of this was Russia's support during the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, the strengthening of economic ties between the two countries, and Turkey's purchase of military aircraft from Russia. Also, on October 14, 2022, a meeting was held between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan - the parties discussed a plan that would turn Turkey into a major oil hub for Europe (Batiashvili, 2021), (Ibadoghlu, 2021), (Litvinova, 2022).

Turkey's interests in the Black Sea contradict both Russia's and the US's interests, although there is common ground between them (Batiashvili, 2021). Turkey's primary goal is to prevent the dominance of any single power in the Black Sea in order to preserve its strategic advantage, which stems from its geographic location and the Montreux Convention.

Turkey and the United States are in endless and unconscious antagonism with each other. This is a significant rift in the relationship between the two NATO countries, and I think their main adversary, Russia, is taking advantage of this rift (Gaprindashvili, 2019).

Through its relationship with Russia, Turkey balances the ambitions of the United States - to become the dominant power in the Black Sea region and to play a decisive role in regional security. However, it is important to note that Turkey is a NATO member state and, in an extreme situation, it will ultimately align with and defend NATO's interests.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) interests in the Black Sea

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is represented in the Black Sea region by three member states and two countries with pro-Western political orientations (Georgia and Ukraine). Although certain steps had been taken prior to this, NATO's substantial interest in Black Sea security has emerged primarily since 2017.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea - preceded by Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and followed by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine - prompted a political recalibration within NATO. Its primary adversary is striving for dominance in the Black Sea region. Brussels clearly recognizes that without peace along NATO's borders and stability in neighbouring countries, the Alliance itself could be at risk. In this context, the Black Sea has acquired critical strategic importance for the defence of Eastern Europe (Voice of America, 2022).

NATO's goal in the Black Sea region is to deter Russian aggression, a clear expression of this was the statement adopted at the

Warsaw Summit, which mentioned that Russian provocative actions, militarism, and demonstrations of force pose a threat to NATO members and its borders (Voice of America, 2022). A second objective - one that can be inferred from observations of the international landscape - is competition with Turkey, despite the fact that it is a NATO member. In this context, compromises are essential. Third, NATO's goal is to achieve regional integration with the Black Sea countries and to include Georgia and Ukraine in its security along with NATO member states. In 2019, during NATO's 70th anniversary events, the Black Sea Package was approved, with the goal of supporting Georgia and Ukraine in enhancing Black Sea security (Voice of America, 2022). In his strategic work "The Black Sea or a Black Hole", Ben Hodges puts the preparation of Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership at the top of NATO's 12 future steps. (Hodges, 2021). Hodges clearly recognizes the strategic significance of Georgia's NATO accession, both in terms of Black Sea security and broader geostrategic considerations.

EU interests in the Black Sea

The Black Sea holds a strategically important place for continental Europe. It penetrates deep into the continent and plays a transit role between East and West.

The European Union has been actively engaged in the economic and political processes of the Black Sea region since its enlargement in 2007 (Gogolashvili, 2018). Its objective is to deepen cooperation among the countries of the region and to promote security, environmental sustainability, and economic stability. To achieve this, the EU relies on its foreign policy tools, particularly the Eastern Partnership initiative. The EU launched the Black Sea Synergy program in 2007 (Gogolashvili, 2018). One of the key goals of the Synergy was to foster regional consolidation and consensus among states for the purpose of joint action. However, the initiative has not succeeded in ensuring the level of unity necessary for guaranteeing security in the Black Sea.

At the NATO Warsaw Summit in 2016, an agreement was signed between the EU and NATO, which aims to contribute to increasing the defence and security capabilities and resilience of NATO and EU partners to the East and South by implementing specific projects in various areas for individual recipient states, including increasing maritime capabilities.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has altered the global economic and political landscape. Alongside the conflict, member states of the European Union and NATO have shown active support for Ukraine – financially, humanitarially, and militarily. This has irritated Russia and led to its blackmailing of Europe with energy resources, of which it is the main exporter in Europe. The war revealed to continental Europe that dependence on Russian energy resources has a negative impact. In 2021, the European Union imported 155 billion cubic meters of gas from Russia, accounting for 45% of the EU's total gas imports (Voice of America, 2022). That same year, Europe purchased 108 million tons of crude oil, 91 million tons of petroleum products, and 51 million tons of coal from Russia. Dependence on Russian energy is especially high in Central and Eastern Europe, where 18 nuclear units operate using fuel supplied by Rosatom (Gogolashvili, 2018). Meanwhile, since 2023, Norway and the United States have been the main suppliers of gas. Norway provided almost 30% of all gas imports. According to official sources, the share of Russian companies supplying gas to Europe has fallen to 40%, and this development was accelerated by the war in Ukraine (Henley).

Thus, since 2022, the European Union has had to confront a new reality. Its goal is to reduce dependence on Russian gas and replace it with gas imported from other sources. This objective, in turn, leads to a new geopolitical context in which the Black Sea becomes even more crucial for the security of continental Europe - as the "only" transit corridor between the West and the East.

Conclusions

Since 2023, the Associated Trio, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, have been candidate countries for EU membership, which significantly

changes the reality in the Black Sea region. It is evident that the interest in these countries will increase further on the path to candidacy, and accordingly, European foreign policy will also increase and be revised, especially in relation to the Black Sea basin and its candidate countries. The democratization process in these countries, prior to full candidacy, has the potential to lead the region toward stability. According to democratic theory, cooperation among democratic states is prioritized, which in turn contributes to the formation of long-term regional security.

Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are strategically located on the eastern edge of Europe and act as buffers between the EU and Russia. These three countries represent the frontier of democracy and are situated on its peripheries. Through supporting these states, the European Union aims to strengthen regional stability and prevent the spread of conflicts. In ongoing regional conflicts, the EU assumes the role of mediator - for instance, in the Ukraine - Russia conflict, the Nagorno - Karabakh conflict, the Georgia - Russia conflict, and others. The EU's support helps these countries resist Russia's political and economic pressure.

It is precisely at this point that the structure of the concept of the Black Sea as a "new space" emerges - an outcome of the shifting geopolitical landscape of the region. This transformation is driven by various factors: increased international interest, strategic military formations, fragmentation, and a low level of integration. Russia's annexation of Crimea significantly altered the balance of power in the Black Sea, enhancing its strategic position and military capabilities in the region. The notion of a "new space" in the Black Sea refers to a transformed geopolitical environment characterized by heightened international attention, strategic military developments, and considerable economic potential. As a result, the Black Sea region has become a hub of international diplomacy, military strategy, and economic development, shaping its future trajectory in the context of broader global dynamics.

Black Sea security is a key issue on the agenda of both neighbouring countries and supranational unions or alliances. However, the

Black Sea suffers from an identity problem, which stems from low levels of integration and weak inter-state relations. The security concept of the region is unformed, which is compounded by existing conflicts and the militarization of the sea, which puts the Black Sea at risk. Ultimately, an analysis of various theories reveals that conflicting interests hinder the development of a unified security concept for the Black Sea and delay its formation.

The major political actors in the Black Sea region - such as Russia, Turkey, NATO, and the European Union - pursue divergent interests. This divergence intensifies competition among these actors, hindering the process of regional integration. For each of these countries, dominance over the Black Sea or control of strategically significant geographic locations often acquires decisive, and at times existential, importance.

Against the backdrop of contemporary developments, the Black Sea has emerged as a "new space" of strategic interest for major global actors. NATO's aspirations to develop security in cooperation with the Black Sea littoral states are hampered by the phenomenon of Russia. Russia perceives the Black Sea as its sphere of influence, and therefore considers NATO an unwelcome neighbour.

Turkey, despite being a NATO member, is trying to present itself as an independent actor in the region and pursue a different policy. At this stage, the "main key" in its hands is the Montreux Convention, which can be said to balance Russia and NATO.

The war between Russia and Ukraine served as a wake-up call for continental Europe, prompting a search for alternative sources of energy. This development led to a re-evaluation of the European Union's foreign policy toward the Black Sea. The EU came to the strategic realization that the Black Sea must become a guarantor of its own security - an area where the dominance of external powers cannot be permitted. To this end, the revitalization of the "Three Seas" initiative has significantly elevated the strategic importance of the Black Sea in ensuring the security of continental Europe.

Ultimately, the core challenges facing the Black Sea region stem from conflicting interests and strategic fragmentation, which generate persistent tensions, wars, militarization, and a low level of regional integration. The key to security in the Black Sea lies in integration, as security cannot be achieved in isolation by any single state. Rather, the security of the Black Sea must be attained through enhanced cooperation and growing interdependence among the countries of the region.

Unpredictable processes, growing militarism, low level of integration, interests of global actors, strategic fragmentation: this is the current political situation in the Black Sea. Consequently, these factors hinder the creation of a secure environment in the region, and it is not ruled out that tensions in the Black Sea could escalate further, especially if the war in Ukraine does not end soon or if Russia manages to expand its influence even more.

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