Strategic Nexus:
The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War

SETH CROPSEY
GEORGE SCUTARU
HARRY HALEM
ANTONIA COLIBASANU

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Cover: Sabotage damaging the Crimean Bridge on October 8, 2022. (Getty)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Seth Cropsey is the founder and president of Yorktown Institute. He began his career as assistant to the Secretary of Defense and was later commissioned as a naval officer. He served as deputy Undersecretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration and acting assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict in the George H. W. Bush administration. Confirmed by the U.S. Senate, he became director of the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau in the George W. Bush administration. Following 15 years as a senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Mr. Cropsey founded Yorktown Institute in 2022 and is the Institute's president.

George Scutaru is a founder and the chief executive officer of the New Strategy Center. He started his professional career in journalism, first as an editor of a press agency, then as a press correspondent to Moscow, and finally as director general of a consultancy agency. Between 2004 and 2014, George was a member of the Romanian Parliament, in the Chamber of Deputies. In that period, he held the positions of secretary (2004-2008) and vice chairman (2008-2014) of the Committee on Defense & National Security. Between 2014 and 2015, he was national security advisor to the Romanian president. His area of expertise is the post-Soviet space and specifically the extended Black Sea region.

Harry Halem is a Senior Fellow at Yorktown Institute. He holds an MA (Hons) in Philosophy and International Relations from the University of St Andrews, and an MSc in Political Philosophy from the London School of Economics. Mr. Halem worked for the Hudson Institute's Seapower Center, along with multiple UK think-tanks. He has published a variety of short-form pieces and monographs on various aspects of military affairs, in addition to a short book on Libyan political history.

Antonia Colibasanu is a Senior Geopolitical Analyst and Chief Operating Officer at Geopolitical Futures. She has published several works on geopolitics and geoeconomics, including "Contemporary Geopolitics and Geoeconomics" and "2022: The Geoeconomic Roundabout". She is also lecturer on international relations at the Romanian National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. She is a Senior Expert Associate with the Romanian New Strategy Center and a member of the Scientific Council of Real Elcano Institute. Prior to Geopolitical Futures, Dr. Colibasanu spent more than 10 years with Stratfor in various positions, including as partner for Europe and vice president for international marketing. Prior to joining Stratfor in 2006, Dr. Colibasanu held a variety of roles with the World Trade Center Association in Bucharest.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black Sea is a key node in Eurasian strategic competition. This has been true since the 16th century. The Black Sea is part of a broader interconnected maritime space that includes the Levantine Basin, Red Sea, and Western Indian Ocean. This maritime space is a global strategic nexus point, the beating heart of Eurasian trade.

Russia's grand strategy clearly centers on control of the Black Sea. This was true even before the Ukraine War escalated on 24 February 2022. Imperial, Soviet, and now modern Russia have all sought to dominate the Black Sea, because control of the Black Sea is a prerequisite for any broader aggression against Europe.

Although Russia is the foremost hostile power in the Black Sea, China and Iran have designs on the Black Sea as well. Chinese interests are primarily economic, but depending upon the arrangement that ultimately ends the Ukraine War, Beijing could become a relevant regional player. Iran, by contrast, views the Black Sea as a passage into Europe, particularly critical given the Middle East's volatility.

The Black Sea is crucial for any long-term conventional defense of Europe. Hostile control of the Black Sea threatens NATO allies Romania and Bulgaria, creates the potential for a much longer Russia-NATO line, and enables far greater political fissures within the Atlantic Alliance.

NATO's Black Sea position also provides the US an opportunity to shore up its broader Eurasian strategic position. The Black Sea is a uniquely placed Eurasian lake. If the US and its allies can gain a dominant Black Sea position, the US gains near-direct access to the Eurasian heartland, an unprecedented state of affairs for a maritime power. This access, meanwhile, provides a legitimate bulwark for those states on the heartland's edge whose existence has been defined by heartland threats. For the mutual security of the US as NATO's political-military benefactor and those states on NATO's front-line, a Western Black Sea strategy, and improved Western Black Sea position, is sorely needed.

The Montreux Convention modifies the legal aspects of force structure in the Black Sea. Turkey's role is central, but creative deployment patterns, and a force structure that adapts to the Black Sea's physical realities, can reduce Montreux's impact upon military deployments.

Historical and contemporary evidence demonstrates the way in which a dispersed, mobile, aggressive force can be leveraged on land and at sea in the Black Sea area. This force should leverage long-range strike capabilities, employ dispersed platforms, capitalize on the unique subsurface dynamics within the Black Sea, and have an aggressive operational disposition.

The US should make a Black Sea strategy a priority. The Black Sea strategy should include a formal recognition of the Black Sea's role in Eurasian competition, an understanding of the strategic dynamics at play around the Black Sea, and the articulation of a leading American role within the Black Sea.

A defense industrial framework for the Black Sea region that includes Eastern Europe more broadly should undergird American strategy in the long run. A defense industrial system that includes Ukraine, Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic at minimum would expand collective defense capabilities and allow the US to shift some of the materiel burden for conventional defense to Eastern Europe.

The central strategic issue for the US will be the management of the contradiction between Old and New Europe, which will also be relevant in the Black Sea. The Western European powers will remain invaluable members of the Atlantic Alliance and EU. But they will never truly embrace a forward-leaning Black Sea or Eastern European approach because of their differing historical conceptions of Eurasia and domestic political modifiers that undermine their willingness to partner with the US. The US, therefore, must prioritize Eastern Europe through the Black Sea for long-term regional strategic stability.

1.0: THE BLACK SEA AND THE EURASIAN QUESTION

The Black Sea sits at the heart of the Eurasian question. Understanding its strategic dynamics and identifying a prudent Western policy for the maritime space requires a grasp of the broader geostrategic context of the current moment and of the historical instances of competition within and around the Black Sea.

The post-1991 international system has broken down, likely irreparably.[1] Globalization is progressively being undone and armed revision of territorial boundaries has begun. This stems from a shift in relative power: the United States has become incapable, at least in the immediate term, of deterring aggression on the periphery of the Eurasian landmass.

Systemic breakdown enables the revision of the political and territorial status of a variety of contested spaces. Historically speaking, the Black Sea has been a nexus point of great-power rivalry. Indeed, the Black Sea's status is typically central to the broader European balance – and the Middle Eastern balance as well.

In turn, the Black Sea is part of an interconnected maritime space, one that lies at the center of European and Eurasian rivalry, and that is interlinked with nearly every major geopolitical confrontation in European and Eurasian history.

Photo: The Swallow's Nest in Gaspra on the Crimean Peninsula.

1.1: The Evolution of the International System

Historical experience shapes modern structures, whether or not leaders know it. The post-1991 Eurasian security system is no exception. It stemmed from a unique security architecture, which in turn rested on the UK's international position (as is explained below), and from specific strategic choices that the US made from 1945 to 1991. It is also, in a manner, revolutionary, for it holds a central legal precept at its core, a liberal precept, unlike that of other systems. Recognizing the post-1991 system's history, political and intellectual, is necessary to understand the current Eurasian situation.

The American system's immediate antecedent, the British international system, lasted for a century. It was established between 1815, with the Coalition victory over Napoleonic France and the Concert of Europe's formalized post-war settlement, and 1822, with the suicide of the Viscount Castlereagh.[2] Its elements deserve brief explication. The system rested upon a balance of mutual interests between the European continent's monarchies and empires. All were threatened by liberal uprisings. Revolutionary France, and then Napoleon's empire, had spread the liberal idea throughout Europe, infecting the German states, the Italians, and even Russia's subjects.[3] The post-1815 settlement was meant to prevent another European war – not simply to avoid bloodshed, but to ensure that the stresses of such a war did not overwhelm the increasingly fragile domestic systems of the great multinational monarchies.[4]

Hence a system of interlocking alliances was developed to link the European powers together, giving the savviest among them the ability to maneuver between major-power interests and reduce systemic tensions. Austria, Russia, and Prussia were joined in the Holy Alliance, a coalition of conservative, religious monarchies.[5] However, Austria, Russia, and Prussia all had their strategic differences. Austria and Prussia both saw themselves as the rightful leader of the German nations; Austria and Russia eyed the decaying Ottoman Empire, particularly its Balkan territories; and Prussia and Russia were at odds over northeastern Europe's territorial arrangement. This alliance required a safety valve.

Initially, Britain provided this safety valve with the Quintuple Alliance[6], adding the UK and France to the grouping of conservative monarchies. The UK had no interest in Russian aggrandizement, and thereby served as a counterweight to Russian pressure on Austria. France, meanwhile, despite its reversion to the Bourbon monarchy, still sought a divided, weak Germany.

These interlocking alliances combined with the final material factor of the British-regulated system, the UK's global sea control, to create a long-term durable framework. As of 1815, there was no power beyond the European peninsula capable of challenging a European state militarily. The UK therefore needed to control only international chokepoints, the routes between the European peninsula and the rest of the world, to regulate trans-Eurasian and global trade. And the UK, through the Royal Navy, held absolute naval dominance over any power or coalition in Europe that sought to challenge it. Any power that wished to access the wider world had to play by London's rules.

The Concert format buttressed this international system. By formally gathering all the great powers during periods of European stress, the system created more opportunities for the great powers to settle disputes diplomatically, or at least to limit tensions and reduce the scope of conflicts. This system possessed two legal principles: that of non-interference in domestic affairs to the benefit of the conservative monarchies, and that of international free trade as regulated by the British Empire. But it remained a conservative system insofar as its legal aspects were procedural and technical, not moral.

The UK withdrew from a portion of this system relatively rapidly. British Foreign Secretary Lord

Castlereagh, the Vienna settlement's critical architect alongside Austrian Foreign Minister and Chancellor Klemens von Metternich, committed suicide in 1822. By 1825, the UK had functionally withdrawn from the Quintuple Alliance. The result was not immediate. It took another two decades for the system to begin to unravel. Even then, following the Spring of Nations in 1848, the conservative monarchies retained their hold on power, albeit with domestic modifications.

It took the Eastern Question to push the system to the brink. And the Black Sea was inextricable from the Eastern Question. No understanding of Eurasian great power politics today is possible without a historical sketch of the Black Sea's geostrategic hinge. This sketch follows. It undergirds the Ukraine War as it does that conflict's profound consequences for the Black Sea and by extension, all of Eurasia.

1.2: The Eastern Question and the Black Sea

The Ottoman Empire is a testament to the resilience of apparently necrotic states. The Sublime Porte survived well over a century of apparently terminal decline, collapsing only after World War I. Yet the reality of Ottoman weakness proved the focal point of 19th and early 20th century strategic competition. The Black Sea's status was strategically crucial to the Eastern Question and its most proximate cause of conflict.

The Black Sea's strategic relevance to the British, and in turn the American, international system was and remains historically predictable. Prior to the

Photo: The siege of Sevastopol by Russian painter Frans Roubaud.

16th century, strategic competition was regionalized. But trade since the 2nd Century BC has contained Eurasian aspects, with Chinese silk, porcelain, and tea flowing west, and European wine, gold, and horses traveling east.[7] The vast majority of trade, meanwhile, has always gone by ship. Maritime transport is simply more cost-efficient for any sort of major cargo than overland transport. The famous silk road contained a major maritime leg that linked at times even Japan and Korea to Italy, with goods passing through the Indonesian Archipelago, along the Arabian coast and into the Red Sea, and then into the Mediterranean.

The Eastern Mediterranean is Eurasia's commercial nexus, the maritime space in which trans-Eurasian trade passes with the greatest frequency. Indeed, despite the discovery of the Americas and European colonization, the transatlantic trade did not rival Mediterranean trade volumes until the late 18th century.[8] The modern conception of Europe as an interconnected strategic space from the Atlantic to the Urals is relatively recent, a product of the late Medieval rationalization of religious practice throughout the Latin and Orthodox worlds.[9]

Prior to this, the Eastern Mediterranean was the focal point of an interconnected strategic space that ran from the Persian Zagros Mountains to the Sicilian Strait, encompassing Greece, Anatolia, the Nile Delta, and Italy. Greece and Persia jockeyed for control of the Eastern Mediterranean. Darius and Xerxes sought to subjugate the Greek cities in part to gain control over the Levantine Basin's trade. Alexander's Persian conquests, meanwhile, would have been impossible without his landward campaign against Persian naval bases – the Macedonian monarch captured every major Anatolian, Levantine, and Egyptian port, thereby securing the Greek rear for an offensive into the Mesopotamian and Persian interior.

Rome patiently accumulated strongpoints along the Mediterranean coastline, subjugating the Greeks, Macedon, and Carthage. Several centuries later, Venice rose to power by dominating the Levantine Basin, creating a chain of outposts throughout the Greek islands and Eastern Mediterranean to regulate trans-Eurasian trade, enriching the small city far beyond what its territory could naturally provide.[10]

In each of these cases, the Black Sea figures prominently in the struggle for mastery of the Mediterranean. All maritime movement between the Black Sea and Mediterranean must flow through the Turkish Straits. Hence a Mediterranean power that controls the Turkish Straits can bar hostile Black Sea forces from disrupting Mediterranean trade. However, the northern and eastern Black Sea provided the historical gateway to other crucial resources, including crops, fish, and high-quality horses.

Control of Crimea was crucial. The peninsula dominates all Black Sea maritime movement and provides its ruler access to the goods of the Eurasian steppe, whose nomadic horse peoples were valuable trade partners for settled Mediterranean civilizations. The Greeks first settled the Black Sea's northeastern coastline, along with Crimea, in the 7th century. At least one Greek Crimean colony was a member of the Delian League, the Athenian coalition during the Peloponnesian War, demonstrating the strategic interplay between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean even in the 5th century BC.

Rome ultimately gained indirect control over the Black Sea through a series of client states, including the Bosporan Kingdom, a unique Hellenistic hybrid state that outlasted the Western Roman Empire by a half-century.[11] The Byzantine Empire regained control of Crimea during the Justinian Dynasty and held it through a series of client states until its fall in 1453. Indeed, despite Byzantium's various internal troubles – and its shift from a commercial to a largely agrarian political economy – the Byzantines remained competitive with larger Middle Eastern land powers and the European maritime city-states in part because of their stranglehold on Black Sea trade.

The Ottomans, in turn, maintained their power through their concurrent control of the Black Sea and Levantine Basin. Indeed, it was Ottoman control of the

Black Sea that solidified the Porte's ability to project power in Europe and the Mediterranean. Through either outright conquest or a vassal state system, the Ottomans controlled the entire Black Sea coastline, completely securing their northern and northeastern flanks, and enabling lucrative trade between the Eurasian steppe, the eastern Balkans, and Anatolia.[12] From this keystone, the Ottomans expanded their footprint into the Balkans, creating another chain of vassal states, and into the Mediterranean, solidifying their control of the central Mediterranean coastline as far as modern-day Algeria.

The visible unravelling of Ottoman power began when the Ottomans lost Black Sea dominance. Russia snatched Crimea from a weakening Ottoman Empire in 1783, violating a previous treaty with barely a protest from the European powers. Two decades later, the national awakenings began, first in Serbia, then in Greece. The Ottomans then ceded significant power to their Egyptian governorate, which ultimately asserted its de facto independence. After two wars with Egypt, in 1840 the Ottomans seemed near-collapse – the Ottoman fleet defected to Cairo, and France was poised to support a formal Egyptian declaration of independence. Only great power intervention prevented a complete collapse.

From this point on, the Eastern Question directly defined European geopolitics. Russia, eyeing the Ottomans' Slavic possessions in the Balkans, craving unimpeded access to the Eastern Mediterranean, and driven by a messianic Muscovite Orthodox mission, sought to dismember the Ottoman Empire, and, if possible, capture Constantinople, thereby legitimating Russia's claim to the Roman Imperial mantle. The UK, meanwhile, could not allow Russian expansion beyond the Black Sea. Land-bound Russia in control of Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Levant could cut Britain off from its Asian imperial possessions, thereby destroying British global sea control and undermining the Empire. The UK therefore supported the Ottomans, gaining marginal points of political leverage while sustaining

the Sultanate as a whole. The other powers had their relative interests, either direct, as in Austria's case, or indirect, as in France and Prussia's. Hence the Eastern Question included nearly every intersecting aspect of the 19th century European balance.

In turn, the Eastern Question ran through the Black Sea. Russia could only pressure the Ottomans and expand in the Balkans because of its control of Crimea and southern Ukraine. In 1853, France and Britain declared war on Russia in response to Moscow's occupation of the Danubian principalities on the western Black Sea – the war's proximate cause may have been a legal-religious dispute between Paris, Moscow, and Constantinople, but its fundamentals stemmed from the Eastern Question. Although Russia withdrew from the western Black Sea in late 1854, the Anglo-French alliance, soon joined by Sardinia, carried the war into Crimea. The Allied goal was unmistakable. By wresting Crimea from Russian control, the UK and France could break Russian power in the Black Sea, thereby securing the Ottomans from further predation and mitigating the Eastern Question. The Allies won the war after two years of hard fighting, and at the 1856 Congress of Paris, made the Black Sea neutral territory.

Russia was deprived of a Black Sea fleet and fortifications, a judgment Russia respected until 1871. During Russia's weakness, Moldavia and Wallachia, the two Romanian principalities on the Danube, formed a union. Both were targets for Russian conquest – Russia hoped to absorb them as it absorbed Bessarabia, today the territory of Moldova and southwestern Ukraine, in 1812.[13] In 1866, the United Principalities were renamed Romania. In 1881, Romania became an independent kingdom under the rule of a German prince, Carol I.[14]

Perhaps a stable European system would have ended the issue. But instability in the Balkans, combined with the emergence of Germany as a major European power, transformed the European situation, and by extension resurrected the Black Sea coastline as an area of strategic competition.

Prussia became Central Europe's dominant power with its victory over Austria in 1866 and transformed into Germany with its victory over France in 1870. This development stemmed directly from the Black Sea's political status. Russia had intervened on Austria's behalf during the 1848-1849 Hungarian Revolution – absent Nicholas I's dispatch of 200,000 troops to relieve pressure on Austria, Franz Joseph might have lost his throne in 1849, rather than dying as Emperor in 1916.[15]

Austria, however, abandoned Russia in 1853, fearful of Russian encroachments upon Slavic areas of the Balkans. Russia's subsequent defeat in the Crimean War embittered it against Austria, convincing Alexander II, who took the throne from his father in the last year of the Crimean War, to leave Franz Josef to his fate.[16] Louis-Napoleon's France, through a mix of opportunism and severe misperception, actively encouraged Prussian ambitions, while Russian enmity precluded an 1849-style intervention from Moscow.

Once Imperial Germany was formed in 1871, the Eastern Question returned, just as great-power European rivalry returned. Under Chancellor Bismarck's skilled diplomatic leadership, Europe avoided a major war despite the 1877 Russian-Ottoman War.[17] But the subsequent settlement provided Russia with expansive Black Sea territories, undoing much of the strategic work that the Crimean War had accomplished. In turn, the revolts of the various Balkan powers intensified geopolitical rivalry, as they allowed Russia to aggrandize itself, while also threatening Austrian political integrity.[18]

The proximate cause for World War I was the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination. Its root was three interlocking antagonisms. Anglo-German rivalry at sea, Franco-German enmity after 1870, and Austro-Russian rivalry in the Balkans all intersected through the European alliance system which dragged the continent to war.

The genealogy of each rivalry stems from the Eastern Question, which in turn runs through the Black Sea. Anglo-German rivalry derived from Britain's jealous maintenance of European sea control, of which its treatment of the Eastern Question was a fundamental part. The Franco-German rivalry, although not expressed in the east, can be traced to the events of the Crimean War, and therefore to the Eastern Question. And most directly, the Austro-Russian rivalry stemmed directly from the Eastern Question, and more specifically, from the European powers' complete inability to resolve it absent a systemic conflict.

The British international system was broken, but not shattered, after 1918. The UK no longer held global sea control. It had abdicated that through an explicit agreement with Japan in 1905 and a tacit one with the US over the Panama Canal shortly thereafter. The rise of Imperial Germany created the potential for a European naval coalition that could counter British maritime dominance. But of equal importance, the growth of American and Japanese power – and the commensurate growth of their navies – added non-European threats to the global balance for the first time in the Eurasian political era.[19] The question became, how might one build a durable peace after the disaster of 1914-1918? The result would again hinge upon the fate of the Black Sea.

1.3: Systemic Breakdown, 1918-1945

The full scope of the 1919 peace settlement is beyond the scope of this study. The most critical aspects of it are its moral-legal underpinnings, its effect upon the great powers, and its inability to resolve the question of the Black Sea definitively.

The 1919 settlement included the fundamental underpinning of the modern international system through its commitment to self-determination. The concept of self-determination provides the initial intellectual basis for the modern liberal concept of sovereignty. Despite its faults, the Wilsonian position did inject into European – and by extension global – intellectual consciousness the principle that all states, great or small, have equal rights.[20]

This principle was refracted through the prism of each global ideology, that of liberalism and of Marxist-Leninism. However, the Leninist variant of this concept was intentionally incomplete: all states have rights to select a socialist political economy.[21] The liberal formulation was more expansive despite the liberal tradition's affinity towards capitalist democracy, thereby ultimately allowing the post-1945 liberal order to contain within it a variety of regimes, barring those with an aggressive desire for aggrandizement.

The most discussed aspect of the 1919 settlement is the German war indemnity, along with other restrictions upon Germany's long-term economic and military potential. These were the structural causes of World War II, for the 1919 settlement never truly resolved the German question. However, it is reasonable to explicate the relationship between the European balance and the Black Sea, both because the modern legal regime that governs the Black Sea stems from shifts in the European balance and because it demonstrates the linkage between the Black Sea and broader European questions.

The Allies sought to resolve the Eastern Question somewhat haphazardly. Britain in particular balanced its rivalry with France – Paris again sought a solid foothold in the Middle East, resurrecting its disrupted strategic expansion in the late 19th century – and its need to contain a burgeoning Soviet threat with obvious designs on the Straits. The first Allied attempt to settle the question effectively dismembered Turkey.[22] The British and French received dominion over Arabia and the Levant respectively, while the UK, France, Greece, and Italy were granted zones of influence over Anatolia. Greece was central to the new balance: the Greek Army took Smyrna, now Izmir, in 1919, gaining a major exclave on the Anatolian coast and thereby solidifying its control of the Aegean. The UK and France also occupied the Straits, thereby guaranteeing free passage to all ships, essentially internationalizing it, but with the obvious caveat that in wartime, the UK now held leverage over Russia's exit to the Levantine Basin.[23]

Turkey rebelled against this settlement, with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk leading the Turkish National Movement in a multi-front war to eject the Western powers from

Photo: Anzac Beach, Gallipoli, 1915 (National Museum of Australia)

Anatolia. The conflict nearly expanded into a Europe-wide war. Turkey, having defeated Greece in western Anatolia, began to drive on the Straits Zone, occupied by 30,000-plus predominately British troops. David Lloyd George, alongside Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, viewed Turkish resurgence as a threat to the European balance.[24]

Turkey, Churchill argued, was at risk of falling under Soviet influence – the Soviets would intervene actively on Turkey's behalf, thereby capturing the Straits and providing Russia unimpeded access to the Eastern Mediterranean and precipitating a major Balkan ground war that would threaten the Versailles settlement. France, Romania, and Yugoslavia, however, had no desire for war, nor did the majority of the Conservative Party or the British Imperial dominion parliaments. In the event, Ataturk's ultimatum, that the Turks required Constantinople and Eastern Thrace but no more, was respected, and the Allies withdrew. Under the Treaty of Lausanne, the Straits were internationalized under a League of Nations control committee, and fortifications around them were banned.[25]

World War I marked the apogee of Romanian territorial expansion. The Russian-controlled Bessarabia, along with the Austro-Hungarian Bukovina and Transylvania, united with Romania between March and December 1918. This afforded Romania control of the Mouth of the Danube, the second gateway to the Black Sea, and a large part of the Black Sea littoral.

This situation held until the mid-1930s, when shifts in the European balance again re-opened the Straits question, and along with it, reinforced the Black Sea's relevance to Eurasian strategy. The halcyon post-war days of disarmament and negotiation were gone by the mid-1930s. Hitlerite Germany withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933.[26] The Comintern had expanded its influence throughout Eurasia. Italy had conquered Libya and taken the Dodecanese, giving the increasingly mercurial Mussolini a foothold in the Levantine Basin. The Stresa Pact was a welcome development insofar as it might contain Germany,

but it indicated the formal resumption of great-power rivalry. In the Far East, Japanese withdrawal from the Washington Naval Treaty reopened the possibility of a naval arms race akin to that preceding World War I. Finally, in late 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia, causing a major rupture with Britain and France, and thereby ending any hopes of an encircling coalition against Germany.[27]

In response, Ataturk's Turkey notified the signatories of the Lausanne Treaty that Ankara sought to revise the Straits convention. Soviet Russia immediately supported revision but sought to remove all restrictions upon passage to enable its Mediterranean access. Initially, Britain and France sought to maintain the status quo with some military modifications. But ultimately, recognizing the danger of a Soviet-Turkish partnership, and judging it better to purchase Turkish neutrality through concessions on the Black Sea, the Western European powers accepted Turkish control over the Straits.[28]

Hence the Montreux Convention, which still regulates access to the Straits, came into being in 1936. In peacetime, merchant traffic is unrestricted. However, there are strict limits upon warship access to the Black Sea from non-Black Sea powers – a concession to Soviet Russia – while the Turkish government reserves the right to close the Straits to all foreign warships during wartime. These limitations, which limit non-riparian naval presence in the Black Sea to 21 days, complicate the movement of American or other NATO ships.[29]

The systemic breakdown of 1935-1940 had clear warning signs throughout, none more notable than Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia. The Nazi regime was opportunistic. Unlike Stalin, Hitler never had the patience to wait for the confluence of forces to shift in his favor and to probe and gain strategic advantage in the meantime. The Western Allies, however, completely misunderstood German aims. Ironically, even a "non-ideological" Germany, a "simply nationalist" resurrection of the Kaiserreich, might have

simply demanded European hegemony anyway, or at minimum, access to the western Eurasian heartland in Poland and western Ukraine.[30] A confrontation for Europe's future was probable regardless of the nature of the regime in question.

Just days before Germany's invasion of Poland, Berlin and Moscow concluded the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which served as a de facto territorial settlement in Central and Eastern Europe between the two dictatorships. The Baltic states, a part of Poland, and a part of Romania (Bessarabia) were to revert to the Soviets.[31] In June 1940, the Soviet Union presented Romania with an ultimatum and occupied Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, reaching the mouth of the Danube. Germany discouraged Romanian resistance akin to the Finnish model in the Winter War. For Germany, Romanian oil was vital to the war effort, as Romania was Europe's largest oil producer at the time: a conflict could have jeopardized Romanian oil supplies.[32] Reclaiming the territories the Soviets occupied partly motivated Romania's support for the German invasion of the USSR in 1941.

World War II, despite its name, was not precisely global, but rather Eurasian. The powers fought over access to the Eurasian heartland and rimland, the resource-rich and trade-centric areas of the Eurasian landmass that ultimately determine the continental agglomeration's wealth. Germany sought to dominate the Eurasian Heartland through its conquest of the Soviet Union, while Japan made a bid for Indo-Pacific dominance, grasping for control of China, Indo-China, and the Western Pacific's sea lanes. The two major Axis powers worked in tacit concert to dominate Eurasia's halves. Better coordination, for example on the Russian question, might have radically shifted the situation.[33]

The Black Sea was relevant to the broader Eurasian balance in this context. The Balkan States, along with Romania and Bulgaria, joined the Axis powers. Swept up in the same great political storm as the rest of Europe, the Romanian and Bulgarian monarchies could not resist fascist pressures internally.[34] During the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea was a crucial staging point for Axis offensives.[35] Germany conquered southern Ukraine, capturing Mykolaiv and Sevastopol by 1942, thereby reducing Soviet naval power in the Black Sea and enabling long-term resupply of its southern axes of advance.[36] Had Germany pushed through southern Russia and reached the Caucasus, the Black Sea would have formed the core of a Eurasian empire that funneled the Eurasian heartland's resources to central and western Europe, enabling a long-term military expansion and further conquests. As the tide turned and the Soviets counterattacked, combat in the Black Sea increased in importance again – the Soviets retook Crimea in mid-1944, creating a bridgehead into the western Black Sea and ultimately breaking the political cohesion of the southern Axis flank.[37]

World War II's conclusion did not include a Versailles-style settlement. However, once again the Black Sea's fate was central to the broader post-war European balance – and the new American-led system that resisted Soviet power for a half-century.

1.4: The New System, 1945-1991

The post-World War international system included three components: one moral-legal, one military, and one political. Its structure became the post-1991 system and is fundamentally the system the US seeks to maintain today. The Black Sea played only a tangential political role within this system because of the Eurasian balance at the time, but it did have a clear military role.

Structural bipolarity defined the post-1945 system, albeit in a manner seldom appreciated by observers of international politics. The US and Soviet Union were the only powers capable of truly dominating Eurasian regions. Both also had grossly dissimilar capabilities. Soviet tank divisions in Central Europe were never opposed by an equivalent Western force, but the West's global naval capabilities maintained freedom of navigation around Eurasia. This specific dissimilarity in capabilities and similarity in relative power defined the Cold War.[38]

American Cold War policy committed to the liberal international principle, again, the principle that all states, great or small, have equal rights. Thus, America – despite its maritime strengths – acted in a manner the Spartan kings would have recognized in their struggle against Athenian thalassocracy.[39]

This moral foundation rested upon a military system that guaranteed uninterrupted commerce for the Western bloc, a collection of peninsular and insular states that all relied upon the US for their ultimate security. Even Germany, traditionally the premier Continental power, became, upon its NATO accession, a member of the maritime coalition, and in turn, a peninsular, pseudo-maritime power in grand strategic orientation.[40] Like the Pax Britannica before it, the US system rested on global sea control.

But unlike the UK, the US possessed the naval capabilities to maintain global sea control and secure all of Eurasia's maritime chokepoints. The Soviets challenged this naval dominance with some success, particularly when American policymakers intentionally reduced the US's naval capabilities. Overall, though, the US's maintenance of global sea control throughout the Cold War enabled international commerce, and, in turn, facilitated the development of a truly international financial system backed by the US dollar.[41]

Politically, the US-backed alliance system included two parts: a systematic European component that faced the Soviet invasion threat, and an informal Middle Eastern-Indo-Pacific component that countered Communist expansion elsewhere. The European component, NATO, was also the focal point of Soviet-American political antagonism – the Soviets could not accept another non-European power as a security participant on the European peninsula. There was some recognition to this view of American ambitions, that the US sought a permanent role in Europe to provide it with long-term strategic leverage in Eurasia.[42] Ensuring that another coalition did not dominate the Eurasian heartland required that the US bind the European powers to it, thereby precluding a coalition's development. Hence NATO prevented a renewed Franco-Russian alliance and restrained a renewed German bid for continental hegemony. The US attempted to create a systematic structure for its non-European alliances. But the strategic conditions in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific were simply too varied to sustain a similar framework, i.e., SEATO, which was toothless and dissolved in 1977.

This strategic context intensified the relevance of the Eurasian Nexus Point, the maritime space running from the Black Sea through the Levantine Basin to the Red Sea. The focal point of Soviet-American rivalry was in central and eastern Europe, as that was the natural area in which NATO and the Warsaw Pact would have clashed. However, the US's European position hinged upon its ability to deny the Soviet Union the Eurasian Nexus Point.

Soviet strategy hinged upon dispersing NATO power from the Central Front. This was not because the Soviets thought the US and its allies could counter a Soviet armored punch. To the contrary, the conventional balance largely favored the Soviets, a fact that motivated a reasonably low NATO nuclear threshold throughout the Cold War. Rather, Soviet planners understood that the only way to prevent a protracted war with obvious strategic nuclear implications was to rapidly and decisively win in Europe and pressure the Western coalition elsewhere.[43] This motivated Soviet global expansion, whether in Indo-China to disrupt Western shipping or in Africa and Latin America to squeeze Western supply lines. But the Levantine Basin was the true Soviet prize. Control of the Eastern Mediterranean would extend NATO's flank to an untenable degree, forcing the Atlantic Alliance to defend the long Italian and Greek coastlines.[44] It would also disrupt the US's trans-Eurasian communications and, depending on the status of Iran and Iraq, provide the Soviets with extreme leverage over international oil markets.

In response, the US conducted a long-term exclusion campaign to prevent Soviet expansion beyond the Black Sea. Turkey was the focal point of this barrier. This explains the careful alliance management that the US undertook throughout the Cold War to prevent a Greek-Turkish rupture. Initially British, and subsequently American, carriers rotated through the Eastern Mediterranean to provide consistent combat power throughout the Cold War.[45] The US's first major Cold War exercises simulated a defense of the Turkish Straits, and the US continuously sought to ensure Turkey and Greece remained within the Western fold.[46]

The Soviets sought to break the West's Black Sea cordon through diplomatic-political means. The high point of Soviet efforts came in the early 1970s, when Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya were in or near the Soviet camp. Skillful American maneuvering countered this expansion – the US leveraged Israeli military power to draw Egypt away from the Soviet sphere – and the judicious application of military force against Gaddafi's Libya, along with Iraqi reorientation toward its war with Iran, limited Soviet mischief. Regardless, the fact that the Western Alliance controlled the Straits ensured that Soviet power, expansive as it was in the Black Sea, could not be released into the Eastern Mediterranean.

In turn, Soviet collapse in 1991 stemmed from the US's global naval supremacy. The Maritime Strategy, a comprehensive operational-strategic plan to counter a Soviet European offensive with naval pressure on the USSR's flanks, combined with doctrinal developments in AirLand Battle to convince the Soviets that, despite their quantitative superiority on land, the US and its allies could fight and win a largely conventional war against it.[47] Decades of Soviet military spending at the expense of economic priorities was fundamentally worthless. Western pressure in the Mediterranean was an integral aspect of this collapse. US planning included strikes from Turkey and the Levantine Basin against the Soviet flanks. By the 1980s, the US had the strike mechanisms to hit Russian supply lines without long-range nuclear-armed missiles.

1.5: Conclusion – After Hegemony

The post-1991 system has begun to unravel. The Black Sea sits at the heart of its unravelling, as will be discussed in the next section. But, as the above demonstrates that the Black Sea's political and strategic status is contingent upon the broader Eurasian balance, it is important to identify the developments in that balance if we are to recognize the Black Sea's strategic future.

The post-1991 system's breakdown stems from the denaturing of its two fundamental components, the European security-political order and the broader US-favorable Eurasian military balance.

The modern United States retains the same objective toward Eurasia as it did throughout the 19th and 20th

centuries, the denial of a power or coalition hegemony on the Eurasian landmass. The most effective means to achieve this goal and maintain the Eurasian security system is a forward-deployed military force, undergirded by global naval mastery, and in concert with allies.[48]

The Cold War's conclusion presented an opportunity to solidify the US's Eurasian security structures and prepare for another competitor. However, the US and its allies cut defense spending and bet on a globalized international system to regulate traditional power. The result was a long-term modification of the Eurasian military balance. The US maintains the upper hand in the Indo-Pacific, but only tenuously, as the PLA races to overtake the US military in the coming decade. The Middle East's fluid alliance dynamics show some promise, but the US has been unable to limit Iranian expansion since the mid-2000s.[49] And in Europe, American power and statecraft proved utterly inadequate to prevent Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The various alliance structures, meanwhile, are not particularly fit for the stresses that they face. The Indo-Pacific hub-and-spoke system was effective during the Cold War, when the US was concerned with narrow Asian conflicts, whether proxy wars as in Korea or Vietnam, or brief direct confrontations as over the Taiwan question. Historical grievances, differing developmental trends and political regimes, and simple expediency birthed the Asian security system, which leveraged each ally for a unique purpose.[50] The China challenge, however, spans the region, meaning the differing interests the hub-and-spoke system accommodated now threaten long-term cohesion against Beijing's ambitions.

In the Middle East, despite multiple missteps and a matchlessly delusional foreign policy toward Tehran, the US has overseen, albeit not driven, the development of an anti-Iranian entente that can contain the growth of Persian power. However, putting aside Washington's fundamental policy inconsistencies, the US-favorable Middle Eastern entente lacks a unique Russia or China policy, meaning that the Eurasian revisionist great powers can still expand in the Middle East even if Iran is contained.

In Europe, the security system suffers from a political bifurcation. The European Union's economic and political structures are neither formally dependent upon nor constrained by the Atlantic Alliance. This has allowed the European powers, through the EU, to work at cross-purposes with American interests, particularly over the Russia question. The US must bridge the gap between NATO and the EU or risk more long-term hybrid pressure against the European system that could crack it.

The current situation demands hard choices. These are not, as has become common to argue, between the US's European and Asian interests. Strategic competition has been Eurasian in scope and objective for around 300 years, when the Portuguese, Dutch, and English began to compete over the Spice Trade and access to India.[51] The European balance, Middle Eastern balance, and Indo-Pacific balance all affect each other. It is impossible for the US to maintain a stable regional security system in Eurasia without a stable pan-Eurasian system. Europe still matters: its economic power, technological relevance, and magnetic pull for the Eurasian trade system cannot simply be abandoned. An American strategy for Eurasia must therefore be unified and crafted to defend all three Eurasian-subregions.

Historical analysis has demonstrated the manner in which the Black Sea has been at or near the center of historical and modern great power competition. The subsequent section will identify the clear interests of each revisionist power – Russia, China, and Iran – in the Black Sea. However, American strategy must also center on this maritime space if the US is to emerge victorious in the 21st century's contest for Eurasian mastery.

The revisionist coalition's objective is twofold. For one, it is to control the Eurasian heartland, an area including Central Asia, parts of Siberia, and the northern Middle East, which contains the plurality of the world's major resources. Halford Mackinder's observation that the ruler of the heartland can dominate Eurasia remains correct.[52] For another, however, it is to control the chokepoints around the Eurasian landmass, and thereby regulate trade between Eurasia's heartland, rimland, and insular powers. Foremost among these chokepoints is the Eurasian Maritime Nexus, the maritime space stretching from the northern Black Sea coastline to the Bab-el-Mandeb.[53] The Black Sea, then, is an essential target area for any potential Eurasian hegemon.

Yet the Black Sea is also a unique, potentially transformative strategic feature for any insular power, as the US is with respect to Eurasia. There are no other directly accessible maritime spaces within Eurasia that border the heartland. This explains the Black Sea's historical strategic relevance long before the Eurasianisation of political competition in the 18th century. In the modern context, for a maritime power, the Black Sea can become a direct gateway into the Eurasian heartland. A maritime coalition that controls the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea would essentially seal off southeastern Europe from hostile disruption, preserve the European terminus of Eurasian trade, and undergird a Central Asian-southern European trade and energy system. Meanwhile, a continental coalition that controls the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea can jeopardize the sovereignty and independence of states along the Black Sea coastline and put severe pressure upon the Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan Peninsula.

Fundamentally, the Black Sea touches on all US Eurasian interests. It is therefore worth crafting a policy that leverages American advantages and harmonizes US allied capabilities to improve the US-backed coalition's position in the Black Sea.

2.0: THE BLACK SEA AND THE REVISIONIST POWERS

As the Eurasian security system fragments, the revisionist powers seek strategic advantage in their competition with the US. There are some contradictory interests between them that will flare up in other Eurasian regions. However, because their interests are fundamentally aligned, the Revisionist coalition is far more likely to cooperate than to compete in the Black Sea.

This stems from the Black Sea's fundamental geographical characteristic – it offers a maritime, insular power access to the Eurasian heartland and the continental powers a springboard to domination in southeastern Europe. The Black Sea in hostile hands is extraordinarily disruptive to any hegemonic Eurasian power or coalition. Hence the three Eurasian challengers, Russia, China, and Iran, are far more likely to cooperate within the Black Sea than compete.

Photo: Russian Black Sea naval exercise, 2021 (kremlin.ru)

2.1: Russian Strategy

Putin's Russia resembles its Imperial and Soviet predecessors in brutality and expansionist ambition. However, post-1991 resource constraints have modified Russian strategy, prompting an intellectual shift. Russian goals remain identical to those of the Cold War, the displacement of the US, and any other non-European power, as a major influence in European security. But its means now involve a distinct maritime focus. The Black Sea, in turn, undergirds all modern Russian strategy.

The Soviet Union's disintegration never divested Russia of its unique political characteristics. These are twofold: a sense of political messianism and a paranoid style in strategy. Both stem from Russia's historical experience. Ivan the Terrible's Russian Tsardom was only newly independent of Mongol domination. It held deep-seated memories of foreign conquest and was thoroughly religious in orientation.[54]

Peter I's Russian Empire carried both traditions forward, reaffirming Russia's role as the Roman Empire and fearing foreign conquest after the Great Northern War. The same forces repeat throughout the 19th century.[55] Napoleonic France, in Russian mythos, sought to destroy Russia and build upon it an enlightened, atheistic society, to which Russia reacted with extraordinary fury. In turn, Russia saw itself as the last bastion of true religious morality and political stability after Napoleon's defeat. Marxism may have shifted the object of Russian veneration. But the Orthodox Church and Marxist-Leninist Ideology, at least in their pure theoretical forms, are both universal.[56] And Soviet Russia, perennially afraid of foreign conquest, instinctively viewed the West as an encircling coalition that must be broken.

Imperial Russian strategy was one of indefinite expansion. Just as Britain's 19th century statesmen had no need to articulate their national interest – Britain's ingrained desire to maintain sea control was obvious, even if its relationship with continental powers varied – Imperial Russian strategy stemmed from a natural inclination toward expansion partly driven by Russian political economy, partly by Russia's inability to break the British naval monopoly.[57] Indeed, Russia's primary adversary was Britain, and Britain's Russia, for the simple reason that Russian policy, acknowledged or not, was to eject non-continental powers from the continental balance. It took Japan's destruction of the Russian Navy at Tsushima, and thereby the removal of Russia's direct challenge to British power, to mitigate that antagonism and enable the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907.

Soviet policy was even more sharply focused than its Imperial Russian antecedent. The USSR actively sought to conquer Europe twice, first during the Polish-Soviet War, then during the World War.[58] In the first instance, the Soviets aimed to subjugate Poland and reach the German border, thereby creating a direct link between German Communists and the Soviet Union. In the second, the Soviets, despite their near-defeat

in 1941, rebounded and reached Germany. Stalin achieved what Trotsky and Lenin never could, the active extension of Soviet power into Central Europe.

In each case, the primary Soviet strategic objective was domination of the European peninsula. This need not have meant total conquest, but the elimination of a European counterbalance to Soviet power. After 1945, the only power in Europe capable of countering Soviet power was the United States. Hence the Cold War's fundamental antagonism was political-strategic, not political-ideological: the Soviets could not accept American participation in European affairs, nor the participation of any other non-European power in European affairs.[59] The obvious way to break American power in Europe was through a major war, during which the Soviets would attack the US in multiple theaters, gain dominance on the Central Front, and push to the Rhine River in a week at most.[60] Indeed, the USSR's collapse was the result of a military defeat – the US had wiped out Soviet capability investments and gained a decisive military advantage in just a decade, thereby necessitating the re-consolidation that ultimately destroyed the USSR.[61]

Putin's Russia retains the same paranoid impulse and messianic orientation as its Soviet and Imperial predecessors. It includes a third force, that of kleptocratic financial acquisition, which modifies its strategy. Russian political economy is overwhelmingly extractive, relying upon the centralization and redistribution of resources through Moscow. Putin has replaced the old oligarch class with a new set of "silovarchs", security services allies who have enriched themselves through the machinery of government. This system can exist only if there is a buffer between it and European political structures, for the EU as a single integrated market, with its host of regulations and transparency requirements, would simply out-compete Russian firms over time.

In the long term, then, Putin's Russia seeks to eject the US from European security structures, thereby allowing Russia to prey on a weak, divided Europe lacking

American power. The collapse of NATO removes the primary military element restraining Russian power. With Germany and France incapable of providing extended deterrence for Poland, the Baltics, and the Black Sea states, the most likely result of a US exit from Europe would be the modification of the EU, either with Russia and Germany de facto partitioning parts of Eastern Europe between them or at minimum Russia receiving specific economic rights within the eastern EU.[62]

Yet despite these expansive objectives, Russian military power is relatively limited when compared to its Soviet predecessor. Russia has a diverse nuclear and missile arsenal, a mid-sized navy of varying-age surface combatants and submarines, an Air Force with a high proportion of strike aircraft, and prior to the Ukraine War, a small professional army backed by a notional two-million-man reserve pool. Gone are the massed tank divisions that the Warsaw Pact could use to pierce NATO lines and rush to the French border. The Russian military could fight NATO on the defensive, leveraging Russian depth, but a NATO offensive into Russian territory was and remains unlikely despite Russian propaganda to the contrary.[63] Russia could assume the offensive in a limited capacity, but was incapable of a major European conquest.

The ultimate objective of Russian strategy is not necessarily a war with NATO, for a Russia-NATO conflict post-1991 could not provide the Kremlin with dominance over the European continent. Rather, Russia seeks a political fracture within NATO, one caused by a hybrid crisis including military action, political manipulation, and economic bullying.[64] The result is not to defeat NATO conventionally but to manipulate the clear disparities in interest between Germany and France, Eastern European NATO, and the US.

Manufacturing this hybrid crisis requires that the Kremlin identify fissures in NATO force posture to maximize limited resources and confront the West with insuperable operational and strategic dilemmas. For this, it must dominate the Black Sea. A dominant Russian Black Sea position affords Moscow three benefits in its competition with NATO. First, it allows Russia to project power into the Levantine Basin, Middle East, and North Africa, thereby reaching around NATO's southern flank and tapping into potential intra-NATO political fissures. Second, the Kremlin with the Black Sea in hand can manipulate Turkey's strategic orientation, particularly if it can bracket Turkey from the north and south.[65] Third, Black Sea dominance creates an outer shield for direct or proxy actions along the Russia-NATO border, either against third countries or NATO directly.

Russia built its Black Sea position over the past 20 years beginning the resources left behind after the USSR's collapse. Russia manufactured Transnistria in the waning days of the Soviet Union to provide Moscow long-term leverage over Moldova and Romania – the unrecognized statelet contained most of the power facilities in Soviet Moldova, meaning that an independent Moldova would remain hostage to the Kremlin's objectives and beyond NATO and European control. A year later, Russian support allowed South Ossetia and Abkhazia to effectively secede from Georgia. It is no accident that Vladimir Putin's first act on assuming power was to manufacture a pretext for the reconquest of Chechnya, for an independent Chechen Republic could prove a potential ally for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, all of which could seek to exit Russia's grasp.

Thus, Ukraine is central to Russian strategy. Russia retained access to Sevastopol through treaty arrangements with an apparently pliant Ukrainian government. However, from 2000 to 2004, Ukrainian political confidence in the Kuchma government, with its pro-Russian orientation, was eroded, triggering the 2004 Orange Revolution, a popular reaction to the kleptocracy that had permeated the Ukrainian state.[66] This occurred simultaneously with other protest movements within the former Soviet bloc, including the Georgian Rose Revolution and Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution.[67]

Despite its preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, losing to Western-affiliated Viktor Yushchenko, Russia retained some control through its gas weapon, forcing Ukrainians to pay higher energy prices as punishment for Kyiv's refusal to extend Moscow's lease on Sevastopol past 2017. Yanukovych ultimately won in 2010, albeit not without contestation.[68] Russia capitalized, concluding a new agreement with Ukraine that secured access to Sevastopol in return for low energy prices.

Moscow's hold on Ukraine, even without direct control, gave it a base from which to project power in the Black Sea. And a short, sharp war in 2008 against Georgia, combined with the pacification of Chechnya, effectively nullified long-term Caucasus threats to Russian power.[69] However, Russia required greater control over Ukraine to secure its Black Sea position – the very fact that the two states were separate disrupted coordination, as did the Ukrainian population's preference for the West.[70]

The situation exploded in 2013, setting the conditions for the current conflict and defining modern Russian strategy. This explosion's proximate cause was not geopolitics, but geoeconomics, a demonstration of the fundamental complications that underpin Russian strategy.

Europe desired Ukrainian resources, and therefore sought a Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. Notionally, this would lead to EU membership. In fact, it would provide tangible but lesser economic benefits to Ukraine, namely access to the Single Market, reduced customs duties, and financial support, in return for Ukrainian anti-corruption commitments and, most critically, the gradual implementation of EU trade standards.[71] All in all, Russia would have lost influence over Ukraine, its key buffer state.

Russia's strategy of building buffers at its West is an outgrowth of its traditional, historical fear of Western encroachment. Russia developed its energy strategy and became a petrochemical kleptocracy to make sure it builds enough influence to keep both its buffer and Europe under control. The Kremlin doesn't embrace the

Photo: On November 22, 2004, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets in protest of the elections that took place that year. (National News Agency of Ukraine)
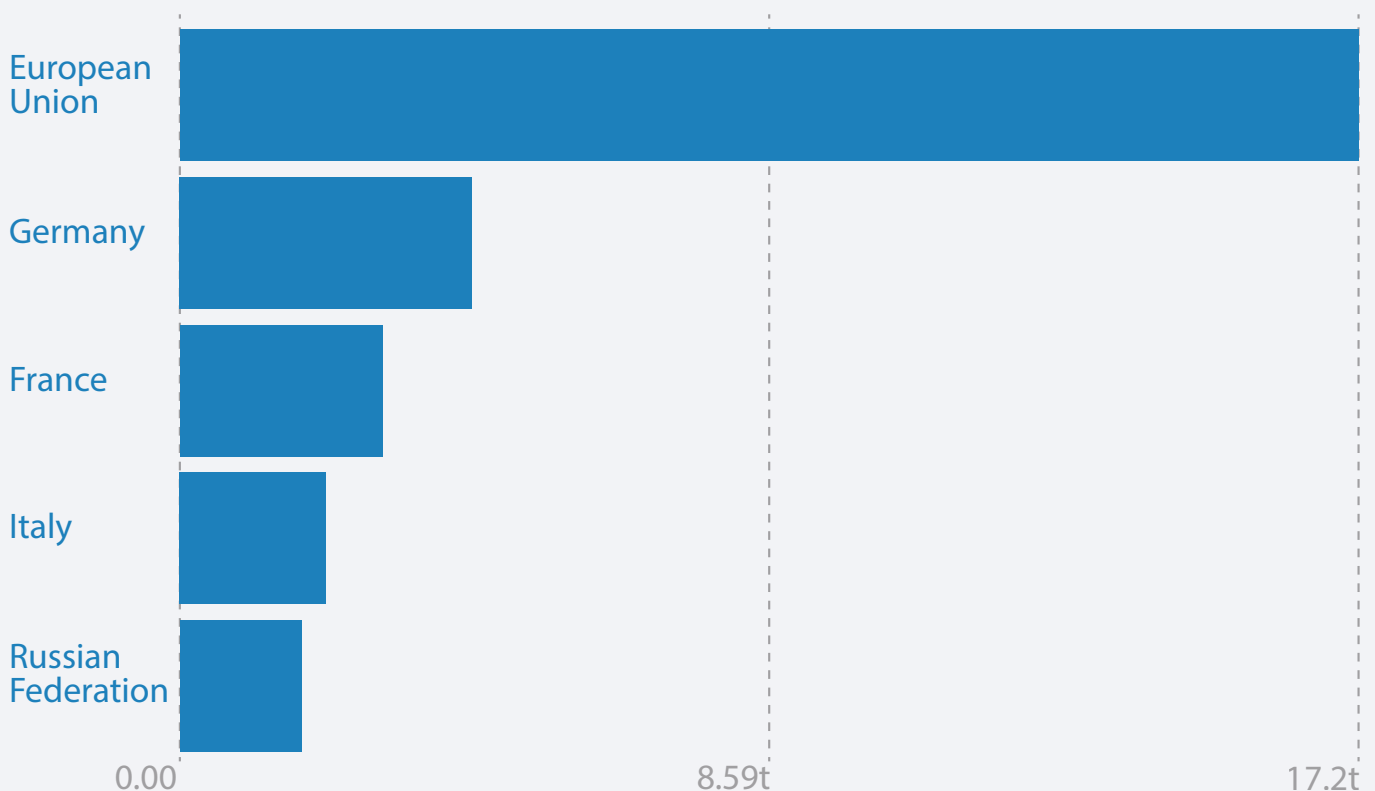
EU regulatory standards, nor the EU transparency at home – but it has adapted to Brussels politicking and has built its energy empire upon a network formed of both silovikis and European political representatives and policymakers. This network was supposed to diminish if not eject the American influence in Europe and have both the EU and NATO fragment.

If Russia were not a petrochemical kleptocracy, a long commercial border with the EU would pose little danger to the Kremlin. But it is a petrochemical kleptocracy with an extremely specific relationship with the EU, at least before 24 February 2022, that relied upon a buffer between Russia and Europe to prevent too thorough and too aggressive EU questioning of Russian regulatory standards, and Russia's obvious corruption.

Ukrainian EU membership runs counter to Russia's strategy – it would demonstrate not only that the EU is strong enough to attract new members, but that American soft power could also make it possible for NATO to grow its posture in Russia's neighborhood. Moreover, the Western model was too close to Russia for Russian citizens to ignore it – it posed a threat to Putin's leadership and to the Kremlin model.

Russia is economically weak, with an economy some four times smaller than the EU's in 2013. Despite its petrochemical leverage over the EU, it cannot prevail in open competition with Europe. Hence the need for physical buffers like Ukraine and Belarus that can keep EU regulations and the Western societal model away from the Russian border. They provide the

GDP (current US$)

European Union	
Germany	
France	
Italy	
Russian Federation	

0.00   8.59t   17.2t

Data from World Bank

Russian state with time to collect an economic bloc. The revision of the European security system will provide time for Russia to settle broader issues with the EU. The above-discussed sphere of influence that Russia seeks in Eastern Europe would also include an economic component, recognizing the post-NATO European balance. This would allow Russia to maintain its economic buffer indefinitely, and thereby keep the current regime in power indefinitely – or at least until a major internal crack.

In the event, Ukrainian civil society supported negotiations with Europe given Ukraine's socio-economic state and cultural shifts. Meanwhile, the Eurocrats either thought or cared little for Russian concerns, and doggedly pursued the Association Agreement. Russia could not offer a compelling alternative.[72] Hence when Yanukovych broke off EU negotiations, entirely at Putin's behest, and agreed to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union, the result was mass protests, not against Russian policy intervention, but rather against the obvious corruption and mismanagement that defined Yanukovych's tenure. The situation unraveled over three months, culminating in Yanukovych's flight from Ukraine, only after the theft of several billion dollars.[73]

Russia had to adapt its strategy rapidly to a fluid situation. Moscow had failed in its central strategic objective to retain an independent Ukraine under its control. However, it could remedy that through the rapid application of force. At minimum, it could leverage the instability within Ukraine to improve its strategic position in Europe. A confrontation with the West loomed.

Holding the Black Sea would bring a variety of strategic benefits to Russia vis-a-vis NATO. It would also ensure its EU relations remained on a war footing. The conversion of the EU-Russia relationship to a trade relationship would be disastrous given Russia's economic weakness. But the constant threat of military action, combined with Russian petrochemical exports, would ensure Russian exports while still centering the diplomatic discussion on security matters.

Hence Russia tore off Crimea while Ukraine essentially lacked a government and, after that operation, activated intelligence assets in eastern Ukraine to trigger a proxy war.[74] Initially, Russia hoped that Kyiv's weakness, combined with a Russophilic culture in at least Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Odessa Oblasts would pry those free from Kyiv's grip as well. However, the Russian action stalled, and the swift armed takeover that had worked so well in Crimea failed in the face of stiff Ukrainian resistance.[75]

This created a bizarre Black Sea situation for Russia that it sought to resolve throughout the intervening eight years. Russia held Crimea. But the Ukrainian population, even in the apparently Russophilic east, did not explode with enthusiasm to join Russia, nor was the Russian military capable of defeating Ukraine's disorganized post-Euromaidan military.[76] With Crimea in hand and the Ukrainian Navy cannibalized, Russia now held a dominant Black Sea position, from which it could sustain operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. But without a land bridge from Crimea to Russia, even with the Kerch Strait Bridge's completion in 2019, Crimea could not be resupplied with ease. Moreover, Crimea's lucrative agricultural industry was crippled once Ukraine cut off the peninsula from its water supply – the Crimea Canal runs from the Kakhovka Reservoir to the peninsula, passing through Ukraine's Kherson Oblast.[77]

In the intervening eight years, Russia maintained the Donbas militias to exercise a continuous veto on Kyiv's foreign policy by leveraging the European desire to settle differences with Russia and break out from American strategic restraints through the Minsk Accords. The hostile Petro Poroshenko might remain in power for ten years. But in that time, Russia could accumulate other strategic nuances – specific positions of control that in isolation seem irrelevant but taken together prove decisive – to undermine NATO cohesion and improve its long-term position. Foremost among these was Russia's attempt, by expanding its position in the Eastern Mediterranean,

Black Sea, and Caucasus, to to manipulate Turkey's strategic orientation.[78] Russian intervention in Syria alongside Iran placed Russian power north and south of Turkey. Russian support for the Libyan National Army gave the Kremlin a potential foothold in the Central Mediterranean. Turkey responded aggressively at times, bringing Moscow and Ankara to the brink of hostilities in multiple incidents. But Erdogan also travelled to Moscow for direct negotiations and purchased Russian S-400 air defenses, at the price of its exclusion from the F-35 program.[79]

By late 2020, the situation seemed somewhat favorable to Russia. Azerbaijan, with Turkish support, had crushed Russian-backed Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh War.[80] But the 2020 ceasefire included a joint Russia-Turkey peacekeeping mission that raised the prospect of long-term cooperation. Russia had built links with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as well, while France's Emmanuel Macron, having selected Turkey as his rhetorical target of choice, could cause an intra-NATO rupture.[81]

However, Russia decided to conduct a step-change in its strategy and invade and occupy Ukraine. Its dissatisfaction with the status quo stemmed from three factors.

First, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's new president, quickly walked back from an apparently conciliatory stance toward Russia, meaning Russia was forced to wait another five years for another president or shift the balance actively.[82]

Second, the Ukrainian Armed Forces were improving. Although an overconfident FSB predicted that Ukraine's military would largely collapse with its political leadership paralyses, Ukrainian forces had matured from their 2014 nadir.[83] In the Donbas, Ukrainian artillery had developed a sophisticated targeting system that integrated UAV spotters. With a larger UAV fleet, the UAF would have gained a decisive upper hand over the Donbas separatists just as Putin approached a 2024 election.[84] Meanwhile, Ukraine was due to deploy its

first anti-ship cruise missile battery in April 2022, and by 2024 would operate a major ASCM force.[85] If more aggressive political authorities controlled Ukraine, an offensive on the Donbas that also disrupted Russian control of Crimea would become viable, threatening Putin with a major loss of face. The military balance, while in Russia's favor in 2021-2023, could become less favorable., risking a much bloodier war.

Third, the West seemed to lack the cohesion to intervene. This belief was sharpened over the course of 2021. Russia's March-April 2021 buildup included a muted NATO response. DEFENDER EUROPE 2021 did go ahead, but NATO did not significantly modify operational dispositions or its links with Ukraine despite the Russian buildup. This convinced the Kremlin that it had an intervention window of at least several weeks.[86] Moreover, the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent collapse of the Afghanistan government indicated the fundamental weakness of Western resolve. American and British arms deliveries and sanctions threats did little to disrupt Russian planning, while Emmanuel Macron's last-minute dash to Moscow simply confirmed the divisions within the Atlantic Alliance.[87] But Russia underestimated the West's solidarity with Ukraine and the speed with which it reacted. In one year, several apparent red lines disappeared. The West transferred Ukraine massive quantities of weapons, including fighter jets, without a Russian escalatory response. Germany provided lethal aid to Ukraine absent a direct Russian retaliation. All manner of sanctions, military aid, and other actions did not prompt Russian nuclear use or a conventional attack on NATO.

Russia's war has not gone to plan, but the strategic conditions that enabled the war are clear. Russia's strategic objective, through its lightning decapitation campaign against Ukraine, was by early 2023 the integration of Ukraine and Belarus into a Russian Union State. In the subsequent months, Republic of Moldova would be integrated, alongside Georgia, while the Caucasus and Central Asia would return to

the Russian sphere. Turkey, meanwhile, would break with NATO, giving Russia unimpeded access to the Eastern Mediterranean. With a state around a third larger than previously, and with a far stronger strategic position and longer Russia-NATO border, the Kremlin could then probe and generate a hybrid crisis of its choosing, leveraging its Mediterranean and Black Sea position to pressure NATO from multiple angles.

As the Ukraine War passed its one-year mark, Russia's objectives remained reasonably similar despite costly fighting. The Kremlin still seeks to solidify its Crimean position and, if possible, bar Ukraine's exports. The difference, in this case, is Ukraine has become the hybrid crisis Russia hoped would crack NATO. Hence Russia will hang on for as long as possible and attempt to conquer either before or after a ceasefire at least southern and eastern Ukraine, thereby monopolizing the Black Sea regardless of its losses.

Moreover, recapturing Snake Island will be another Russian goal before a ceasefire. The island is a perfect platform for ISR and electronic warfare equipment, from which to surveil the entire Romanian coastline and the base at Mihai Kogălniceanu, where US troops are deployed. Snake Island also skirts the edge of Romania's Exclusive Economic Zone where significant gas reserves have been discovered. If Romania accesses these resources, it along with Moldova and Bulgaria can greatly reduce Russian energy pressure, making these reserves a critical target for Russia. Moreover, Russian control of the Ukrainian littoral will imply Russian occupation of the Republic of Moldova and Russian expansion to the mouth of the Danube. Such a scenario would be a geostrategic nightmare for Romania, the US's most effective ally in the Black Sea region, as it could once again border Russia in the Danube Delta and on the Prut River.

The Black Sea, therefore, remains central to Russian strategy in the short and long term.

2.2: Chinese Strategy

The Ukraine War has modified China's approach to the Black Sea. However, there remains a policy consistency on China's part, both toward Russia and the Black Sea itself. Indeed, China's reaction to the Ukraine War reveals fundamental elements of the Sino-Russian relationship, with long-term implications for China's position in the Black Sea.

The Eurasian nexus point is central to Beijing's broader strategy. Briefly, the CCP has understood the central mistake of the Soviet Union.[88] From Stalin's death onward, the Soviets slowly retreated from their quest for global dominance. Khrushchev was the first to adopt detente as a principal of Soviet strategy – his fixation on Berlin stemmed from the view that the city's absorption into the DDR, when combined with other spectacular international moves, would bolster his domestic credibility, give him the ability to negotiate with the Americans, and ultimately allow him to turn inward and reform the USSR.[89] Brezhnev's corruption hollowed out the system despite its front-footed military posture. After the brief Andropov-Chernenko

interregnum, Gorbachev's reform agenda broke the Soviet Union, not because he was insufficiently Marxist or Soviet, but because he had lost the animating spirit of Leninism, its objective of global conquest.

Communist China took a different path from its Soviet cousin, even during the Cold War. However, the Soviet Union's collapse did prompt a modification in Chinese strategy. China and Russia from 1990 to 2010 resembled each other in the intense dynamics of elite competition within each. The Tiananmen crackdown lead to a brief resurgence of neo-authoritarian, collectivist hardliners who saw the protests as both a Red Guard style social threat and therefore cracked down economically and politically.

However, by the early 2000s, China's economic system had begun to shift. Jiang Zemin, and to a greater degree Hu Jintao, employed targeted liberalization as part of China's grand strategy.[90] Specifically vis-a-vis Taiwan, Beijing bet that globalization would cut in its favor. Over time, the inexorable pull of Chinese industry

Photo: Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. (kremlin.ru)

would ensure Taiwan's "Return" to the mainland.[91] This would take some patience, and some acceptance of flagrant American muscle-flexing, as in 1996, but ultimately, China would achieve its regional and national objectives.

The 2000s and early 2010s demonstrated the limits of this strategy. The US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan revealed that America, not bound by the Clinton administration's desire to tie US power to international legalism, remained a formidable opponent with some political will. The Global Financial Crisis, meanwhile, revealed the way in which the Chinese economy was vulnerable to systemic shocks.[92] And throughout the decade, corruption permeated the CCP's upper echelons, creating a bloated, necrotic Party-State incapable of the facade of good governance.[93]

The reality that Xi Jinping and his coterie have grasped is that the Chinese domestic model requires the ability to regulate, if not dominate, Eurasian and extra-Eurasian trade. The CCP cannot allow a market economy, not precisely because it will lead to political liberalization, but rather because market forces absent a liberal political system will generate corruption that hollows out the Party.

Yet the CCP must also grow the Chinese economy, and China must retain a dominant spot in global economic terms, or risk remaining structurally weak and vulnerable. The solution is for China to remake first Asia, and then Eurasian, political institutions in a manner that ensures Beijing's centrality. If the CCP have control over a major chunk of Eurasian trade, the Party can regulate these flows, increase Chinese wealth, and most critically, ensure that external shocks do not destabilize the system. Like Stalin, Xi Jinping understands that the Party-State must dominate Eurasia.[94] It cannot settle for detente. And Eurasian domination, at some point, will require great-power war.

Asia is the primary zone of contest given China's location and military forces. But the Middle East and Europe remain relevant, for the Eurasian trade system links all three regions together and includes African resources and wealth. China is resource-hungry – it must import food, fuel, raw materials, semiconductors, and other goods for its massive population.[95] A stable link with the Middle East is necessary to ensure access to petrochemicals. And Chinese presence in Europe is needed to connect China with Europe's wealthy social market economies.

The key hub in China's Middle Eastern-European approach is the Eastern Mediterranean as the center of the Eurasian Nexus Point. Yet the Eurasian Nexus Point is both far from China, some 3,000 miles overland. A direct land route is possible but extraordinarily expensive. At sea, however, accessing the Eurasian Nexus Point requires movement through at least two international chokepoints, the Malacca-Lombok Straits and the Bab-el-Mandeb.

The US retains strong naval structures, with its Eurasian alliance system providing it access to the Indian Ocean, Middle East, and Europe. It has other potential allies, foremost among them India, which recognizes the threat of Chinese encroachment and, in a major-power war, may tacitly or explicitly support the US. The PLA has increased its power-projection capabilities and is building bases abroad, most notably in Djibouti and Cambodia.[96] Nevertheless, it will still take a decade or more of patient diplomatic and strategic investment to create a legitimate base system and project power from it.

China is therefore caught in a bind. It wields the military power to assault Taiwan, and to conquer it barring significant American and Japanese intervention. But it will struggle to break an American blockade. Given Chinese import-dependence, a blockade leaves the PRC with few appealing options in a long-term war.

China's answer has been to hedge. It now seeks three routes to the Eurasian Nexus Point as an expansion of what is typically termed the Belt and Road Initiative. The Maritime Route runs from Chinese territory through Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and through the

Bab-el-Mandeb and Suez to the Levantine Basin.[97] Piraeus—where China owns a majority interest in its port facilities—is the key terminus for this route.[98] The Central Route or Middle Corridor, meanwhile, runs across China, through Central Asia, over the Caspian, and terminates in Anatolia. Finally, the Northern Route begins in eastern Russia, and runs across it and to Eastern Europe, notionally terminating in Hamburg.[99]

The Black Sea presents an alternative to the Maritime Route and is therefore of crucial importance to China. A Sino-Russian partnership provides Beijing with access to the Black Sea, reinforcing the Belt-and-Road-cultivated leg of the transport system that runs through Central Asia. The same is true of a Sino-Turkish partnership that caps Chinese networks in Central Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, even China's actions in Xinjiang are intended to sustain this network, for the Middle Route terminates in Xinjiang.[100]

Despite the Black Sea's obvious importance, China has emphasized states one level beyond the Black Sea, rather than the Black Sea states themselves. Beijing has concluded major agreements with Serbia and Hungary and plans to develop a rail link from Budapest to Piraeus via Belgrade. This peripheral approach stems partly from the forthright resistance to Chinese Black Sea involvement, particularly from Romania, which has barred or limited Chinese participation in most utilities contracts.[101]

However, it also stems from China's recognition of long-term geopolitical risks. Despite multiple negotiation rounds, Chinese companies never invested heavily in Crimea, and China never formally recognized Russia's annexation of the peninsula. This stemmed partly from authoritarian pseudo-reverence for sovereignty. But it was also obvious that Russia was not content with the post-2014 situation. Hence investments in Crimea, or in Ukraine, at scale were simply imprudent – China could accrue marginal gains, but never commit fully to the market.[102]

Nevertheless, China viewed Ukraine as a reasonable long-term strategic hedge. Transshipment of Chinese goods through Ukraine enabled access to European markets while avoiding the political sensitivities of a prickly EU. Moreover, Ukrainian food production is crucial to China – in 2019 China overtook Russia as Ukraine's primary trade partner because of Chinese food imports.[103] China positioned itself to expand in the Black Sea long-term, as Chinese state-backed companies conducted dredging and land reclamation programs that would enable port development, and signed a contract to expand Kyiv's metro system. However, before 24 February 2022, Chinese engagement was still limited.

China's long-term approach to the Black Sea region will depend upon the Ukraine War's resolution and, in turn, its relationship with Russia. China undeniably knew Russia's invasion was in the offing. This explains the "No Limits Cooperation" memorandum Xi and Putin jointly released on 4 February 2022, at the opening of the Chinese Olympic Games. Like the United States and European powers, China expected Ukraine to collapse. The No Limits document would have positioned China as Russia's staunch ally, eagerly embracing a new world in which Russia regained its position as a major Eurasian power. President Xi's March 2023 visit to Moscow has underlined the image of Russia's political and economic dependence on China, with the Chinese leader showing his support for Putin immediately after the International Criminal Court issued a war crimes arrest warrant for the Russian dictator.

In the event, Russia's invasion stalled, and China hedged once again. It has been careful to avoid significant public rhetorical commitments to Russia, given the severe domestic situation Xi Jinping had to manage until the 20th National Congress and his Zero-Covid about-face.[104] Yet Sino-Russian trade increased last year, and China has committed to extensive infrastructure and energy investments within Russia.

Barring a Russian breach of the nuclear threshold, a Sino-Russian break is unlikely. Examined in historical terms, it is also true that Sino-Russian relations are rarely stable over the long-term and that Sino-Russian crack-ups are almost impossible to predict.

If Russia can conquer Ukraine and break the West, China will assess how it can access Ukraine through Moscow. Even if Beijing will be permitted into Ukraine, all investment will need to be approved by Moscow first, something that makes China be cautious about taking a clear stance in the current war, while seeking benefits from good commercial ties with Russia. By helping Russia avoid Western sanctions while appearing neutral, it makes certain Moscow would be friendly to Chinese interests after the war ends and allow it to capitalize on Ukraine's food production and other resources, for example.

However, the amount of capital required to sustain the post-war Ukrainian economy, even under Russian control, along with Russia's fundamental inability to access Ukraine's resources and benefits through its financial limitations, China will become post-war occupied Ukraine's largest investor, capitalizing on its food production and natural resources.

Even if Russia loses, or a stalemate ends the war, China could benefit in the long term. It receives a multi-billion-dollar energy subsidy as Russia provides China with cut-rate oil and gas.[105] It is also, in the long-term, Russia's only provider of semiconductors at scale, and will ultimately dominate the Russian consumer electronics market. Russia, victorious or humbled, will be exhausted after this war. The ultimate consequence of Putin's gambit has therefore been the conversion of Russia into a Chinese dependency. This has profound implications in the Black Sea. Once the war ends, China will actively compete for a greater economic role.

More importantly China's strategic interest is in an extended Ukraine War. The longer the conflict continues, the more dependent Russia becomes on China, and the greater the likelihood that Europe fractures along Western and Eastern European lines.

2.3: Iranian Strategy

Iran is the weakest of the three revisionist powers. It is also the most prone to embrace strategic risk given its ideological and geographic position. Iranian engagement in the Black Sea has accelerated since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, considering the degree of Iranian support Russia has received thus far, and the likelihood of expanded support in the near future, along with potential Middle Eastern volatility, Iran's Black Sea strategy must be considered.

Iran has four strategic interests in the Black Sea. They stem from its foundational grand strategic objective and theatre strategic objective in the Middle East. At the level of policy, Iran seeks to lead the Islamic World as the head of a global coalition that unites Islamic states in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and claims the allegiance of Muslims in South Asia. This religious objective has a distinct impediment, for Iranian Shiism is on the wrong numerical side of the Islamic sectarian divide. The only way to achieve this objective is to generate enough credibility to rally significant Sunni support. Put differently, Iran must claim the mantle of regional Islamic leadership, taking actions that demonstrate its Islamic credibility.[106] This involves, in the long term, the destruction of Israel, the return of Jerusalem to Islamic political control, and the custodianship, either directly or indirectly, of Mecca and Medina.

In theatre strategic terms, Iran's objectives require that it eject the United States from the Middle East and, in turn, defeat and destroy Israel and humble the Gulf Arabs, particularly Saudi Arabia, if not defeat them outright.[107] This explains Iran's desire to seal off Israel and the Gulf Arabs, creating a corridor to the Eastern Mediterranean through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, generating a foothold in Yemen, and gaining links in Sudan.

Photo: Military Museum, Tehran. Offensive Missiles of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Saeediex/Shutterstock)

After five years of jockeying, intensifying proxy conflict, and Euro-American policy divisions, the JCPOA has become irrelevant. The Iranian nuclear program is too developed for JCPOA monitoring to provide confidence of any breakout detection. Iran has enough uranium and spare enrichment capacity to produce around a dozen nuclear weapons in four weeks. It also has an increasingly capable ballistic and cruise missile arsenal that can deploy these weapons. Once a full breakout attempt begins, only an active response can stop it. Cyber means, intelligence operations, and assassination are no longer capable of halting the situation. Only a strike could stop it.

The logistics of a strike are difficult absent direct US involvement, and the political conditions are not ripe for US force deployment to the region, given an emphasis on Ukraine and the threat that China poses. Regional actors, most notably Israel, could conduct a strike, especially with Gulf Arab and US support. Nevertheless, it would be far more difficult to execute than Operations OPERA or ORCHARD.[108] And even if it succeeds, Iran's has developed a major regional proxy network that will assault Israel, and perhaps the Gulf Arabs and the US, triggering a full-fledged war.

However, Iran remains at a distinct disadvantage. Despite its major proxy network, Iran's conventional forces are extremely limited, and improved Israeli air and missile defenses will reduce Iranian offensive effectiveness. Iran requires a number of specific, patient advances to ensure its combat effectiveness. Moreover, the long-term American sanctions campaign, unrelenting since 2018, has greatly diminished Iranian revenues, and compelled it to cut off Assad's oil subsidy.[109]

It is this immediate context in which Iran's leadership makes its decisions. They make Iran's aggressive Black Sea policy far more than mere adventurism.

Since the Ukraine War began, Iran has served as Russia's crucial international partner. Iran has extensive experience with sanctions avoidance and illegal oil exports. Iran became a valued Russian partner in the war's first months, serving as a crucial transshipment point for sanctioned oil and, equally relevant, assisting Russia with its world-leading dark tanker fleet.[110]

Iranian engagement accelerated in July 2022. Russia turned to North Korea and Iran to sustain its war effort given the former's supply of Soviet-standard munitions and the latter's sophisticated missile program.[111] Iranian loitering munitions have become crucial to Russia's strategic-strike campaign. The Shahed-131 and 136 loitering unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) have become Russia's saturation weapons of choice. Known as the Geran-1 and Geran-2 in Russian service, the munitions are slow, lack maneuverability, and have a relatively small warhead, around the same power as two to five explosive artillery shells.[112] They also lack an organic camera, and therefore require pre-programmed target guidance, an anti-radiation package, or a "buddy system" to track and direct targeting. However, both weapons are cheap and can be launched from a standard truck, making it an ideal tool for a strategic bombardment effort. Meanwhile, the Iranian Shahed-129, a medium altitude long endurance (MALE) UAV similar to the US Predator, has improved Russian ISR/T capabilities.[113]

Iranian equipment is not beyond the ability of Russian personnel to understand and employ. Nevertheless, it is overwhelmingly likely that the IRGC has deployed advisors to Ukraine to support Russian forces and coordinate weapons transfers.[114] Once the JCPOA's ballistic missile export sanctions elapse in October 2023, Iranian advisors will also support these platforms. Iranian ballistic missiles are remarkably sophisticated.[115] Weapons launched from Crimea could cover the entire Black Sea and strike well into Europe.

The Ukraine War, then, and Iran's subsequent force deployments alongside Russia, has given Iran four strategic opportunities:

- Penetration in Europe: Iran maintains an intelligence network throughout Europe that it has cultivated for thirty years, beginning with Iran's support for Bosnia during the Yugoslav

Wars. The network traditionally targets Iranian dissidents and defectors, conducting kidnappings and assassinations across the European continent even as Iranian diplomats negotiated in Vienna.[116] Greater presence in Ukraine will provide Iran with improved access to Europe, and in turn, a broader European intelligence network.

- Weakening and Disrupting NATO: Iran views NATO as a direct threat given the US's central role within NATO. Hence as a matter of proxy strategy, Iran regards its support for of Russia in Ukraine as a de facto campaign against the US and NATO. The more resources NATO pours into Ukraine, the fewer resources will be available, in Iran's rulers' minds, for a Middle Eastern contingency.

- Linkages with Russia: Iranian strategy involves significant regional disruption, a fact that has complicated Russian-Iranian cooperation since Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria. Simply put, a Middle East in turmoil does not serve Russian interests. Regional stability and a solid link with the Gulf Arabs and Iran give Russia some leverage over international energy markets while also ensuring a secure rear area for Russian power projection in the Mediterranean. With increased Russian dependence on Iran, however, the situation has shifted. The more support Iran provides for Russia, the more likely it becomes that Russia openly assists Iran's nuclear program and that, in a conflict, Russia steps aside or even assists Iran.

- Outer Defense: Russia's Mediterranean position enabled its aggression in Ukraine. Prior to 24 February 2002, Russia surged several Surface Action Groups into the Levantine Basin, along with submarines, air defense systems, and strike aircraft, to serve as an outer defense screen for the ground invasion.[117] If Iran can develop an effective presence on Russian-controlled Ukrainian territory, it can pressure Europe and Turkey to avoid participating in a war against Israel and the Gulf Arabs.

Iranian nuclear capabilities would modify the Black Sea balance even further by enabling Iranian aggression in the Levantine Basin and modifying Turkey's strategic orientation. A major Middle Eastern war, meanwhile, would have clear implications for Black Sea stability and would likely put the US in a position of making choices it would rather avoid making.

2.4: Conclusion

Russia, China, and Iran all have a distinct interest in the Black Sea region. Their interests intersect. Russia's primary goal of Black Sea dominance enables Iran's objective of Levantine expansion. China's economic emphasis may be disrupted in the short term, but the elevation of Russian power in Eastern Europe remains a core Chinese strategic objective, at least insofar as Russia expands and becomes more reliant upon China.

The West is therefore confronted with a sobering reality: the three major revisionist powers on the Eurasian landmass are working in concert in a region far removed from two of their core geographical areas. This raises two implications. First, the Black Sea's strategic dynamics are still linked directly to broader Eurasian security dynamics. Second, the West's Black Sea policy should be framed as part of a broader Eurasian strategy.

The next section articulates the integral role of the Black Sea in European security, and the political and strategic interests of the European powers as they relate to it.

3.0: THE BLACK SEA AND EUROPEAN DEFENSE

The Black Sea balance is central to European security. Indeed, it is the Black Sea, not the Baltic, that is the key hinge for European defense. The West – the US, Old Europe, and New Europe – all have a vested interest in Black Sea security if Europe is to remain united.

The difficulty, however, is that European political interests diverge quite decisively on the continent's strategic future, which complicates a coherent Black Sea policy. There remains a fundamental divide between Old Europe – whether as Germany and France or the EU – and the United States.

New Europe has greater strategic affinities toward the US. On NATO's eastern flank, the US has two pillars: Poland in the Baltic region and Romania in the Black Sea region. Poland has at times a fractious relationship with Berlin, such as on the subject of financial compensation for WW II damage, but also with the EU more broadly, primarily because of the way the political leadership in Warsaw has been willing to change legislation to ensure greater control over the judiciary. Rule of law remains a difficult issue in the EU-Poland relationship, now overshadowed by Poland's energetic involvement in the process of supporting Ukraine. Romania does not have a forceful policy toward the EU, but is content to try to find common ground between the EU and the US. It relies on the US for defense and security, but is aware that it needs Brussels to ensure access to European funds and programs to close the development gap with the West.

Any coherent American Black Sea policy, then, must set these strategic dynamics alongside the political-historical dynamics that prevent an Atlanticist Black Sea.

Photo: NATO 2019 Sea Shield exercise held in the Black Sea. (Twitter/USNavyEurope)

3.1: European Strategic Interests in the Black Sea

Historical analysis demonstrates the iron link between European security and the Black Sea balance. Simply put, because the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea are interlinked strategic spaces, both part of the Eurasian Nexus Point, dividing the two between different powers or coalitions inevitably causes friction. If a single European political-security space is to extend from the Atlantic to at least the Russian border, the Black Sea must be in hands friendly to the European powers along with the Mediterranean.

Considering this strategic reality, three specific strategic interests explain the relevance of the Black Sea to European security.

First, it is extraordinarily difficult to establish a coherent line of defense within Europe, given the modern geopolitical environment, absent the Black Sea in friendly hands. Europe's post-2010 line of defense is far longer than its pre-1991 line. This provides benefits, namely additional strategic depth, a far more advantageous position in the Mediterranean – if it can be leveraged – and better ground to defend than the Fulda Gap and North German Plain.

However, it creates two clear defensive seams in a potential conflict with Russia. The western Black Sea coastline is exposed to Russian predation, both because NATO members Romania and Bulgaria have limited strategic depth facing a Russian-dominated Black Sea and, to the north and west, they are confronted with Russian-controlled Transnistria and Russian-aligned Serbia.[118]

Hence with Romanian and Bulgarian NATO membership, European defense requires control of the Black Sea, for without it, two crucial NATO allies can be cut off in a major conflict. In turn, absent control of the Black Sea, any European defense system will remain exposed in the south. The European powers no longer maintain major navies capable of Mediterranean deployment. France is the closest with its single aircraft carrier.[119]

The US, facing considerations in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East, and responsible for European defense against threats from the High North, will be overstretched if more than one crisis occurs simultaneously. This provides Russia, battered as it may be after combat in Ukraine, with leverage against a European defense system. For European military security, then, the Black Sea must be secure.

Second, European trade depends upon a secure Black Sea. Lying astride the Eurasian Nexus Point, the Black Sea is crucial to European trade. The path of China's Middle Route makes the Black Sea an extraordinarily lucrative maritime space in and of itself. The EU has emphasized Romania and Bulgaria as the western node of a Central Asian bridge.[120] Both states have invested heavily in their port capacity.

Romania is especially relevant because of the Danube-Black Sea Canal. The canal is too shallow to accommodate major container ships, but it is deep and wide enough for a variety of Feeder ships, smaller craft that are designed to traverse shallower waterways and carry up to 3,000 TEUs.[121] Major shipping companies like Maersk also run a consistent Romanian feeder service, giving Romania the potential to become a European commercial hub. Ukraine's food exports will amplify this relevance after the war, as will its power generation capacity. Economically, Europe requires a stable Black Sea to ensure consistent trade. Critical in this context is the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal, which connects the Dutch port of Rotterdam to the Romanian port of Constanta, linking the North Sea with the Black Sea.[122]

Third, the Black Sea is crucial in the long-term for European energy security. This results from both the Black Sea's intrinsic energy resources and its role as the gateway to Central Asia. Romania has invested heavily in offshore gas extraction, with development continuing despite the Ukraine War. The Black Sea Oil and Gas Platform, launched in late June 2022 some 30

miles from Snake Island, provides 1 billion cubic meters (bcm) and will meet around 10% of Romanian energy needs. Next year Romania will begin constructing infrastructure in its most relevant Black Sea perimeter field, Neptun Deep, which will bring it another 100 bcm over the next 12-15 years, and an estimated $26 billion revenues, which is its defense budget for five years.[123]

The Ukrainian Shelf, meanwhile, may contain over two trillion cubic meters of gas. Romanian offshore oil deposits likely reach 200 billion cubic meters. Bulgaria's 100 billion cubic meter deposits could cover its oil need for three decades.[124] The Black Sea is also ideal for offshore wind platforms. The combined Romanian and Ukrainian littoral areas could generate 200 gigawatts, enough to power hundreds of thousands of homes a year, or expand regional industry.[125] Before 24 February 2022, Romania sought several deals with Naftogaz, Ukraine's state-owned oil and gas corporation. The post-war Black Sea – if Ukraine holds its southern oblasts, and especially if Crimea is in Ukrainian hands – will therefore be a southeastern European energy hub.

A robust Black Sea-Caucasian-Central Asian energy corridor would intensify the Black Sea's importance.

The Ukraine War ironically demonstrated this corridor's potential. Bulgaria was particularly vulnerable to Russian energy pressure. By late summer 2022, its energy reserves had run dangerously low, and EU-wide capacity could not meet Bulgarian demand.[126] In mid-August, however, the EU and Azerbaijan concluded a major gas deal that would meet Bulgarian needs. Moreover, the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor, which would link Central Asian energy deposits to Europe via Azerbaijan and Turkey, respectively, would completely reorient European energy supplies.[127] The EU will also fund a cable that will cross the Black Sea from Georgia to Romania and deliver electricity from Azerbaijan to Hungary and Austria. The Balkan countries will also be able to access this Caspian energy source.[128] Hence for direct and indirect reasons, the Black Sea's stability and strategic orientation will be a crucial aspect of European energy security. Turkey also has significant gas reserves in the Black Sea, which will start to be exploited in 2024. The Sakarya field, located just 100 nautical miles from Romania's Neptune Deep field, has an estimated 540 billion cubic meters of gas reserves,[129] which is equivalent to almost 10 years of Turkish consumption, with a consumption of 60.44 bcm in 2022.[130]

From this stems a fundamental reality of the Ukraine War. Russia's position in the Black Sea poses a severe threat to European security, in a military, commercial, and energy context. Russian power in the Black Sea must either be militarily neutralized or made politically palatable for Europe to ensure European security.

Photo: Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Ports Europe)

It is this dichotomy, between those states that desire to neutralize Russia's military position, and those that still seek a political settlement between Russia and Europe, that defines European politics and will define the Black Sea's future.

3.2: Regional Power Objectives

The linkages between the Black Sea and European policy require an identification of the broader strategic orientations of Old Europe, New Europe, and Turkey, and a recognition of the post-Ukraine European security systems they seek. Through this, one may identify possible Black Sea strategic and political futures, and in turn, recognize the space for productive American and regional Black Sea strategy.

Prior to 24 February 2022, much of Old Europe still sought strategic autonomy from the United States. Even during the Cold War, Western Europe's leading powers – Germany and France – chafed under American dominance. Washington humbled London in the Suez Crisis of 1956. It did not humble France. The French withdrew from NATO's unified command structure and, for the rest of the Cold War, actively sought to ensure their strategic independence in a Russia-NATO confrontation.[131] Germany, meanwhile, shifted to Ostpolitik, essentially a grand strategy of integration with Europe that would, if pursued doggedly enough, create a united independent Germany absent American assistance.[132]

The Soviet Union's 1991 collapse and German Reunification provided Europe with a brief historical holiday, the Yugoslav Wars notwithstanding. Yet Berlin and Paris did not waste the 1990s, instead accelerating the creation of the European Union, which throughout the 2000s served as the vehicle for apparent European autonomy, with France as the bloc's political head and Germany its economic head.

The US invasion of Iraq demonstrated that American independent power remained a threat to the economically focused order France and Germany desired, explaining their deep-seated opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. 2008 was somewhat jarring, as was the acceleration of Islamic terrorist activity in Europe, but in each case, the EU's strategic fundamentals remained the same. The bloc's purpose was to recreate the pre-1945 situation, in which the European balance was the sum total of the relevant Eurasian balance. Europe's relative decline demanded a United Europe that could compete directly with the other great powers, explaining the EU's purpose.

By the early 2010s, the situation had worsened. Russia did not pose an obvious threat, but it had become more aggressive with its invasion of Georgia. Meanwhile, New Europe seemed eminently willing to align with the US on its more adventurous foreign policy endeavors, in particular the invasion of Iraq. Old Europe needed a strategic opportunity to rebalance the situation and place itself at the fore of diplomatic efforts. The 2014 Ukraine Crisis provided that opportunity. Its result, the Minsk II Agreement, allowed France and Germany to become indispensable diplomatic partners in a constructive process with Russia that kept Ukraine out of NATO.

Nord Stream 2 was the logical extension of Germany's economic philosophy, which relied on cheap Russian gas for the competitiveness of its economy but deepened Berlin's dependence on Moscow. After Russia's occupation of Crimea, countries like Germany and Italy wasted 8 years without reducing their energy dependence on Russia, with Putin expecting the cheap gas argument to play into his hands again in his relationship with the EU in February 2022 when he invaded Ukraine.

European attempts at policy independence accelerated throughout the late 2010s. The Trump administration's repeated demands that Europe increase its defense spending fell on deaf ears. Brexit strengthened the Franco-German position by removing the EU's only economy of note with an emphatically Atlanticist orientation. After 2016, Merkel
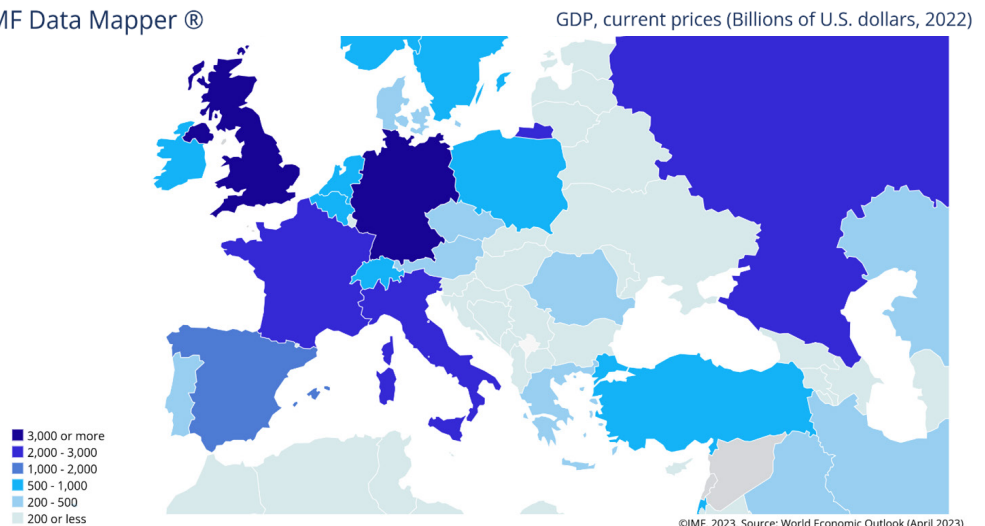
was hailed as the "Leader of the Free World," the embodiment of a moral, constructive foreign policy in contrast with boorish Trumpism, itself an expression of base American instincts.[133] Macron's France also took major steps, most notably manufacturing a crisis with Turkey over its position in the Mediterranean. Indeed, Macron's accusation of NATO's "brain-death" stemmed not just from Trump's rhetoric, but from the US's perceived inability to check Turkish adventurism in Syria and elsewhere.[134] The situation very nearly boiled over in 2020, when France aligned itself with Russia in Libya against Turkey. The French project of European Strategic Autonomy has not produced much support in Poland or Romania, both of which advocate that its initiative should not be competitive with the US and NATO.

The Ukraine War has rankled Old Europe so deeply because it undermines eight years of patiently accumulated strategic nuances, small bits of advantage that would ultimately prove decisive, that should have translated into a long-term settlement with Russia. Rhetorically, Berlin and Paris have shifted tack, and the latter has provided effective military aid to Ukraine. But it remains unclear whether Old Europe, in the face of the Ukraine War, has abandoned its quest for strategic autonomy.[135] France has deferred this objective. Germany has not yet broken with the US directly over Ukraine. However, it has questioned the Atlantic Alliance's hard line toward Russia. The Zeitenwende, Olaf Scholz's apparently transformational foreign policy that included a €100 billion defense spending injection, has yet to bear any substantive fruit a year on.[136] Indeed, Chancellor Scholz revised the Zeitenwende's commitments in his "Global Zeitenwende" essay, a piece that stated Germany still sought long-term strategic autonomy from the US.[137]

German military assistance to Ukraine remains limited, although Berlin has now belatedly authorized Leopard 2 re-export. If Berlin makes good on its investment pledges and expands its military capacity over the next ten years, a debatable proposition considering the obvious divisions within the German political establishment over this question, Germany will have the strongest army on the continent. Until now, the Franco-German engine has operated on the basis of a division of roles between France and Germany, with Paris taking a stronger security role and Berlin a stronger economic one. However, if Germany does expand its military capacity, it will be able to assume a greater role in strategic matters in Europe, which will diminish France's role and cause Franco-German friction.

If Old Europe's objective remains strategic autonomy, the implications for the Black Sea are threefold. First, Old Europe desires a rapid settlement to the Ukraine question, one that ideally prevents Russian "humiliation" and therefore provides it with a route back into the European political system. Second, the Middle Corridor will be developed alongside China, not as a potential rival center of economic gravity to China and Russia. This points to significant Chinese investment in the Black Sea region. Third, and most critically, Russia may receive special rights within the

IMF Data Mapper ®   GDP, current prices (Billions of U.S. dollars, 2022)

3,000 or more
2,000 - 3,000
1,000 - 2,000
500 - 1,000
200 - 500
200 or less

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Black Sea – along with the Baltic – in return for a stable economic relationship with a post-Ukraine War EU.

New Europe's powers – namely Poland, the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, and Romania – have a distinct strategic vision that involves an Atlanticist military orientation. However, New Europe's diplomatic, political, and economic orientation still point toward Old Europe. This creates a unique contradiction in New European policy between the realities of Russian aggression and the economic objectives of the post-Soviet European space.

New Europe has derived powerful economic benefit from its contact with, and increasingly membership in, the European Union. The Eastern European EU contributes only 15% of the bloc's GDP.[138] Yet after adjusting to market economies in the early 1990s, Eastern Europe has posted consistently high levels of GDP growth, ranging between two and six percent per annum, apart from during major contractions like the Global Financial Crisis.[139] Free movement has improved educational and labor opportunities for Eastern Europeans. Technological advancement has increased as well – absent Polish EU membership, for example, it is difficult to imagine a Polish Space Program. And most critically, the Eastern European EU states receive a seat at the table in continent-wide discussions, giving these post-Soviet states significantly greater diplomatic heft. Breaking with Old Europe is difficult to imagine.

Eastern Europe also has a distinct cultural and social orientation toward Old Europe, rather than the US. There is no organic Atlanticist tradition in Poland or the Black Sea states, and only a limited one in the Baltics. Romania in particular retains vibrant connections to France, which offers challenges to deeper cultural relationship with the United States.[140]

However, the past eight years have demonstrated that Berlin and Paris are willing to improve their relationship with Moscow rather than assuming the role of as security guarantors for European defense. And although new Europe may no longer have the same democratic, nearly Wilsonian fervor of the 1990s and early 2000s, it does retain significant sympathy for US-centric democratization.

Thus, New European economic, political, and cultural interests point toward the EU just as the region's strategic interest points toward the US.

Left to its own devices, New Europe is unlikely to coalesce into a coherent strategic bloc capable of tilting EU policy direction or expanding its defense burden. Indeed, while Poland has greatly expanded its military footprint since the Ukraine War began, its annual 16% rate of inflation blunts a sustained defense expansion, as it tilts Warsaw toward a Finnish and Baltic-style total defense concept.[141] Absent coherent American diplomacy combined with military deployments, New Europe can do little more than hedge, pressing Germany to accelerate weapons deliveries without any major policy modifications.

The implication for the Black Sea is that the Black Sea states and their Eastern European neighbors are unlikely to play a decisive role in regional security absent an overall policy framework. Time will tell if that policy framework comes primarily from Washington or from Paris-Berlin-Brussels.

The only state granted exception to the above statement is Turkey. As discussed, one of Russia's central strategic objectives in the Black Sea is to create the conditions for a Turkish diplomatic realignment, one that breaks Ankara off from NATO and brings it into Moscow's camp, at least in an informal entente. Turkey has an increasingly fractious relationship with Europe over religious questions, but retains crucial energy and economic relationships with the continent, and directly with the EU, including through the Middle Corridor project.[142] Turkey alone cannot determine the Black Sea's long-term status. However, a Turkish break with the West would make any coherent Western position in the Black Sea – either NATO-wide or EU-specific – extraordinarily difficult to sustain. In the long-term, Turkey's orientation will remain crucial to the regional balance.

3.3: Conclusion – the Balance of Mutual Interests

The Black Sea lies at the center of intersecting allied and adversary interests. It is therefore relevant to consider a US Black Sea strategy, given the ongoing Ukraine War, the strategic role of the Black Sea in European defense, and the need to maintain alliance cohesion.

For the US, the Black Sea can best serve as a Eurasian lake. Historically, a maritime coalition's greatest weakness in its confrontation with a continental adversary is its inability to disrupt political and strategic actions in the continental heartland, for the heartland is the source of continental strength. Maritime powers must wage long-term attritional wars to erode continental hegemonic aspirations and check continental attempts to control Eurasia's chokepoints. The British blockades of Napoleonic France and Imperial and Nazi Germany, and even the Cold War strategy of containment, stem from this logic.

The Black Sea provides an alternative approach. It can serve as a Eurasian lake, providing near-direct access to the Eurasian heartland. The Caspian is truly an inland sea – locked in Central Asia, it is too far within Eurasia to be a maritime-dominated space absent a road to it. But the Black Sea is relatively accessible. The Anatolian Peninsula is narrow, and a maritime coalition that includes the European powers and Turkey can deploy forces directly to the Black Sea.

Maritime access to the Black Sea places a maritime coalition directly against the Eurasian heartland. From the Black Sea itself, events in the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and the northern Middle East can be influenced. Once-remote Central Asian political questions become accessible, allowing a maritime coalition to drive a wedge between heartland powers.

Moreover, and arguably more critically, the US's regional allies can be defended much more effectively with an active Black Sea strategy. The greatest threats to Eastern Europe's NATO border states – namely Romania and Poland, the most consequential of them – have almost invariably stemmed from the Eurasian heartland, primarily from Russia. If NATO, undergirded by American power and allied geographic positioning and political commitment, can ensure a strategically stable Black Sea, it will be afforded greater opportunities to disrupt the revisionist coalition within the Eurasian Heartland, thereby reducing the intensity of threats the Eastern European and Black Sea border states face.

The US's objective in the Black Sea should therefore be to maintain a coalition around it, and the American or allied forces to dominate it. With the Black Sea in hand, the US gains the ability to manipulate events in Central Asia and separate Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran.

To achieve this, the US must maintain the political structures it has built in Europe. There can be no major rupture between the US and Germany, France, and Turkey, or within NATO otherwise. There are two ways to avoid this rupture.

First, the US can maintain direct strategic control in NATO through a major military deployment. A deployment in this context must be tailored toward a southern European mission, thereby modifying its cost, scope, and structure. The US has lacked NATO strategic control since the late Cold War. Although it remains NATO's crucial member, the Atlantic Alliance has lacked significant European-directed military heft since the late Cold War.

Second, the US can support specific allies within southeastern Europe, namely along the Black Sea, to build out a US-favorable military system that provides NATO with long-term Black Sea leverage.

The following section will delineate the Black Sea's unique military dynamics to identify potential employment mechanisms for this expanded military presence, as the Black Sea has a variety of specific geographical factors that modify the necessary military deployments.

4.0: THE BLACK SEA'S UNIQUE MILITARY DYNAMICS

Any coherent Western approach to the Black Sea requires a relatively rapid expansion of regional military presence. However, the Black Sea's geography and legal regime create a specific operational situation.

This section will delineate the physical and legal influences on Black Sea operations, namely the dominating role of the Crimean Peninsula, the depth variations within the Black Sea, the rivers that define the Black Sea coastline, and the small geographical features along the coastline and within the Black Sea itself. The legal framework for Black Sea operations must also be considered in light of the Montreux Convention's strictures on passage through the Dardanelles. The history of combat operations throughout the Second World War demonstrates the unique strategic dynamics of the Black Sea, and should be considered when designing a regional force. Additionally, the course of the Ukraine War itself demonstrates the unique land-sea linkages within the Black Sea. Finally, the section will conclude with thoughts on Black Sea force design.

Photo: Russian naval vessels transversing the Bosphorus Strait. (Yörük Işık)

4.1: Physical and Legal Influence on Operations

The Black Sea is a physically unique operational area, as military engagements and geopolitical interactions within it have demonstrated. Four factors are most relevant for contemporary Western planning.

First, the Crimean Peninsula dominates the Black Sea. Eurasia has few enclosed maritime spaces like the Black Sea. The Italian Peninsula splits the Mediterranean in two, rather than dominating it outright, while the Korean Peninsula may be a dagger aimed at Japan's heart, but it also demarcates the Sea of Japan's western approaches.[143] By contrast, the Crimean Peninsula lies at the center of the northern Black Sea. Only the Isthmus of Perekop, narrower than the Isthmus of Corinth, connects Crimea to the Ukrainian mainland. Bridges link Crimea to mainland Ukraine and Circassia, but Crimea is nearly an island. The diamond-shaped peninsula is slightly larger than Sicily, despite jutting out into a sea less than a fifth the size of the Mediterranean. As history demonstrates, whatever power holds Crimea can gain a dominant Black Sea position.

Second, the Black Sea has a varied depth.[144] North of Yalta and Sevastopol, the Black and Azov Seas are extremely shallow, averaging around a dozen meters.

Indeed, the entire Romanian littoral is also shallow, not exceeding 90 meters. The central Black Sea, however, drops off to over 2,000 meters, and does so rapidly from Romania's territorial waters to the east. This complicates subsurface operations as submarines are relatively restricted in their operational areas.

Third, the Black Sea is a river basin. The Dnieper defines Ukrainian geography, cutting the country in two. But the Dnieper, Dniester, Southern Bug, Berezan, Inhul, Inhulets, and Danube rivers all terminate in the northwestern Black Sea between Crimea and the Romanian coastline. Combined with the Danube-Black Sea Canal, this creates a maritime environment comprised of overlapping littoral zones. Smaller river basins are also scattered across the Caucasian coast, but the northwestern Black Sea is decidedly littoral.

Fourth, the Black Sea's craggy coastline, especially in the north, includes a variety of strong-points that influence maritime operations. The Kerch Peninsula shoots off Crimea's east toward Circassia's Taman Peninsula to form the Azov Sea, while west of Kherson several spits extend finger-like into the Black Sea. Farther south, the small Snake Island demarcates the Romanian-Ukrainian maritime border – Russia sought to exploit this to increase strategic control during the recent Ukraine war. In general, the Black Sea has decisive maritime points that can directly influence naval operations.

Not only is the Black Sea's geography unique. The Montreux Convention also modifies non-Black Sea access to the maritime space. As discussed above, Montreux was developed as a concession to Turkey in the 1930s – in an increasingly volatile Europe, the UK sought to ensure at minimum Turkey's non-alignment with the fascist continental powers.

Montreux primarily governs the Straits themselves, rather than the Black Sea, since the only way for non-Black Sea powers to move large warships into the maritime space is through the Straits. Beyond the notification mechanism Montreux creates for Turkey, the Convention also limits the aggregate tonnage of

Photo: Danube-Black Sea Canal

non-Black Sea warships to 45,000, and their time in the Black Sea to 21 days.[145]

The Black Sea has two gateways: the Straits and the Mouth of the Danube. There is one other route into the Black Sea that a non-Black Sea power can exploit, the Danube-Black Sea Canal network. The Canal, located in Romania, has a draught of only 5.5 meters, but this is perfectly acceptable for any warship under 1,000 tons displacement, and well-designed warships slightly over 1,000 tons.[146] Warships deployed through the Canal would have no need to notify Turkey of their entry into the Black Sea, and depending upon Montreux's reading, may be exempt from the Convention entirely.

The physical and legal constraints on the Black Sea create a unique operational environment. Historical evidence also demonstrates the need for creative Black Sea force design.

4.2: Historical Evidence

Historical engagements at sea and on land around the Black Sea demonstrate its unique strategic and geographic characteristics. Specifically, the Black Sea does not require traditional naval platforms, but the conventional elements of naval and amphibious strategy still apply in the maritime space.

Combat around Crimea in the 19th and 20th centuries demonstrates the land-sea linkages in the northern and north-western Black Sea.[147] Throughout the Crimean War, the Allies employed their amphibious capabilities to squeeze Russian forces into a small pocket around Sevastopol. Ground combat took months to break Sevastopol's fortress. In turn, the entire Allied campaign plan was amphibious in focus. Its goal was to neutralize Russia's naval power in the Black Sea, thereby securing the Levantine Basin from Russian pressure and containing Moscow for the coming decades.

All Allied targets across the Black Sea were naval, including in Crimea, the Azov Sea's coastline, and the Caucasus.[148] This required an immense sealift effort. Additionally, the Allies leveraged new technologies to penetrate major Black Sea rivers – France used ironclad floating batteries to reduce the Russian position on Kinburn Spit in just a few hours.[149] Even in this instance, non-traditional elements of naval power, alongside land-based naval weapons, were of paramount tactical relevance.

There were a handful of Black Sea campaigns during World War I, but the reality of the alliances at the time limited the area's relevance. Nevertheless, the limited Black Sea combat that did occur was maritime in focus. German war aims after Imperial Russia's collapse expanded rapidly. As Moscow lost control over its European possessions, Germany sought to expand its influence, particularly in Ukraine, Crimea, and the Caucasus to secure grain and oil for a long-term struggle in the West.

Germany conquered Crimea rapidly and immediately used it as a base for operations against the Caucasus – if Germany and the Ottomans could secure Caucasus oil fields and Ukrainian grain, Ludendorff hoped, they could shift the long-term balance of forces and counter the Allied blockade.[150] In the event, the German Spring Offensive exhausted Berlin's strength, while the Allies broke through the German lines in the west, forcing the November armistice. But with better planning and a bit of luck, the Black Sea may very well have become a region crucial to Imperial Germany, one that served as its main rear area, with Brest-Litovsk having provided Germany access nearly up to the modern Russian border.[151]

World War II confirms the role of naval power in the Black Sea, while also throwing into relief its unique aspects. The Soviet Black Sea Fleet, given the balance of forces from 1941 onward, should have achieved sea control in short order. It consisted of five cruisers, dozens of other smaller surface combatants, torpedo boats, and submarines. Doctrinally, it was tasked with

offensive action to achieve sea control through a fleet engagement.[152] However, the initial German offensive had a maritime-related element. While its primary objective was the capture of Kiev, a secondary axis of advance passed through Odessa, Nikolaev, and Crimea to Sevastopol, with the objective of cutting off the Soviet Navy from its Black Sea bases. This, combined with an initial high concentration of strike aircraft in southern Ukraine and Crimea, led to a high attrition rate for Soviet warships in 1941 and 1942, especially as the Soviets sought to relieve Sevastopol.[153]

Soviet and German maneuvering over Crimea from 1942 to 1944 demonstrated the role of naval power when properly joined with other tools in the Black Sea. Axis forces entered the peninsula in October 1941, reaching Sevastopol's defensive lines by 30 October. To relieve pressure on Sevastopol, the Soviets mounted a counteroffensive that retook the Kerch Peninsula through a haphazard amphibious operation, conducted primarily with repurposed civilian motor craft. Germany, employing small boats and aircraft, quickly blockaded the Kerch Strait, and over time eroded the cohesion of the Soviet bridgehead, ultimately driving it back into the sea after inflicting some 500,000 casualties. Fast attack craft had leveraged the Black Sea's geography to play an outsized offensive role.

The 1944 Soviet counteroffensive that retook Crimea also leveraged naval power to outsized effect. In late 1943, the Soviets conducted another landing on the Kerch Peninsula. Although Soviet forces could never break out of this new Kerch beachhead, improved planning and additional reinforcements allowed the Soviets to hold their beachhead against German counterattack, despite a blockade. This laid the groundwork for the Crimea Offensive in April-May 1944, where Soviet forces, after driving Army Group South back toward the Carpathians and Bessarabia, partly swung south and punched through the Perekop Isthmus.[154] Soviet naval forces provided gunfire support throughout the offensive, allowing the Soviets

to retake Sevastopol in weeks, compared to the initial Axis siege, which took well over a year.[155]

In short, the Black Sea – and the Northern Black Sea in particular – has unique geographic conditions that lead to a specific sort of naval combat. The fact that neither combatant in World War II recognized this fact meant that significant adaptation was necessary after the war began.

Beyond littoral operations in Crimea and the Caucasus, purely landward operations also have a relevant unique aspect. The rivers that define western Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus make it eminently viable to conduct a mobile defense from the Dnieper's right bank well into Bessarabia. Unlike in Eastern Ukraine, where forests, small rivers, natural ridges and hills, and two-century old industrial centers severely complicate rapid offensive maneuver, the ground in Western Ukraine is relatively flat until the Carpathians rise from the Dniester's northeastern bank. This enables the rapid reconstitution of defensive lines for a mobile combined-arms force. The goal is not fluid combat per se, but the ability to withdraw and reconstitute after an initial operational offensive. This geography explains the performance of Axis forces in 1944 despite a brutal year of combat. The Battles of Targu Frumos demonstrate this fact, when two Axis armies, one Romanian and one German, held off better supplied Soviet attackers in mobile engagements.[156]

4.3: The Ukraine War

Given the history of Black Sea area combat operations, the Ukraine War's maritime element should come as no surprise. And as noted above, Putin's war has distinct maritime motivations. It is nevertheless worth emphasizing the reality that the Ukraine War is a naval-ground war, not a traditional land contest.[157]

The Ukraine War can be divided into three phases: initial combat until early July 2022, July 2022 to November 2022, and November 2022 to May 2023. In each phase, tactical, operational, and strategic considerations link land and sea power.

During the war's first phase, Russian control of the Black Sea was the key link in its position in Ukraine. As much as Ukraine made gains on the ground initially, repulsing Russia's attack, breaking Russia's Black Sea chokehold was also a major goal.

Russia invaded with three broad objectives, which divided into several axes.[158] The Kremlin's initial plan was to stage a nearly flawless coup de main. Russian and L/DNR forces would tie down the bulk of Ukraine's maneuver units in the Donbas through continuous frontal assault. To the south, Russian forces from Crimea would break out, with one group moving northwest, through Kherson, Mykolaiv, and onto Odessa, and the other swinging east, taking Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Mariupol. Concurrently, Russian columns would descend on Kyiv from the north, bypassing other major urban areas and ideally reaching the capital in the war's first two days. After Kyiv's capture – and ideally the execution of Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian cabinet – Russian spearheads would conduct a pincer movement driving north from Mariupol and south from Kharkiv, thus enveloping Ukraine's fixed forces in the east. Cut into segments and absent a unified command authority, Ukrainian units would collapse. Those that resisted could be mopped up in a few weeks.

Russia's initial operation failed to accomplish three objectives. First, its Kyiv assault stalled. Ukrainian SOF retook Hostomel Airport, denying Russia a forward base to dash on Kyiv. In the following days, Ukrainian forces held major urban strongpoints and began to rake Russian supply lines, blunting Russia's advance. Second, Russia could not break through around Kharkiv. The vaunted 1st Guards Tank Army, the de facto Household Formation of the Putin regime, encountered ferocious resistance and was ultimately destroyed as a coherent fighting force.[159] Third, although Russian forces took Kherson

Photo: Sinking of the Russian missile cruiser Moskva, April 14, 2022. (Twitter)

and surrounded Mariupol rapidly, they could not drive further. Ukrainian resistance around Mykolaiv and farther north prevented an assault on Odessa, while dogged resistance in Mariupol imposed severe casualties upon the Russians in the Ukraine War's first drawn-out urban engagement.

Russia ultimately withdrew from around Kyiv in early April as Ukrainian harassment stretched its logistical system to the breaking point. It refocused on the Donbas, seeking first a traditional armored breakthrough, and then smaller breakthroughs that cut the Ukrainian line into digestible portions. It maintained a bridgehead over the Dnieper with its hold on Kherson and Nova Kakhovka.[160]

As it pushed forward in the east, Russia held in the south, using its naval dominance to preclude a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russian warships and strike aircraft had sunk the Ukrainian Navy's handful of smaller patrol craft in the war's opening hours. The Russian Navy also took Snake Island, giving it control of Ukraine's territorial waters. Russian amphibious assault ships, loaded with several Marine battalions, fixed Ukrainian forces in

Odessa. Russian surface combatants operated in the northwestern Black Sea with impunity. Combined with combat aircraft, they hit Ukrainian cities with impunity and maintained an air defense bubble over Russia's Kherson bridgehead, complicating any Ukrainian counteroffensive.

In this phase of the war, Ukraine's two most critical offensive actions were its sinking of the Moskva and its ejection of Russia from Snake Island. Ukraine needed time to echelon and prepare for a major mechanized counteroffensive. And if Ukraine had let Russia drive forward in the Donbas, the risk existed that the West would accept a preemptive Russian peace overture that left Russia in control of Ukraine's east and south. Hence resistance was critical, first against Russian assaults across the Donbas, and then specifically in the Severodonetsk Salient, which Ukraine held for two-plus months of brutal combat.

Photo: Snake Island (Location4film.com.ua)

Sinking the Moskva knocked out Russia's largest mobile air defense system. The Slava-class cruiser carried a navalised S-300 that complemented Russia's Crimea-based Bastion-P air defenses. From this point on, Ukraine used missiles, rockets, and artillery to attrit Russian naval forces, which provided Russia's Kherson bridgehead with valuable air-sea strategic depth. Just days before claiming final victory in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk fight, Russia withdrew from Snake Island, signaling a major reduction in its northwestern Black Sea operations.

The war's second phase built off the naval freedom of action Ukraine had gained. In the east, Ukraine had worn down the Russian assault and, with newly-acquired US HIMARS, derailed the Russian logistical system.[161] In the south, Ukraine began to press, staging a slow, methodical assault against the Kherson bridgehead. Absent a more layered air and naval defense network, Crimea and the Russian fleet became vulnerable to Ukrainian strikes – Ukraine employed small naval drones, cheap converted civilian drones, and a handful of long-range missiles to hit major Russian logistical hubs and bases, ultimately damaging the Kerch Strait Bridge and destroying the Black Sea Fleet's aerial strike wing.

This methodical offensive and interdiction campaign, combined with a well-planned, meticulously executed offensive around Kharkiv, ultimately forced Russia to abandon the Kherson bridgehead and retreat across the Dnieper.[162]

Since mid-November 2022, there has been little battlefield movement. A combination of weather conditions and mutual exhaustion has prompted Ukraine and Russia to limit their operational actions, restrict themselves to modest gains – as around Kreminna and Bakhmut – and prepare for offensives in the spring and early summer.

In the war's third phase, however, land-sea factors will be equally relevant. Ukraine's long-term objective is to pressure Crimea, if not recover the peninsula outright, for Russia's Crimean position undergirds its entire war effort, and more generally, its post-2014 aggressive foreign policy. This will require traditional offensive capacity. Ukraine must stage a breakthrough operation and exploit its gains rapidly to prevent a Russian counterstroke.

Ukraine's ability to strike Crimea and attack the Russian fleet will be critical, hence the need for naval-focused Ukrainian platforms, whether these are missiles, unmanned systems, manned aircraft, or fast attack craft. Regardless, Ukraine has leveraged traditionally inferior capabilities to prosecute an effective coastal naval war against Russian forces and limit Russia's naval impact to long-range strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure.

While in early 2023 all Russian efforts were focused on Donbas, Moscow wanted to demonstrate its continued interest in the western Black Sea basin. On 10 February 2023, Russia conducted an air strike and launched four bombs on Snake Island. The same night, Russia used for the first time a kamikaze naval drone to hit the Zatoka railway bridge across the Dniester estuary, which provides the rail link between Odessa and Romania.[163] This signaled that Russia has not given up that part of the Black Sea. Russian naval drones can be dangerous not only to Ukraine, but also to Romania's critical energy infrastructure on the Black Sea, especially as it is difficult to prove their traceability in the event of an incident.

4.4: Force Design

Historical and contemporary Black Sea operations, along with the area's geography, generate four implications for force design that the US and its regional allies should consider.

First, the Black Sea is an integrated air-land-maritime space. Capabilities in each domain affect the balance in every other. The air-naval balance in the Black Sea is extraordinarily fluid. Traditional naval forces are not needed to ensure even sea control. Indeed, traditional naval forces can become a liability when facing a properly-designed adversary, since the capabilities needed for operations in the Eastern Mediterranean are not congruent with those in the Black Sea. Hence there is immense potential for creative force design that maximizes non-traditional units.

Second, long-range and medium-range strikes have an outsized naval impact. The Black Sea has always been congested. Even limited German air power, never decisively devoted to the Black Sea, had an outsized operational impact during World War II. Ukraine, meanwhile, has reduced Russia's maritime freedom of action with only a handful of dedicated anti-ship missiles. A greater missile arsenal, combined with USuVs, UUVs, and mines, would have a significant impact if leveraged properly to counter traditional Russian naval forces.

Third, small platforms can counter larger ones more effectively than in a traditional, non-enclosed maritime environment. The Ukraine War demonstrates the value of mobility alongside deception and signature reduction efforts. Even more important than the ability to hide is the ability to move when found – hence on land the distinction in performance between towed and self-propelled artillery, for example. The maritime environment is distinct, lacking the terrain that ground-based forces use to mask their deployment. But a cluttered enough maritime space combined with dispersed air, ground, and naval forces that have significant offensive capability can replicate these dispersion effects.

Fourth, Russian Black Sea forces will remain heavy, traditional warships and submarines. Russia's Black Sea interests are inextricably linked with its Mediterranean and Middle Eastern objectives. The Black Sea Fleet is the natural supporting maritime force for any expeditionary or proxy campaign in the Mediterranean area. Hence Russia must include several large missile-armed surface combatants in the Black Sea Fleet even if these warships, in the Black Sea context, are vulnerable to smaller offensive systems and not fundamentally necessary to achieve sea control.

A Black Sea defensive force, ideally under NATO auspices or through a regional power arrangement, would therefore consider the operational environment's unique factors while striving for two strategic objectives: deterrence against Russian escalation and credible compellence during a confrontation.

Any escalatory situation after the Ukraine War will place all Black Sea offshore assets, in particular Romanian assets, at risk. A dispersed force that creates more targets for a Russian strike campaign will provide better strategic insurance against anti-infrastructure attacks by complicating Russian strike efforts and presenting a credible response.

A Black Sea force would be based not upon a "platform", but upon a network of short, medium, and long-range strike implements, including anti-ship missiles and long-range artillery. Its naval elements would be comprised of a fleet of fast attack craft, some 20-plus small ships, between an Osa-class missile boat and a Tarantul-class corvette, or perhaps even smaller. These would be offensively designed platforms, equipped with a handful of anti-ship missiles and offensive mines, and combined with a fleet of unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) and unmanned surface vehicles (USuVs) for harassment of major Russian bases.

A Romanian – or Bulgarian or Ukrainian – fleet of this sort could be based directly on the Black Sea. Using a common set of platforms, ideally one small craft and one larger corvette, and encouraging a block-purchase system between multiple Black Sea states, would accelerate the procurement process and ensure production at scale, while the small size of the proposed ships would increase the number of yards that can build them rapidly.

However, a non-Black Sea state fleet is possible depending upon the interpretation of the Montreux Convention. The agreement governs the Turkish Straits directly. It has obvious implications for the Black Sea, but the legal framework that governs non-Black Sea state ship deployments only explicitly applies to those ships that must transit the Straits. A small missile ship fleet could be home-ported along the Black Sea-Danube Canal Network, in keeping with other Romanian bases. This may obviate Montreux restrictions on deployment monitoring, and thereby enable direct US deployments to the Black Sea. This design is especially relevant if the war continues and Turkey keeps the Straits closed, with no NATO ships being able to enter the Black Sea, as is the case now.

5.0: CRISIS SCENARIOS

Geographic and legal questions create a unique Black Sea operational environment. However, the most critical current consideration for Black Sea strategy is the course of the Ukraine War and, subsequently, how rapidly and in what manner Russia rebuilds its armed forces.

This section will set out the most likely war termination scenarios in Ukraine, identify the course of Russian rearmament, and then from these build out several "conflict scenarios" that can govern Black Sea strategy and force development.

5.1: War Termination Scenarios in Ukraine

There are three core factors to any war termination scenario in Ukraine: territory, diplomatic arrangements, and Ukrainian military capabilities.

Territory: Beyond the domestic-political impact of any territorial concessions, Ukraine requires, from a strategic standpoint, defensible and economically viable territory. The minimal territory under dispute in Ukraine is the Donbas and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts, that is, the historical heart of Ukrainian manufacturing and, more critically, Ukraine's primary export pathway. Unlike Finland during the 1939 to 1940 Winter War, Ukraine cannot trade land for peace. Russian presence in eastern Ukraine removes from Kyiv valuable strategic depth, and its presence in southern Ukraine hampers Ukraine's long-term export capacity. Crimea figures into this, given its dominant Black Sea position.

Diplomatic Structures: It is difficult to envision a peace settlement, temporary or enduring, that lacks an official relationship between Ukraine and NATO. The Atlantic Alliance's support has been crucial for Ukraine

since the war's first days. Ukraine, while perhaps not perfectly aligned with NATO's strategic priorities, is closely aligned with NATO – the Atlantic Alliance exists to counter precisely the sort of Russian imperial aggression that is on display in Ukraine. However, it is not clear whether NATO membership is the ideal framework. Absent a formal peace settlement, NATO is unlikely to accept Ukraine since it is actively at war with Russia. Moreover, even with a formal peace settlement, Ukraine and NATO may benefit from a hybrid NATO affiliation that affords Kyiv some freedom of action, especially if Moscow maintains that "independent separatists" are attacking Ukraine, not the Russian state.

Ukrainian Military Capabilities: Ukraine will have a robust conventional military after the war ends. But this military will be dependent on NATO support for at least several years, until the Ukrainian defense industry expands capacity to sustain a new military. In turn, this military will lack long-range strike capacity if the West does not supply it, since Ukraine has produced only a handful of Neptune anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) and, apart from them, has relied upon legacy Soviet equipment for long-range strikes. Resolving the gap between Russian and Ukrainian offensive strike capacity is key to ending the war. Even if Russia is ejected from all of Ukraine, including Crimea, its strategic strike capabilities will still threaten Ukraine absent Kyiv's ability to strike back.

From these three factors, there are four types of settlements to the Ukraine War, each with its own implication for Black Sea security:

- *Formal Russia-Favorable Settlement:* In this case, Russia's gains are either partly or wholly recognized, if not in international law, then by some sort of Minsk-style framework that allows Russia to maintain its hold on Kherson, Zaporizhzhia Oblasts, and the Donbas.

- *Informal Russia-Favorable Settlement:* This situation occurs if no more than a ceasefire is concluded but, subsequently, Western support dries up in light of a "complete" conflict.

- *Informal Ukraine-Favorable Settlement:* Under this case, Ukraine retakes some occupied territory, but falls short of breaking Russia's hold on Crimea and the Donbas. However, significant Western military support continues, Ukraine's relationship with the EU and NATO expands, and a Ukrainian defense industry develops that can produce long-range weapons.

- *Formal Ukraine-Favorable Settlement:* Most ambitiously, Ukraine retakes all its territory at least up to the pre-24 February line, if not beyond it. Ukraine also receives various diplomatic linkages to NATO and the EU.

The most relevant aspect of any peace settlement is, again, the status of Crimea. The peninsula provides Russia a dominant Black Sea position and is a springboard for any operations in the northwestern Black Sea area. Absent the return of Crimea to Kyiv's control, Russia will remain capable of, and committed to, significant aggression in the Black Sea, even with a battered military. Ukraine's retaking of Crimea also helps Romania, whose Black Sea Exclusive Economic Zone will no longer de facto border the Russian Federation EEZ.

5.2: Russian (Re)armament

Russia's primary offensive arms post-Ukraine will be its air-naval forces. This is for two reasons.

First, the Ukraine War has mauled all branches of the Russian armed force, but the brunt of the damage has fallen upon Russia's ground forces, whether line units, naval infantry, or airborne. The Russian military will therefore be incapable of traditional offensive action for at least two years as it reconstitutes, and

perhaps for longer, depending upon the degree to which attrition has reduced its stockpiles and the state of Russia's post-war defense industry. The Russian air force is also damaged. But relatively speaking, the air force and navy have suffered far less, meaning they are the most viable strike implements the Kremlin can employ in post-Ukraine contingencies.

Second, the Russian experience in Ukraine has demonstrated the potential of strategic warfare. Russia has targeted Ukraine's power grid and other aspects of critical infrastructure. This has not shattered Ukrainian morale. But it has intensified the refugee crisis within Europe, placed additional stress on Ukrainian planning, increased Ukraine's dependence on the West, and imposed a direct, tangible cost on the Ukrainian population. Russian strategists have highly sophisticated views of strategic strike campaigns, a fact that facilitated the post-September 2023 bombardment. In the future, Russia can be expected to begin a campaign with this sort of strategic bombardment and continue it throughout any effort to disrupt adversary cohesion.

The above makes Russian air-naval capabilities crucial to any long-term regional balance.

Russia's future force in the Black Sea will resemble its pre-war force. This has three components, again informing a future Black Sea force structure:

- *Surface Combatants:* Russia's surface fleet must remain substantial to achieve its Black Sea strategic interests and broader interests in the Euro-Mediterranean. Indeed, much of the Black Sea Fleet will be designed and reserved for combat beyond the Black Sea during deployments to the Levantine Basin. This implies a traditional Russian surface force, comprised of a capital ship and missile-armed large surface combatants, alongside fast attack craft for combat within the Black Sea, and a limited amphibious force for expeditionary contingencies.

- *Submarines:* The Black Sea Fleet's most survivable striking arm will remain submarines. Russia is unlikely to deploy nuclear-powered boats to the Black Sea Fleet, given the infrastructure that would be needed to support a nuclear-powered submarine fleet in the Black Sea. More generally, submarines will remain largely immune to Ukrainian targeting out of port unless the West transfers anti-submarine warfare systems to Ukraine, meaning Russia will turn to its submarines more frequently than any other tool to project power in the Black Sea and Levantine Basin.

- *Aviation:* The Russian air and naval air forces will remain crucial to long-term Russian planning. Russian strike aircraft will sustain any future strategic strike campaign, with which Russia begins a future war, per its experience in Ukraine. Black Sea aviation is traditionally tilted toward strike missions as well. Russian air forces in the Black Sea are less likely to deploy in support of warships in the Mediterranean considering Russia's bases in Syria.

Countering a future Russian Black Sea force requires, therefore, the weapons to target large capital ships and robust anti-air and anti-submarine capabilities – or, at minimum, long-range strike tools to attack Russian naval bases.

Even if the fighting ceases or lessens in intensity, Russia will use hybrid tools to harass Ukraine or NATO states such as Romania and Bulgaria, using cyber-attacks or naval drones against critical Black Sea energy infrastructure. Disinformation campaigns could affect NATO and EU states further to create internal problems.

5.3: Foreign Involvement in the Black Sea

Chinese and Iranian presence in the Black Sea is worth considering, particularly in scenarios less favorable to Ukraine, for their presence will tangibly modify the military and political balance.

Chinese presence, if scaled up, will primarily be economic, given the Black Sea's role in the Eurasian Nexus Point and its links with other aspects of the Chinese trans-Eurasian trade network. However, a forward-leaning Chinese economic approach to the Black Sea will necessarily involve greater diplomatic engagement. China will not serve as a counter to Russia, nor as an impartial mediator between Russia and other Black Sea states. Chinese commercial expansion in the Black Sea should therefore be recognized as a supporting appendage to Russian power. This may be a controlling influence upon Russian power because of China's need to safeguard its investments and Russia's post-Ukraine War dependence on China. Nevertheless, Russian and Iranian objectives will remain aligned. Beijing should not be expected to restrain Moscow's actions.

Iranian activity in the Black Sea is far more troublesome strategically and militarily. A settlement favorable to Russia will allow Iran to entrench itself in southern Ukraine, primarily in Crimea. This will afford Tehran an outer defense network it can use to disrupt any response to its regional predation, even absent nuclear capabilities.

5.4: Conflict Scenarios

Four escalatory scenarios are outlined below to demonstrate the relevance of the Black Sea in the long term. Each case will describe the political and strategic context at hand, while subsequently laying out the benefits a NATO Black Sea force would provide.

Scenario 1: Ukraine's collapse and a renewed war in the west

Political divisions within the West and careful Russian strategy lead to a ceasefire in late 2023 that lock in Russia's gains in the Donbas and Ukraine's south. In 2024, Ukraine's elections degenerate into factionalism, and Volodymyr Zelensky loses a narrow race to a candidate the Kremlin paints as hyper-nationalist. Russia then employs active measures to shape Ukraine's political environment and, in mid-summer 2024, invades Ukraine once again, this time taking Kyiv, Odessa, and much of western Ukraine, leaving only a small Ukrainian rump state with its capital at Lviv. Russian forces carry on, uniting Transnistria with the newly-declared People's Federation of Novorossiya, a Russian-backed statelet. Russian forces then take the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, and as of January 2025 are massing on the Romanian border.

The United States has reduced its naval presence in the European littorals, but retains some ground presence, primarily in Romania, Poland, and the Baltics. NATO stockpiles, however, remain low post-2023, and French President Macron conducts another high-speed dash to Moscow in late January 2025. Russia has a Combined Arms Army stationed along the Romanian border. Russian forces remain in Ukraine, but have largely shifted to pacification, employing brutal methods of mass punishment to reduce manpower strain. The Russian Black Sea Fleet has surged into the Black Sea and Mediterranean. Russian aircraft and fast boats buzz Romanian energy platforms in the Black Sea. The US surges a Marine

Brigade and elements of XVIII Airborne Corps to the Black Sea region, and US surface combatants to the Mediterranean, but aircraft carrier and cruise missile submarine presence is sporadic.

The US must rely chiefly on only landward assets if it lacks a Black Sea force. However, with Ukraine in Russian hands, Turkey will be strongly disinclined to allow US and NATO access to the Black Sea even if it remains a nominal member of NATO. In turn, if Turkey is aggressively probing Greece in the Aegean, NATO-affiliated ships must contend with Turkish impediments beyond the Straits. Russia, if it can pry Turkey off from NATO – a circumstance relatively likely after a Ukrainian defeat – can therefore exercise sea control and challenge Romania (if it has not constructed an effective anti-access/area denial bubble in the Black Sea) and Bulgaria through an air-sea strategic strike campaign that shapes the environment for an invasion.

With a Black Sea force, the Turkish question becomes far less mortal, and in turn, far less difficult to manage. Even with Ukraine under Russian control, NATO need not commit a major force to the Black Sea, and instead holds a NATO strike force in the Eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, a combined Romanian-US fleet of small, missile-armed patrol craft spills out into the northwestern Black Sea, while aircraft and minelayers deploy mines near Crimea and in the central Black Sea at varying depths to disrupt Russian submarine operations. A Russian strike campaign, in this circumstance, is far more difficult, while the fleet of small missile-armed attack craft – combined with a sufficiently developed Romanian strike system – can deter Russian pressure.

Scenario 2: A compromise peace and Russian Hybrid pressure on Romania

The Ukraine War ends in early 2024 with a negotiated ceasefire. Russia retains its land corridor to Crimea but is too battered to take the strategic offensive at any point in the near future. Ukraine has some

affiliation with NATO. However, in 2025 a political crisis begins over Russia's EEZ with Romania, given the Russian annexation of Crimea and Kherson Oblast. Russia claims that Snake Island, while under Ukrainian control, is within its EEZ, and begins to patrol off the Romanian coast, harassing oil platforms.

Russia deploys small surface combatants forward into the Romanian EEZ. The Black Sea Fleet deploys from Novorossyik and Crimea into the central Black Sea. Russia also surges several submarines into the Black Sea and deploys air defense and strike elements to Crimea and Kherson Oblast.

The central question in this context is Turkey's status. A pro-Western/Ukrainian settlement in the Ukraine War will keep Turkey in the West's orbit and restrain its Middle Eastern and North African adventurism, while a defeat in the Ukraine War will embolden Turkey to strike its own strategic path. A divided Ukraine – one in which Russia holds the Donbas and part of the south, including a Crimean land bridge, but under which Ukraine receives NATO and/or EU membership along with a long-range strike program – creates a troubling situation for Turkey. Russia clearly gains leverage over the Black Sea. But the Atlantic Alliance gains a competent ally, and Russia does not fully resolve the long-term threat to its Black Sea position.

Some intensification of strategic cooperation is necessary to make this peace a durable one and deter renewed Russian aggression. Business-as-usual for NATO after this settlement is concluded cannot create a sustainable security system: Ukraine's borders will lack a natural defensive barrier beyond the Dnieper. Indeed, Ukrainian absorption into NATO would create a reasonable vulnerability given Belarus's position, despite the barrier the Pinsk Marshes present, and incentivize a forward-leaning NATO strategy from an operational viewpoint. Absent a variety of mechanisms to bolster defense

cooperation, the front line in Ukraine is likely to remain unstable, and, most critically, Turkey will be under pressure to modify its strategic stance.

In this context, two factors – a fleet of fast boats, and extensive Romanian-Polish-Ukrainian defense industrial cooperation – would contribute overwhelmingly to regional stability. A fleet of missile-armed patrol craft based in the Danube and Romania, along with offensive mines, would provide valuable operational tools. They should be combined with a robust defense industrial agreement between Romania and Ukraine, and ideally Poland and other Eastern European NATO states, to produce tens of thousands of medium and long-range anti-ship and ground-attack missiles for naval, aerial, and ground deployment. The Ukrainian Neptune could be used as a base platform. This approach ensures that Western defense industrial capacity is leveraged to reduce the need for major surface or ground force surges into the Black Sea region, both to keep NATO forces in reserve for other contingencies and, equally critically, to reduce Turkey's active role in Black Sea defense. Ankara is most likely to remain on-side if it is not asked to stand at the forefront of a NATO Black Sea strategy. Hence a western Black Sea focus would improve NATO cohesion more generally.

Scenario 3: Ukrainian victory and long-term escalatory patterns

Ukraine drives Russia from the Donbas and the south by 2024. Russia does not escalate to nuclear use, but it does remain capable of holding Crimea, primarily because the West does not transfer Ukraine enough long-range missiles and anti-ship weapons to interdict Russian air-sea resupply of the peninsula, while Russian fortifications on the Perekop Isthmus are robust enough to make an offensive into Crimea prohibitive. Hence the war ends with the return to approximate status quo ante borders, albeit with some minor territorial changes in the Donbas in favor of Russia and Ukraine, and the Donbas's remaining separatist-controlled territory formally annexed to Russia.

This loss rankles the Kremlin and elevates the more aggressive, hard-line elements in Russia, ironically solidifying the current regime and ensuring Putin's preferred siloviki, Nikolai Patrushev foremost among them, gain control of policy. Moreover, there is no formal armistice agreement, let alone a peace treaty that terminates hostilities and establishes a consistent framework for long-term European-Russian and Russian-Ukrainian relations. Russia, therefore, with Chinese and Iranian strategic assistance, rebuilds its military within just two years.
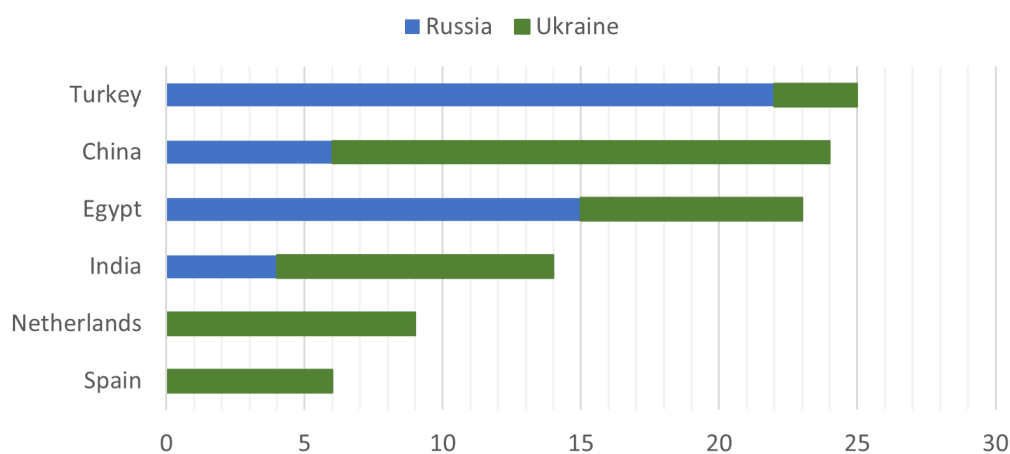
In this context, Ukraine may formally remain beyond NATO. It is difficult to join an alliance while at war, which creates an obvious incentive for Russia to defer a formal peace agreement for as long as possible, thereby disrupting Ukrainian NATO or EU accession. Moreover, these borders are not acceptable to Russia in the long term. Putin launched his war in 2022 from nearly identical borders, indicating his enduring dissatisfaction with them, meaning Russia will return with a rebuilt military and refashioned state for another attempt at conquest.

Even if Ukraine is beyond NATO, the West will retain a major role in its defense, particularly its defense industrial systems, as Ukraine transitions over time to fully NATO-standard weaponry. Absent a major Black Sea presence, the West will be confronted with a variety of unsavory choices similar to those before 24 February 2022 – either shift forces into the Black Sea at scale or accept a Russian outer air and naval defense network in support of another invasion, or at least another escalation.

With a Black Sea force, by contrast, NATO can preemptively flood the maritime space with a host of attack craft that jeopardize the larger, heavier assets that Russia needs to sustain the Crimea air-naval supply route and launch another strategic bombardment within Ukraine. Preemptive deployment, depending upon its scale and aggressiveness, can deter another war. Of equal relevance, this sort of Black Sea force will not overtax American defense industrial or air-naval assets, both of which will be needed in high numbers to deter China from adventurism against Taiwan.

Food Dependence
Import share of selected agrifoods*

Source: UN comtrade
*wheat, barley, corn, and sunflower oil

Photo: Keith Good, "Ukraine Production 'More Critical' Amid Food Security Concerns" (Farm Policy News)

Scenario 4: The Black Sea and a Middle Eastern Crisis

Iran's nuclear program, its obvious ambitions for regional expansion, and its accelerating military-technical relationship with Russia suggest that escalation in the Middle East is probable in the next 24 to 36 months. This has clear if underappreciated implications for the Black Sea.

As long as Russia retains control of any southern Ukrainian territory, whether in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts or Crimea, Iran will have access to the Black Sea. Iranian loitering munitions are cheap, effective systems when fired in salvos, and can be launched from reconfigured civilian trucks. Russian-Iranian co-production would enable a steady supply of munitions, while Iranian ballistic missile transfers to Russia would amplify Russian combat power. With this leverage, moreover, given its centrality to the Russian war effort, Iran can gain more advanced weapons from Russia and, equally critical, ensure advanced basing in the Black Sea.

Iranian presence in the Black Sea will not prove decisive for a major regional conflict. It will, however, complicate NATO and EU reactions to escalation in the region. It becomes entirely conceivable that Iranian loitering munitions could be used, from Russian territory, to threaten NATO forces during a regional contingency and disrupt NATO planning.

Another relevant issue when considering the Black Sea and the Middle East is food security. Egypt's stability depends on wheat imports from Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and France.[164] Egypt has seen several riots over the years due to higher food and grain prices. The Pita Revolution of 1977, which started because of the high cost of bread, still provokes unpleasant memories in Egypt, and the 2011 uprising that ousted Mubarak from power coincided with a global food price increase.[165]

Any threat to Egypt's stability is alarming to Israel, which is interested in maintaining the security of its Arab neighbors. A security crisis in the Middle East caused by Iran's nuclear ambitions could be exacerbated if freedom of navigation and trade in the Black Sea is affected by Russian ships. It is enough for wheat deliveries to Egypt to be cut back for that country's internal stability to be questioned, with serious consequences for regional security.

In this context, a Black Sea presence would serve as an invaluable lever with which the West could apply pressure to Iran and Iranian affiliates in this crucial maritime space. Of particular relevance is sanctions enforcement if the JCPOA's snap-back mechanism is applied. All shipping to and from Russia could be scrutinized both to enforce current Western sanctions on Putin's regime and to ensure that Iran is not violating United Nations Security Council sanctions on weapons exports.

6.0: RECOMMENDATIONS

The Black Sea is of immense strategic importance to the US and NATO. It is, therefore, of obvious relevance to clarify and develop four aspects of the Black Sea question: the strategic framework through which the US should view the region; the force structure the US should encourage among regional allies; the role of European engagement in Black Sea security; and the potential for an American direct role in the Black Sea.

6.1: An American Black Sea Strategy

The US requires a Black Sea strategy that takes into account the region's long-term strategic relevance and the short-term odds of regional confrontation. The US should take up the challenge laid out in the Romney-Shaheen Black Sea Strategy Bill, proposed in the summer of 2022.

A Black Sea strategy should begin with the recognition of the maritime space's central role in the Eurasian balance. It should declare the explicit policy that either the US or its allies should hold strategic primacy in the Black Sea. In no uncertain terms, the objective of the US's Black Sea strategy must be to box out Russia, challenge the Kremlin directly in its maritime near abroad, and exclude it from the Levantine Basin. Doing so will limit Russia's influence over Turkey, curb Iran's access to southeastern Europe, and create a robust enough security system to counter Chinese economic-strategic penetration.

The US should rely primarily on its Black Sea NATO allies, rather than its own forces, to conduct this Black Sea strategy. The most crucial ally in this context is Romania, for it is geographically positioned perfectly to serve as a long-term bridgehead into the Black Sea, has the port facilities, canals, and strategic depth to conduct creative force deployments, and has a defense system capable of accommodating more aggressive deployments. The US should assist Romania in executing this policy.

6.2: Black Sea Force Structure and Defense Industrial Policy

The US and its allies should prioritize two systems in any Black Sea force structure: well-armed fast patrol craft and long-range strike weapons. These are strategically relevant, tactically-operationally sound, and are within the scope of a regional industrial policy that can bolster deterrence.

Romania today occupies a geopolitical space akin to West Germany's during the Cold War when it abutted the line that separated NATO from the Warsaw Pact. Strategically, the US and its allies, Romania foremost among them, require a greater Black Sea presence due to the region's centrality to global competition, European defense, and strategy. Operationally, the Black Sea's restricted maritime space and air-land-naval linkages favor a fleet of fast attack craft, around two to three dozen of them, that are armed with long-range anti-ship missiles, backed by land-based strike elements, and supplemented with minelayers that can offensively disrupt Russian surface combatant and submarine deployments and freedom of action while holding at risk Russian bases. The Danube-Black Sea canal, meanwhile, enables creative basing of non-Black Sea state warships, as long as the US presents the proper incentives to Romania.

This approach would leverage historical trends away from large surface combatants in the Black Sea, maximize regional basing, and, of equal relevance, create a task commensurate with Central and Eastern European defense industrial capabilities. CEE shipyards, and Romanian yards in particular, have experience with patrol craft. They would be well under 1,000 tons – ideally closer to 200-300 tons – and cost around $10-20 million each. Meanwhile, co-production deals for a variety of anti-ship and land-attack missiles would be relatively easy, considering the consolidation and bureaucratic similarities between the Romanian, Polish, and Ukrainian defense industries.

6.3: The Black Sea, Europe, and the US

CEE, and particularly the Black Sea states, should be responsible for Black Sea defense, not Western Europe. The US can play a leading role. Its primary goal should be to cultivate a series of mutually reinforcing CEE relationships for regional strategic stability.

During the Cold War, NATO contained, in the abstract, two elements, an American-Atlantic camp and a European camp. The American-Atlantic powers, the US foremost among them, provided military capabilities, while the European powers offered political commitment for a major war and accepted damage to their territories. Even in this historical context, there were divisions between the European and American elements of the alliance – divisions that were less robust than the fundamental community of interests between the US and Europe.

Contemporary NATO contains a trilateral structure, by definition more complex than its bilateral antecedent. Its three camps are the American-Atlantic states, again with the US at the fore, the Western European states of the EU's Franco-German core, and NATO's relatively new Eastern European members. There does remain a fundamental community of interests between all three camps: despite French dreams of strategic autonomy, France still benefits fundamentally from a NATO-undergirded European security system and has slowly tilted its policy in Ukraine to recognize this fact.

However, there are self-evident fissures between the US and Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and Western Europe on the other. It is not at all clear whether Western European NATO is committed to the full, sustained security of its Eastern European NATO allies, nor whether they have any interest or conception of geostrategic competition beyond Europe. This is natural: Europe, not Eurasia, dominates Berlin's and Paris's historical experience.

Nevertheless, the US must recognize that it cannot rely principally on the Western European powers to sustain NATO's strategic position in Eastern Europe. Rather, the US must rely upon its two principle Eastern European allies, Poland in northeastern Europe, and Romania in the Black Sea region. Both have intimate knowledge of Russia due to their historical experience of Russian imperialism. Neither is willing to compromise with Russia on questions of security and sovereignty. And particularly in light of the Ukraine War, both have committed to becoming visible front-line states in a long-term NATO-Russia strategic competition, modifying their defense practices, improving societal resilience, and considering carefully the implications of Russian action on their military and energy security.

A coherent US Black Sea strategy that emphasized NATO's Black Sea interests would harmonize to the greatest degree possible the US's long-term strategic objectives and force structure with the immediate need for security that must be fulfilled for Black Sea and Eastern European NATO members. An active US regional role combined with an expansion in American and allied force structure would improve NATO defenses, provide greater long-term leverage over the region, and allow careful, patient American diplomacy to exploit opportunities for division in the Eurasian hegemonic bloc. All these steps will make the US and its NATO allies more secure.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE BLACK SEA

As of this writing, the Ukraine War is into its second year. The winter mud turned to cold, and a subsequent spring thaw has begun to dry out the ground.

Ukraine's counteroffensive is expected to begin, and it remains to be seen what effect the supply of Western tanks and armored vehicles will have on Russian armed forces and what new territories will be liberated from Russian occupation. Beyond the number of tanks and the type of modern weaponry supplied to Ukraine, and what Russia currently has, it is hard to predict the real morale of Russian troops and whether they will resist Ukrainian attack. The US and NATO have to be prepared not only for a long war of attrition but also for a possible collapse of the Russian front. Managing a quick Ukrainian victory and a surprise Russian defeat will be just as important as maintaining long-term Western support and combating war fatigue that could diminish support for Ukraine.

The longer the United States allows Russia, China, and Iran to dictate the strategic future of the Black Sea, and the longer it refuses to work actively with its allies to reassert favorable military clarity and political stability in the region, the more likely it becomes that the Black Sea will slip from the Western bloc's even partial control.

The Black Sea states are as vulnerable as they are critical to US security and all of Europe's security. Ukraine remains under a relentless assault that may only intensify in the coming months, particularly if the Chinese step in and arm Russia. Iran nears a nuclear weapon, and with that weapon in hand, it will be a major power capable of dominating its region and projecting its influence beyond it, including into the Black Sea against Ukraine and other powers. Moreover, Romania and Bulgaria are wedged between an increasingly unstable Black Sea space and a Balkans again set to explode, as Serbia strongly tilts toward the Russian camp.

Meanwhile, Turkey's strategic orientation remains in long-term limbo. For now, Erdogan is content to receive concessions from the West in return for his support against Putin's Russia. But a dramatic shift in the Black Sea balance would undeniably force Ankara to reconsider its position, particularly if other events in the Levantine Basin or Middle East prompt a greater Turkish military commitment elsewhere.

Moreover, it is exceptionally difficult to consider a defense of Europe absent the Black Sea. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet naval forces spilled out into the eastern Mediterranean, exerted influence in North Africa, and pressured NATO's southern underbelly. But NATO then had a robust European fleet, including American carriers and allied warships that could resist active Soviet aggression against NATO's southern flank. This is no longer the case. If the Black Sea again becomes a Russian lake, and, as a consequence, Turkey abandons the Western camp, European NATO will become increasingly conventionally indefensible, at least once Russia re-arms after the Ukraine War.

The Black Sea is the first littoral battleground in the struggle for Eurasian mastery. It will not be the last. But the US, through a combination of prudent policy, commitment, and careful work with its allies, can ensure this critical littoral remains in Western hands, and through it, disrupt and complicate any hostile Eurasian coalition.

It is Washington's task, then, to secure the Black Sea for American and allied interests.

Photo: Monument of Sunken Ships in Sevastopol (Twitter)

ENDNOTES

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37	*Ibid.*, 191.

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