

The Battle for the Black Sea Is Not Over

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Cover: Russian President Vladimir Putin watches a naval exercise from the *Marshal Ustinov* missile cruiser in the Black Sea on January 9, 2020. (Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

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“What happens in the Black Sea doesn’t stay in the Black Sea.”

—Bulgarian Ambassador to the United States Tihomir Stoychev (2016–2022)

“I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them.”

—Empress Catherine II (1762–1796)

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INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the importance of the Black Sea region (BSR) for the United States and the global West, describes in detail Russian actions there since it illegally annexed Crimea and invaded the Donbas in 2014, and sheds new light on Russia's methodical efforts to weaponize the BSR to advance neo-imperial ambitions.

The authors emphasize that despite the undeniable gains Ukraine has made in the maritime domain in recent months, the battle for the BSR is not over; that Russia will not change its long-term strategic approach to the area as part of Russia's permanent sphere of influence; and that the Kremlin will pursue control of the Black Sea littoral as Moscow advances and faces periodic setbacks in the war in Ukraine. It is in the national security interests of the United States that Russia fails in Ukraine, for

if it succeeds, the geopolitical consequences will be negative not only for the Black Sea region, but also for Washington, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and relations between the West and the biggest threat it faces: communist China.

Negative developments in the BSR cannot be ignored or explained away as yet another region that clamors for greater US or European attention, requires more resources, or draws the United States into the problems of faraway countries. The region is the central node connecting Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. What happens there has greater geopolitical significance and more serious consequences than is often recognized. As Ukraine goes, so goes the Black Sea region.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many consider the Black Sea region to have been mostly peaceful since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in 1991 until 2014, but the reality is more complex. While the sea itself may have been largely free and open during the 1990s and 2000s, Russia interfered regularly in the broader region during that time, making Ukraine its main target as Moscow sought to retain control over former Soviet territory in the aftermath of Ukraine's 1991 independence. The Kremlin also interfered in Transnistria (1992), Abkhazia (1992–94), and Georgia (2008)—all of which are on or close to the Black Sea.

Russia and the BSR

Russian President Vladimir Putin's obsession with the *Russkiy Mir* and *Novorossiya*, revanchist names for the southern regions of the former Russian Empire to the north of the Black Sea, has driven Moscow's focus on the BSR to unprecedented levels. In the service of this obsession, the Kremlin has torn up multiple treaties, flaunted international law and bilateral and multilateral agreements, rewritten history, weathered international ostracism, faced an arrest warrant for Putin from the International Criminal Court, and imposed untold hardships and tragedies on the Ukrainian and Russian people.

The Kremlin shows no intention of abandoning its goals of subsuming Ukraine within Russia and dictating developments in the BSR. Control of Crimea and the Black Sea littoral is essential to achieving these objectives. Moscow views the Black Sea region in zero-sum terms: what Russia can control or deny, others cannot.

Unstable, Contested Space

The BSR will remain an unstable and contested space until Russia is defeated or accepts the status quo ante before 2014, or until both Moscow and Kyiv reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Russia's illegal seizure of most of Ukraine's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) has shifted Russian territorial waters close to Romania's maritime border, while Moscow's attacks against Ukrainian ports on the Danube have caused damage to

adjacent Romanian territory. Its threats against peaceful maritime activity have triggered food insecurity and spikes in global commodities prices, caused conflicts in the European Union agricultural sector and it has interfered in the Romanian and Bulgarian EEZs. Russia will continue to challenge the interests of Black Sea littoral and NATO states for as long as those states and the international community permit it.

In recent years, it has become something of a cliché to refer to the Black Sea as becoming a Russian lake. While Ukraine has slowed that momentum with recent successes in the maritime domain, the Kremlin has, without doubt, expanded its influence over what happens on the water and in the region and shows no signs of giving up its goal of dominating it. Russian officials have told foreigners they view the Black Sea as a domestic body of water.

To that end, the Kremlin has regularly declared exclusion zones for military exercises in the northern half of the Black Sea and closed off areas of the sea for weeks and months at a time. Since 2014, Russia on multiple occasions has declared close to half of the Black Sea surface off-limits to commercial traffic. If the international community acquiesces to these actions, it risks normalizing Moscow's efforts to restrict freedom of navigation.

A Critical Geopolitical Node

In its March 31, 2023, Foreign Policy Concept, the Kremlin delivered the clear message that it intends to dominate its neighbors, is fighting the West, and is seeking to change the global order. The United States needs to continue to prioritize countering Russian actions in the Black Sea region and elsewhere, even as it recognizes communist China as the more serious long-term threat.

The Black Sea has become increasingly important over the last decade as Moscow has sought to expand its borders and forged ever closer relations with China, Iran, and other dictatorships. As Beijing expands its influence in the Middle Corridor—a

trade route encompassing Central Asia, the Caucasus nations, and the Caspian Sea—its objective of replacing US and Western influence there has become ever clearer.

The balance of power in Europe affects the distribution of influence in the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and beyond. These regions meet in the Black Sea, making it a critical geopolitical node for Eurasia, which itself spans the broader maritime space that includes the Levantine Basin, the Red Sea, and the western Indian Ocean.

The BSR has always been a nodal point and transit route. Today it remains a bridge for facilitating connections between Europe and Eurasia via the Middle Corridor, critical infrastructure like oil and gas pipelines and fiber optic cables, and trade in resources like coal, metals, and cotton. It is also where the forces of democracy to the west, the Russian military to the north, Chinese economic influence to the east, and Middle Eastern instability to the south converge. With Europe's center of gravity moving eastward, littoral states have become more important for the rest of the continent. As the aggressive, revisionist powers of Eurasia seek to expand their influence, a free and open Black Sea is firmly in the US national interest.

US Policy

Beginning in the early 2000s, successive US administrations, NATO leaders, and the EU and its member states failed to pay close attention or respond in a sustained manner to warning signs in the region. This signaled to Moscow that the area was of merely peripheral interest to the United States and Europe. Geography—the United States is half a world away from the Black Sea—and the strictures of the Montreux Convention also benefited the Kremlin. Despite continued US engagement, a sense pervaded the region that it was low on Washington's list of priorities.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 moved the BSR up that list. While the Biden administration repeatedly

declined to transfer long-range missiles and other high-impact, precision weapons platforms to Kyiv, US support helped Ukraine slow Russian advances and regain occupied territory. NATO's July 2022 Summit Communiqué demonstrated renewed focus on the region, and the alliance began to decrease the disparity in resources it had allocated to the northeast and southeast sectors of its eastern front. Washington also increased its assistance to Romania and Bulgaria.

The Black Sea Strategy that US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien presented to Congress on October 25, 2023, stressed that the fate of the region is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine and wider Europe. However, his was a State Department message that lacked the imprimatur of the entire US government, and its exhortations were too modest and too late. Its recommendations also relied too heavily on descriptions of well-known issues, came with few additional resources, and failed to provide a clear roadmap for implementation.

The December 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) took a major step forward, stressing the need to halt the spread of Russian aggression in Europe, recognizing the BSR as a target of the Kremlin, and describing regional littoral states as crucial members of NATO. The NDAA characterized Russian attempts to use the Black Sea to control access to the Mediterranean as a threat to the United States and NATO and noted the importance of strengthening economic ties with the nations of the BSR. It also tasked the Biden administration with developing a whole-of-government strategy for the region in 2024.

The Militarization of the Black Sea Region

Since Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea in February 2014, Moscow has transformed the peninsula into a formidable military stronghold. This expands its influence over more of the Black Sea through its missile, air, and naval forces and extends its military and strategic resources across more of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Russia's simultaneous oc-

cupation and annexation of the territorial waters and EEZ surrounding the peninsula have also been significant, giving Moscow control over a substantial portion of the sea and allowing it to establish a comprehensive anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) zone in the region.

The Battle for the Black Sea Is Not Over

Over the last year, and especially since autumn 2023, Ukraine has scored major successes in the maritime domain, sinking or disabling some 30 percent of Russia's Black Sea Fleet (BSF). This success has fed the narrative that Kyiv is winning the battle of the Black Sea. The BSF is indeed increasingly vulnerable, and Russia is on the defensive on the water. It has relocated major naval assets away from Crimea, forces that are now only partially deployable, and even its hardware in Novorossiysk is vulnerable. The BSF no longer operates in the northwest of the Black Sea. This development challenges narratives that the war is a stalemate and that Russian victory is inevitable, and demonstrates that the war remains dynamic and that Ukraine can inflict major damage on Russian forces.

Yet it is far too early to declare that Ukraine has won the battle at sea. Kyiv's clear maritime successes have not restored the Black Sea to anything resembling the status quo ante before 2014. Russia remains strong in the land and air domains and is hardly powerless in the maritime domain.

This war will be won or lost on land and in the air. As long as Moscow occupies Crimea and the Donbas, it has a platform from which to project its malign influence across Ukraine and beyond. This represents a serious long-term threat to Ukraine's survival, to the Black Sea as a free and open body of water, and to the entire Black Sea region.

While Ukraine's access to the global commons and international markets continues, it remains hostage to the Kremlin. Ukrainian ports and shipping remain vulnerable, which complicates and reduces commercial flows; while a grain corridor

allowing Ukraine to export its most valuable commodity is currently operating close to the western Black Sea coast, Moscow can disrupt it at will, should it choose to do so. The Black Sea also contains many thousands of naval mines, both anchored and drifting.

Plausible Scenarios for the Evolution of the War in Ukraine

Three scenarios remain plausible as future trajectories of the war, each carrying varying levels of probability and divergent consequences for Ukraine and the West.

Scenario 1: Increased probability of a frozen conflict—mixed consequences

A freeze in the conflict appears to be the most likely scenario at this point in its evolution. Some countries are reducing their support for Ukraine even as others increase theirs. Western support may ebb if Russia advances further in 2024 or if domestic political support for Ukraine erodes further in the United States.

Scenario 2: Medium probability of a partial Russian victory, with Russia at the mouth of the Danube—very negative consequences

The probability of this scenario is directly correlated to whether Western support for Ukraine continues, increases, or declines. For this outcome to occur, the Kremlin would need to conquer Ukraine's entire Black Sea littoral. If Putin is unable to make large-scale conquests in the first half of 2024, he will likely continue fighting a war of attrition, depleting Ukraine's resources and wagering that Russia has the manpower to continue for longer than Ukraine can.

Scenario 3: Medium probability of Ukraine's victory and liberation of Russian-occupied territories—positive consequences

A Ukrainian victory remains possible but is decreasingly probable as Western support erodes, Kyiv struggles with manpower and other shortages, and Putin doubles down on his goal of

erasing Ukraine from the map. A Ukrainian victory would increase the likelihood of its accession to the EU and NATO and of the reconstruction of the country. Russia cannot begin the long process of expunging, and healing from, its neo-imperial mentality unless and until it loses the war.

A Worst-Case Scenario

Russia cannot be a reliable partner for the global West until it departs Ukraine, drops its territorial demands on neighbors, and allows the Black Sea region to return to the status quo ante before 2014. The United States has a clear interest in the BSR as whole, free, open, and at peace. This is also critical for Ukraine's survival and for the prosperity of all littoral states.

While Ukraine continues to fight, envisioning a Russian victory—clearly the worst-case outcome of the war—remains an exercise in speculation. It is clearly up to Kyiv to define the conditions under which it decides to cease fighting.

Observers argue that Russia has already lost this war no matter its outcome. Ukraine has humiliated Moscow on the battlefield. The war has clarified the relationship between Moscow and Kyiv and solidified Ukraine's national identity. Russia has become further dependent on China. NATO is more united than ever and has granted membership to formerly neutral Finland and Sweden. Putin is a war criminal with a warrant for his arrest from the International Criminal Court. Europe has significantly decreased its energy dependence on Russia.

Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin, however, do not view the world in these terms. If the guns fall silent and Russia holds territory it did not occupy before 2014, Putin will declare victory. The view from Red Square is that Moscow controls 17 to 19 percent of Ukraine—significantly more than it did before 2014 or 2022. The Russian army remains on the offensive, and it can determine, if not dictate, the terms for ending the war. Putin is still in power. That Moscow sees the war in these terms has geopolitical and other consequences for the United States.

The Impact on US Interests

A consolidation of Russian control over the Ukrainian littoral would have a major negative impact on NATO allies, partners, and friends. It would leave the Kremlin in possession of highly strategic territory that it would no doubt weaponize to exercise inordinate influence over the region. It would entrench the militarization of the Black Sea and increase the likelihood of future conflict, at a cost to the United States.

Moscow still harbors ambitions of taking the entirety of Ukraine's Black Sea coast. Retaining Crimea will enable the Kremlin to expand its malign influence over the BSR, Southeastern Europe, the Western Balkans, the Levant and broader Middle East, the eastern Mediterranean, and beyond.

Energy resources in the Black Sea region have the potential to be a game changer for Europe's energy security. But if Putin wins, the development of these untapped assets is much less likely. The region is also important as an energy crossroads for Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the Middle East.

A Russian victory would also have negative consequences for the most acute long-term threat the United States and the global West face: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). CCP leaders are watching the United States and its allies closely for signs of resolve, resilience, social cohesion, and military and financial strength. Should Russia win in Ukraine, China would likely conclude that the United States is unable to oppose its efforts to shape an alternative world order. Iran and its proxies would be emboldened to sow chaos across the Middle East. Pyongyang would feel freer to act on the Korean peninsula. Dictators, autocrats, and fence-sitters around the world would accommodate themselves to this new reality.

Principles Also Matter

The United States has a major interest in the preservation of the post-Cold War security system, which has fostered unprecedented peace and prosperity for the transatlantic community

and beyond. Russia seeks to shatter the principles that undergird this US-led system.

The United States, therefore, also has a vested interest in demonstrating that Moscow's brazen violation of the rules-based international order cannot stand, that internationally recognized borders are inviolable, and that independent countries cannot be extinguished.

The Kremlin should not be permitted to trample on international laws and norms. By invading Ukraine, Russia violated the 1945 United Nations Charter, the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the 1991 Belovezha Accords, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the 1998 Russia-Ukraine Friendship Treaty, and the 2010 Kharkiv Pact, not to mention the laws of war and international humanitarian law. Russia has also violated international treaties and rulings relating to the BSR: the 1997 Black Sea Fleet Treaty and the December 2003 Russian-Ukrainian Treaty on the Legal Status of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait.

The exclusive economic zones of NATO member states are not, strictly speaking, covered by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. However, Russian encroachments into these areas clearly

obstruct free and open navigation. Russia has also not formally declared war on Ukraine, usually referring to its invasion as a special military operation—although some Russians use the term “war”—to avoid having the law of war and international humanitarian law apply to its behavior.

A Plan of Action

A more stable security environment in the Black Sea region requires strengthening Ukraine's deterrent and destroying, damaging, or neutralizing Russia's military infrastructure and ground lines of communication (GLOC) in Crimea. If the Kremlin can supply and use Crimea as a platform to prosecute its war, threaten attacks, and disrupt the region, the BSR will not resemble its pre-2014 state. Ukraine's allies should do more to ensure Russia does not win this war. The Biden administration, for one, should speed the flow of weapons to Kyiv so that Ukraine can end the fighting on terms as favorable to its interests as possible.

For specific recommendations on the political, diplomatic, military, and economic elements of a whole-of-government United States strategy for the Black Sea region, please see page 79.



AS UKRAINE GOES, SO GOES THE BLACK SEA REGION

The Russian Understanding of the Black Sea Region

It has become common to assert that Russian leaders have sought access to the Black Sea since the days of the tsars. The year-round warm water ports of Crimea offer the Kremlin uninterrupted access to the world's oceans (see map 1). Russia benefits commercially, economically, and militarily from year-round access to Black Sea ports and the global commons beyond.

However, historians note there is no strong evidence that Moscow prioritized the sea until the twentieth century.¹ This interest intensified during World War II, stoked by the brief Nazi-Soviet alliance from 1939 to 1941, and surfaced at the Yalta Conference.

That Moscow would have a strong interest in the warm water entrepôts on the Black Sea is logical, but Western observers, more than Russia itself, have been responsible for the thesis that this goal has guided the Kremlin's ambitions for centuries. Historically, Russian leaders—from the time the country began developing as a maritime power during the reign of Peter I—have focused more on the Baltic Sea than on the Black Sea. Since the eighteenth century, Russia's Northern Fleet, headquartered on the Kola Peninsula near Murmansk, has been the centerpiece of its navy.

Photo: Russian ships and jets take part in a military exercise on the coast of the Black Sea in Crimea on September 9, 2016. (Photo by Vasily Maximov/AFP via Getty Images)

Map 1. The Black Sea



Source: Authors.

Over time, the leaders of what now constitutes the center of modern Russia turned their attentions to the Black Sea for a host of reasons. They sought to dominate the rich agricultural lands of the southern steppe. They aimed to exploit the bountiful natural resources of what is now the Donbas. They wished to prevent the Crimean Tatars, who burned Moscow in 1571, from stirring up trouble along the southern edges of Muscovy. They desired to control the Sea of Azov, to trade, and to push back the Ottoman sphere of influence. When Catherine II asserted control over Crimea in 1783, she gave no indication her motivation was the pull of year-round warm water ports (see map 2).

Since 1991, however, Russia has felt a much more acute need for access to the sea after it lost control of Ukraine in a referendum and all its administrative regions, including Crimea, voted for independence. Since parts of the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait often see ice for several months in winter, Moscow values its military bases in Crimea as something akin to an unsinkable aircraft carrier that enables it to project power across the BSR, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean.

While many in the West consider the Black Sea region to have been mostly peaceful from the collapse of the Soviet Union

Map 2. Map of the Conquest of Crimea, Kuban, Novorossiia, and Other Territories of the Northern Black Sea Region by the Russian Empire



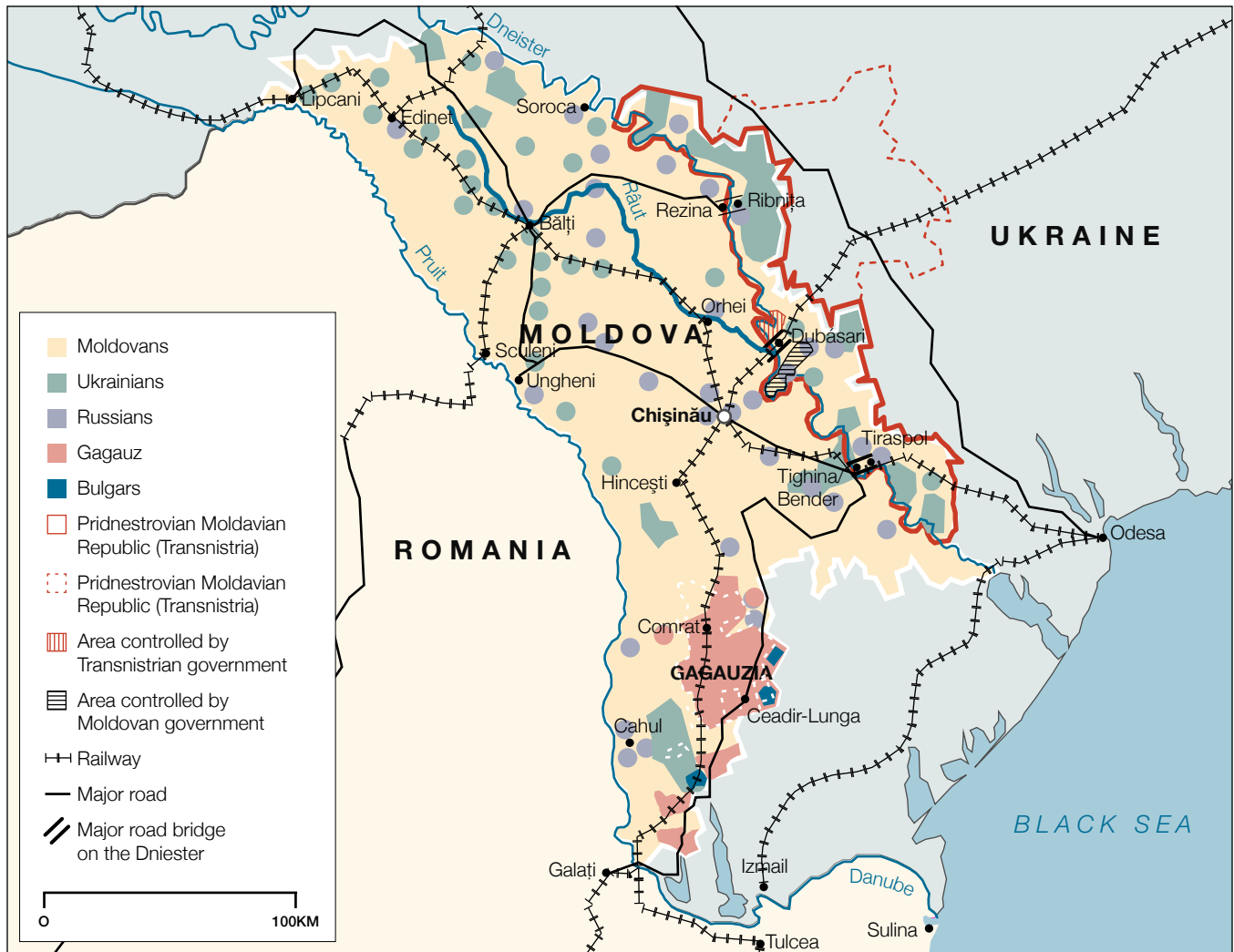
Source: Deviant Art.

and the Warsaw Pact in 1991 until 2014, reality is more complex. The BSR remained a major focus of Russian foreign policy in the 1990s and 2000s, as Moscow executed a deliberate strategy of retaining influence in, if not control over, former Soviet territory. The Kremlin continued the tsarist practice of creating or fomenting conflicts in areas with ethnic Russian

populations. In the post-Soviet era, these have often turned into frozen conflicts.

Russia began its meddling in 1992 in Moldova, the southern tip of which is less than two miles from an estuary that flows into the Black Sea, when pro-Moscow separatists broke away from

Map 3. Moldova, Transnistria, and Gagauzia



Source: Loïc Ramirez, "Transnistria, Relic of a Frozen Conflict," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2022, <https://mondediplo.com/2022/01/08/transnistria>.

Moldova with Russian support and declared themselves the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, later known as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, or Transnistria (see map 3). It also began fomenting trouble in the Abkhazia region of Georgia in 1992 (see map 4). The frozen conflicts in the Republic of Moldova and Georgia are situated on or near the Black Sea.

Russia's creation of frozen conflicts, by which it maintains a state of agitation between peace and war in Soviet successor states, has been an important feature of its post-1991 foreign policy. The practice perpetuates Russian interference in sovereign nations, fosters dependence on Moscow, and fosters disinformation, corruption, and criminality—all characteristics of Russia's hybrid warfare toolbox. The Kremlin's interference pre-

Map 4. Conflict Zones Created by the Russian Federation in the Independent Republics that Emerged after the Dissolution of the Soviet Union



Source: Eleonora Tafuro, "And Yet it Moves: Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts in 2019," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/and-yet-it-moves-post-soviet-frozen-conflicts-2019-22137>.

vents nations from achieving full sovereignty, developing, prospering, and choosing foreign policies independent from Russia.

While these conflicts festered, the Black Sea itself remained largely free and open during the 1990s and 2000s. Its littoral states benefitted from freedom of navigation and maritime commerce and made progress in rebuilding societies that had been ravaged by decades of communism and Soviet domination. Democracy developed, trade increased, and prosperity spread.

But Russia continued to interfere in Ukraine, Moldova, and throughout the broader region. During negotiations in 1992, 1994,

and 1995, Russia refused to recognize Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. Only in the 1997 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, when Kyiv agreed to give up some 80 percent of the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet (BSF) and control of the naval base at Sevastopol, did Moscow relent and accept Crimea as part of Ukraine.

The Putin Regime and the Black Sea Region

While Russia has consistently prioritized the Black Sea region since 1991, Vladimir Putin has given it unprecedented attention. Hints of Putin's fixation on Ukraine and the Russian diaspora

surfaced in a rant at a 1994 Koerber Stiftung conference in St. Petersburg, when he called the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”² This outburst went largely unnoticed for years, but reflected Putin’s long obsession with the *Russkiy Mir* and what he later began calling *Novorossiya*, an appellation that an expansionist Moscow applied during the mid-eighteenth century to the regions north of the Black Sea.

Russian designs on Ukrainian territory on the Black Sea became evident soon after Putin took power in 2000. In 2003, Russia and Ukraine nearly came to blows over Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait. Shortly after, the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine signaled to Moscow that it was losing control over countries it had once dominated. This change intensified Putin’s fears that ideas of democracy, individual freedom, the rule of law, good governance, political accountability, and market economics would undermine Russia. The Rose and Orange Revolutions strengthened his nationalist, neo-imperial mindset and deepened his suspicion of Western ideas.

By 2005, Putin was signaling to then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Russia would recognize Abkhazia, a disputed region of Georgia, as a state. The George W. Bush administration, seeking stability in its relations with the Kremlin, downplayed signs that “Russia was uninterested in democratic values.”³ Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference sent a strong message that he was going on the offensive against the West.

Russia had also begun to hold regular large-scale military exercises in the Black Sea region. Moscow treated these exercises as instruments of its foreign policy and timed them to send signals to the West. It conducted exercises named Caucasus Frontier not long after the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit had declined to offer Georgia and Ukraine a pathway to membership, and just before starting the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008. That short war cemented Russian control over Abkhazia

and South Ossetia, disputed regions of Georgia. By 2008 Putin was telling then US Ambassador to Russia William Burns that Ukraine was “not even a real country.”⁴

By the 2010s, the Black Sea was well on its way to becoming what the Greeks once called a *pontos axeinós*—an inhospitable sea. The Kremlin took its confrontation with the West into open war in 2014 with its illegal annexation of Crimea, turning the Black Sea into a front line between Russia and its adversaries, bringing conflict and instability to the broader BSR, and affecting the interests of NATO and its littoral member states Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Russia’s invasion of Crimea marked the beginning of a new era in warfare, with hybrid means of waging war replacing old Clausewitzian concepts of interstate conflict.

By 2017, Russia had fine-tuned its arsenal of hybrid warfare tools. Moscow seized upon gaps in international law governing the Black Sea maritime domain to advance its influence further into the region. By blockading the maritime perimeters of regional littoral states’ EEZs for months at a time, Russia overtly challenged freedom of navigation in the sea. Its tactics both drew inspiration from and inspired similar strategies implemented elsewhere, including in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, adopted on July 31, 2022, entrenched these practices in writing. The document envisaged Moscow “ensuring, based on the norms of international maritime law, an international legal regime favorable to the Russian Federation in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and the procedure for the use of biological sea resources, exploration and development of hydrocarbon fields, construction and operation of the underwater pipeline.”⁵ This doctrine elevated the Black Sea to the same level of importance as the Baltic and Mediterranean, and is reportedly the only such paper Putin has approved in recent years.⁶ It joined the projection of military force to the preservation of political and economic influence, and publicly codified Moscow’s weaponization of its natural gas resources that had been underway for many years.

To promote his revanchist ambitions, Putin has promoted a distorted view of the history of the Black Sea region. In his speeches, he has indicated that the history of the region does not begin in earnest until the eighteenth century; uncoincidentally, Russia established its Black Sea Fleet in 1783. In a speech on December 14, 2023, Putin stated that the entire Black Sea coast became Russian after the Russo-Turkish War of 1774. In his interview with Tucker Carlson, aired on February 8, 2024, he said, “The Soviet Union was given a great deal of territory that had never belonged to it, including in the Black Sea region.”⁷

Putin also has claimed that areas in the south and east of present-day Ukraine lack any historical connection with the country, and that because Catherine II conquered these territories from the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century, they are Russian—ignoring that the inhabitants of these lands at that time were not Russian, but largely Ottoman, Tatar, or Cossack. Understandably, leaders of Black Sea littoral states, like former Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov, take comments like these as proof of Russia’s imperial ambitions.⁸

Putin has used this neo-imperialist worldview to justify tearing up multiple treaties and agreements, flaunting international law, and rewriting history. He also has used a revanchist mindset to marshal domestic support and impose massive costs on the Ukrainian and Russian people, in the process weathering international ostracism and the humiliation of an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court.

Meanwhile, the Russian president has been doubling down on his efforts to incorporate Ukraine into Russia and influence, if not dictate, developments in the BSR, despite Ukraine’s significant successes during the last year in destroying, damaging, or neutralizing Russian naval assets or forcing their retreat from Crimea. Putin seems determined to force global recognition of Russia’s self-defined new maritime borders, to retain the military and geopolitical advantages Crimea provides, and to restore Russian domination over areas he considers eternally Russian.

The notion that Crimea is Russian is such an article of faith for Putin that he is likely prepared to spend untold amounts of Russian blood and treasure to keep it.

For the Kremlin, control of Crimea and the Black Sea littoral is essential to extinguishing Ukrainian statehood and resurrecting *Novorossiia*. Indeed, Putin has implicitly linked his own future to Russia’s success in the war and to maintaining its influence in the BSR. Russia needs to control Crimea to be able to project power. It wants the navies of non-Black Sea NATO member states out of the region, even if it must tolerate those of the alliance’s littoral states. The Kremlin is determined to prevent the sea from becoming anything even approaching a NATO-dominated domain, as is occurring in the Baltic Sea. Russian activity in the region is therefore designed to prevent this contingency. Putin sees the Black Sea region as integral to Russian identity (see photo 1), viewing it in zero-sum terms: what Russia can control or deny, others cannot.

In his determination to reverse perceived geopolitical defeats ensuing from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin has benefited from Western inattentiveness, even as international security experts have called for investing in a robust strategy for the Black Sea and strengthening deterrence there. This has signaled to the Kremlin that the region was of peripheral interest to the United States and Europe, and that the West was not prepared to invest significant military and political assets there. Western inattentiveness also has encouraged Putin to think that his adventurism could succeed, as he has calculated that regions, once occupied, would be difficult to regain and could be Russified.

The BSR will remain an unstable and contested space until Russia is defeated or accepts the status quo ante before 2014, or until the warring sides reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Russia’s illegal seizure of most of Ukraine’s exclusive economic zone has not only seriously reduced Ukraine’s prewar maritime territory. It also has moved the area Russia claims as its own EEZ to Romania’s maritime border, even as the interna-

Photo 1. Dmitry Medvedev’s Speech against the Background of the Expansionist Map of Russia’s Territorial Claims on March 4, 2024



Source: Screenshot of Sergey Lavrov, “Geographic and Strategic Borders of Russia,” speech at the World Youth Festival, For the Fatherland, YouTube video, 43:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42t1woXzHsw>.

tional community considers this occupation illegal under international law. Moscow’s attacks against Ukrainian ports on the Danube River represent a real danger to adjacent Romanian territory. The Kremlin’s threats against peaceful maritime activity have caused food insecurity and spikes in global commodities prices and disrupted European agricultural markets, while its interference in Romanian and Bulgarian EEZs has restricted Bucharest’s and Sofia’s activities there. Indeed, Russia’s efforts to extend its influence into the Black Sea reflect a clear determination to be the dominant power in the BSR, which challenges the interests of littoral states and NATO for as long as the international community allows.

Russian Lake—A Key Concept for Understanding Russian Strategy

The Black Sea was often described as a Soviet lake while the USSR existed. While the Black Sea was largely free and open during the 1990s and 2000s, Russia’s illegal invasions of Georgia and Ukraine changed the status quo in the region so significantly that politicians in the 2010s began asking whether the sea was becoming a Russian lake.

Numerous world leaders have subsequently expressed this concern. At the 2014 Wales NATO Summit, then Romanian President Traian Basescu said, “The Black Sea can’t become a Russian lake.”⁹ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan echoed these sentiments in May 2016, observing that “the Black Sea has almost become a Russian lake.”¹⁰ Erdogan reportedly told NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, “You are invisible in the Black Sea. Your invisibility in the Black Sea turns it into a Russian lake.”¹¹ Russia’s Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, asserted in 2016 that “the balance of forces in the Black Sea has changed in recent years, and the Turkish navy cannot be called the master in the region anymore.”¹² US Senator Pete Ricketts observed in October 2023 that “Putin wants nothing more than to turn the Black Sea into a Russian lake.”¹³ On January 24, 2024, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander told a conference that Washington designed its regional strategy “so that the Black Sea does not become a Russian lake.”¹⁴

While the phrase “Russian lake” has become something of a cliché, the Kremlin has clearly expanded Russian influence over what happens on the water and in the region since 2014. Russian officials have told foreigners they view the Black Sea as a domestic body of water, analogous perhaps to the Great Lakes in the United States.¹⁵ When Russia illegally occupied Crimea in 2014, Ukraine lost its fleet, and the Russian navy gained de facto control over the northern and northwestern Black Sea—both the territorial waters and exclusive economic zone—even as the international community refused to recognize its claims. Russia had similarly destroyed Georgia’s fleet in 2008.

Russia’s strategy of declaring exclusion zones for military exercises has entrenched the idea that the Black Sea is its domain. The Kremlin has tended to focus on the northern half of the sea, in part out of respect for Turkey as a maritime power. But even this practice regularly closes off other parts of the water for weeks or months at a time. Indeed, since 2014 there have

been periods when Moscow has declared half of the Black Sea surface off-limits to commercial traffic. If the international community acquiesces to this behavior, it runs the risk of normalizing such restrictions on freedom of navigation.

Turkey, to say the least, sees the Black Sea through a different lens than Russia. Ankara's diplomats like to note that the only time the sea belonged to any one power was during the period from 1475, when the Ottomans conquered Crimea, to 1783, when Catherine II overturned centuries of Ottoman dominance and annexed the Crimean Khanate. During those 300 years, it would have been more accurate to call the sea an Ottoman lake than a Russian one. Since then, and especially after the 1936 Montreux Convention made Ankara the gatekeeper of activity in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, the Turkish Navy has also been a major player in the Black Sea, at least in its southern half.

But the Turkish Navy in recent decades has shifted its focus to the Mediterranean, while the Romanian and Bulgarian Navies are smaller and less capable. This dynamic, coupled with Russia's aggressiveness, has made NATO littoral states less able to

deter or prevent Russia from pushing into space to which it has no legal claim. And while Turkey has used the Montreux Convention to prevent Russia from reinforcing or replacing ships in its Black Sea Fleet, it also has limited how NATO forces can operate there. The Montreux Convention has on balance proven to be a net benefit to Ukraine since February 2022.

Since 2014, NATO and its member states have attempted to compete for positive influence in the Black Sea by conducting exercises there, and member states have continued to send warships on freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), although the Montreux Convention limits these vessels to 21 days in the area. FONOPs continued until June 2021, while the most recent NATO exercise occurred in July 2021. The last vessel of a NATO member state to depart the Black Sea was France's FS *Auvergne*, which left in January 2022. No warships from NATO member states have entered the Black Sea since December 2021, and Turkey has stated clearly that it will not allow any warships to enter or leave the sea while the war in Ukraine is ongoing. If anything, since 2014 the Black Sea has become more of a mixed Russian *and* Turkish lake—but the security situation there changed dramatically in favor of Moscow.



A US RATIONALE FOR THE BLACK SEA REGION

Geopolitics: The Black Sea is the Central Strategic Node in Eurasia

With the Kremlin affirming in its April 2023 Foreign Policy Concept that it is fighting the West and seeks to change the global order,¹⁶ the United States needs to continue to counter Russian goals and actions, even if China is the more serious long-term threat. The United States has long opposed domination of the Eurasian landmass by one hegemonic power or coalition. Washington has forward-deployed military forces, backed up by its global naval reach, and has worked with allies, friends, and partners to support the massive US economic and political presence in Europe, despite domestic concerns going back to George Washington’s Farewell Address that its involvement in global problems entails risks. This fault line continues to polarize the US political debate, dividing

those who take a broader and narrower interpretation of the country’s national interest.

But as the Kremlin has attacked its neighbors and forged ever closer relations with Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang, the Black Sea region has grown in geopolitical and economic importance. With China expanding its influence in the Middle Corridor via investments in BSR countries like Georgia, its goal of limiting Western influence has become clearer. The United States has been unable to contain the expansion of Iran’s reach since the

Photo: Ships during the Sea Breeze annual exercise—which brings Black Sea nations together to train and operate with NATO members to build interoperability and increase capability—on July, 25, 2020. (US Navy photo courtesy of Ukrainian Navy/Released)

mid-2000s and the Biden administration lacks a clear strategy in the Middle East, leaving the region vulnerable to Russia, China, and Iran. The Hamas attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, and continuing Houthi strikes on Red Sea trade routes reflect Tehran's growing strength and pose new challenges for the United States and its allies.

Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia meet in the Black Sea, which connects Russia to the global seas and China and Iran to Europe. The Black Sea is thus a critical geopolitical node in Eurasia, a region connected to the broader maritime space that includes the Levantine Basin, the Red Sea, and the western Indian Ocean.¹⁷ Central Asia, Siberia, and the northern Middle East contain many of the world's key resources and important trade routes. It is not in the US interest for the aggressive, revisionist powers of Eurasia to gain further influence there.

Russia's war against Ukraine has already increased Moscow's influence in the region by hindering freedom of navigation and challenging regional trade routes. Russian control of the Black Sea region could have major negative geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences.

The US Policy Framework

Since 1991, successive US administrations have treated the Black Sea region as peripheral or subordinate to their relationships with Russia and Europe. Washington's approach reflected its desire to prioritize ties with Moscow, its fear of confrontation and escalation, and its perception of its economic interests. The US has consistently prioritized other maritime theaters: the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea regions as well as the Atlantic Ocean. Geography—the United States is half a world away from the Black Sea—and the strictures of the Montreux Convention also benefited the Kremlin. Despite continued US engagement, a sense pervaded the region that it was low on Washington's list of priorities.

In the 2000s, the United States expanded its engagement with and presence in the region, especially after Romania and Bul-

garia joined NATO in 2004. Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference rant and Russia's 2008 war against Georgia sent unmistakable messages that the Kremlin had not given up its designs on former Soviet territory. Moscow's 2014 illegal occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas forced the Obama administration to pay greater attention, leading it to pause the reset it had undertaken in 2010 and to push back against Russian aggression. US Navy ships conducted FONOPs in the Black Sea with increasing frequency, on occasion spending almost half of a calendar year in short-term deployments there.

However, both the Bush and the Obama administrations ignored warning signs from the Kremlin. At the April 2008 NATO-Russia Council, Putin claimed that "not all legal procedures were followed" in the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. Former President Bill Clinton related to a New York audience in 2023 that Putin had stated at the World Economic Forum in 2011 that he did not support the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and was not bound by it. Clinton commented that he knew then that it was "just a matter of time" before Russia would launch an attack on Ukraine.¹⁸ He gave no indication he had engaged on these key developments with his wife, who was secretary of state at the time.

Furthermore, the Obama administration declined to revise its approach to the region fundamentally after Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas in 2014. President Barack Obama also did little to counter Russia's attempt to redraw the borders of Europe and failed to provide Ukraine with the weaponry necessary to seriously weaken, let alone dislodge, Russian forces from occupied Donbas and Crimea.

The United States and NATO continued to focus more on the northeast sector of the alliance's eastern front (Poland and the Baltics) than the southeast sector (Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey). This focus stemmed from an assessment that Moscow was more likely to threaten the alliance in the north. NATO also declined to approve an alliance naval force for the Black Sea at its

2016 Warsaw Summit, as then Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov blocked the move. The US State Department and Pentagon sent mixed messages: while more concerned and engaged than in past years, they still treated the region as peripheral.

The Trump administration also sent mixed messages. President Donald Trump pursued a pragmatic relationship with Putin while his administration was tough in practice. Washington supplied Ukraine with more—and more lethal—military support, prioritized combating malign Russian and Chinese influence, strengthened the resilience of regional allies and partners, and solidified the ties that bind Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey to the West. The White House provided Ukraine with capabilities like Javelin anti-tank missiles that the Obama administration had refused to supply. But the 2020 election drew down the curtain on the Trump State Department's effort to develop an ambitious Black Sea strategy.

The Biden administration revived the Obama team's approach to the Kremlin, seeking a constructive relationship and largely ignoring serious warning signs. It continued military support to Kyiv but went to great lengths to refrain from doing anything it feared could be perceived as provocative or escalatory. It sought a summit with Putin in Geneva in June 2021 that achieved nothing. It issued no response to Putin's July 2021 publication of "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," an irredentist screed that set forth the ideological framework for the February 2022 invasion. It projected numerous other signs of weakness, mixed messaging, and inaction that almost certainly led Putin to conclude that the Biden administration would offer only token resistance to the impending Russian war effort. So far, Putin's assessment that the Biden team would only go so far to support Ukraine has proved correct: for two years, Washington has supplied Kyiv with a slow drip of material support, too little for Ukraine to win and too much for it to lose.

Yet Russia's full-scale invasion moved the Black Sea region much higher up the priority lists of the State Department, the Pentagon, and the US Congress. While the Biden administra-

tion has repeatedly declined to transfer the long-range precision weapons that could seriously weaken Russian forces, US support helped Kyiv impede Russia's advances, regain territory, inflict massive losses on enemy forces, and prevent Moscow from expanding its influence further into the Black Sea region. Indeed, without US support, Ukraine could have lost the war already.

The July 2022 NATO Madrid Summit Declaration mentioned the Black Sea and focused more on the region than any prior NATO document had. The alliance began to decrease the disparity between the resources it had allocated to the northeast and southeast sectors of its eastern front. Washington also increased the military assets it had assigned to Romania and Bulgaria, tripling the number of US troops on rotation in Romania.

But blind spots still existed. Washington's October 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) failed to mention the Black Sea. The Biden team excluded the eastern Black Sea from policy documents,¹⁹ and did not respond to blatant provocations, including when a Russian fighter forced down a US MQ-9 Reaper over the Black Sea in March 2023.

The US Black Sea Strategy, for which some members of Congress had begun calling in 2020, and which Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien finally presented to Congress on October 25, 2023, demonstrated that the current administration understands what is at stake in the region. But while the strategy came with the backing of the State Department, it lacked the imprimatur of the entire US government, and its exhortations were too modest and too late. Its recommendations also relied too heavily on descriptions of well-known issues, provided few additional resources, and failed to supply a clear roadmap for implementation.

A Free and Open Black Sea: An Important US National Interest

The passage of the December 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was an important step forward, as it

stressed that it was in the US interest to prevent the spread of Russia-driven conflict in Europe and recognized the Black Sea region as an arena of Russian aggression. It described littoral states as crucial to countering Russia and as contributors to NATO's collective security. It highlighted Moscow's attempts to control access to the Mediterranean via the Black Sea as a threat to the United States and NATO. It emphasized Washington's interest in strengthening economic ties between the United States and the BSR littoral states. Finally, it tasked the Biden administration with developing a whole-of-government strategy for the region in 2024.

Section 1247 of the NDAA further stated explicitly that a greater focus on the Black Sea region is in the US national interest.²⁰ This development reflected an understanding of the Black Sea region as a critical crossroads for Europe, the Caucasus, Turkey, the Levant, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and a region where Russian expansionism over centuries has regularly brought conflict and war. A part of the world that has always been a nodal point for north, south, east, and west is even more so today. The modern BSR facilitates connectivity between Europe and Eurasia via the Middle Corridor, through critical infra-

structure like east-west oil and gas pipelines and fiber optic cables, and by the trade of other natural resources like coal, metals, and cotton. It is also "where the forces of democracy to the west, Russian military aggression in the north, Chinese economic influence in the east, and instability in the Middle East to the south converge."²¹

A growing percentage of global trade also occurs in the Black Sea region and would be higher in the absence of war. Sitting astride the Middle Corridor that connects China to Europe, the region provides the only direct route avoiding Russia between these two major economic areas. With Europe's center of gravity moving east, the area's littoral states have become more important. These factors alone would merit increased US attention in the region.

Presenting the State Department Black Sea Strategy to the US Congress in October 2023, Assistant Secretary O'Brien stressed that the fate of the region is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine and wider Europe. He also dwelled on the BSR during a January 25, 2024, speech at the German Marshall Fund, stressing the area's connections to Ukraine and Europe.



THE MILITARIZATION OF THE BLACK SEA REGION, 2014-22

Since Russia began its illegal occupation of Crimea in February 2014, Moscow has transformed the peninsula into a formidable military stronghold. From its platforms there, Moscow has used missile, air, and naval forces to assert dominance over the Black Sea and extend its influence across Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Russia's simultaneous occupation and annexation of the territorial waters and EEZ surrounding Crimea have given Russia control over a substantial portion of the Black Sea and enabled it to establish a comprehensive A2/AD zone in the region.

On November 25, 2018, Russian warships, planes, and helicopters conducted a targeted attack on Ukrainian naval vessels near the Kerch Strait, effectively signaling Russia's intent to dictate terms in the Black and Azov Seas. This blatant

act of aggression demonstrated that neither NATO nor the international community could impede Russian expansion in the region.

Since then, Russia has reshaped the geopolitical landscape in the Black and Azov Seas. Operating by force and disregarding international law, the Kremlin has defied NATO attempts to curb its influence, while steering clear of direct military confrontation. Its occupation, annexation, and subsequent militarization of Crimea have enabled it to act with such impunity.

Photo: The Russian Kilo-class submarine *Rostov-on-Don* sails through the Bosphorus Strait on the way to the Black Sea past the city Istanbul on February 13, 2022. (Photo by Ozan Kose/AFP via Getty Images)

Map 5. Occupied and Annexed Ukrainian Crimea



Source: Olga Volyniuk, Christina Dobrovol'ska, and Maksym Maiorov, Trans. R. Limahl, *Crimea behind the Curtain: Guide to the Occupied Zone* (Kyiv, Ukraine: International Renaissance Foundation, 2019), https://prometheus.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/%D0%A1rimea_behind_the_curtain_EN.pdf.

Russia's strategy in Crimea has revolved around its militarization of the region. Between 2014 and 2022, Russia's most notable achievement on the peninsula was its extensive military development of the territory, which swiftly became home to the largest inter-service grouping of Russian troops in Europe. From the initial days of the occupation, Moscow flooded Crimea with new and advanced military equipment and weaponry.

Russia also made significant efforts to restore numerous Soviet military facilities in the occupied region, including airfields, missile launchers, air defense installations, radar systems, and bases storing Soviet-era nuclear weapons. It revitalized and expanded the infrastructure of its military bases. As a result, the presence of Russian special services on the peninsula has surged.

To build its presence in Crimea (see map 5), Moscow prioritized revitalizing the defense industry, focusing on military instrumentation, shipbuilding, and ship repair. It incorporated Crimean military enterprises into Russian state-owned concerns. Moscow subsumed every facet of life in Crimea—the economy, social life, human rights, the information space, and ethnic policies—into its effort to transform the occupied region into a comprehensive military base.

The Buildup of Russian Armed Forces in Occupied Crimea, 2014–22

Since February 2014, the Russian Armed Forces have been intensively strengthening their capabilities on the peninsula (see table 1). The initial cross-service grouping of Russian troops in Crimea consisted of three main components: land, air, and sea, all clearly offensive in nature. Although the land grouping played a supporting role in the initial Russian annexation and occupation, its composition and equipment presaged preparations for wider offensive actions against Ukraine. After seizing Crimea, Russia placed a new emphasis on the development of air, missile, and naval strike groups. Strike missile systems became the main instrument of dominance for the Russian Navy in the Black Sea;

even as the Russian fleet's oceanic capabilities declined, Moscow used Kalibr cruise missiles to project force into the Mediterranean and threaten the territory of Ukraine and any country in the region. In fact, since its occupation of Crimea, Russia has built up its forces for the exact purpose of waging offensive and attack actions against Ukraine and, potentially, other BSR countries. The number of Russian military occupation forces in Crimea has increased several times since the illegal annexation.

The deployment of Russian troops in Crimea unfolded as a dynamic process. Moscow established a comprehensive A2/AD zone, successfully achieving this objective on the eve of its full-scale invasion in 2022 (see map 6). Ukrainian and NATO actions proved insufficient to counter Russia's expansive actions. Ukraine lacked the time to develop an asymmetrical mosquito fleet, and NATO's actions in the Black Sea were driven primarily by its desire to prevent an escalation of conflict with Russia.

Considering the limited naval capabilities of Romania and Bulgaria at that time, along with Turkey's unwillingness to confront Russia and NATO and the specific regulations outlined in the Montreux Convention for non-Black Sea littoral

Table 1. Russian Military Forces in Crimea

	AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF SOVIET UNION (1991)	BEFORE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA (2013)	BEFORE FULL-SCALE AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE (2021)
Personnel	70,000	12,500	32,500
Tanks	258	0	40
Armor	742	92	600
Artillery	229	24	170
Aircraft	170	22	122
Helicopters	115	37	62
Missile Systems	6	0	16
Ships	105	52	71
Submarines	4	2	7

Source: Information from the internal databases of Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies and New Geopolitics Research Network.

states, NATO's activities in the Black Sea provided only passive deterrence against Moscow, demonstrating the alliance's resolve to respond forcefully to any threat to NATO members while simultaneously avoiding the initiation of direct armed conflict. This approach ruled out active, forceful resistance to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, including providing any support for Ukraine.

When Western sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014 saddled its oceanic fleet with critical technological problems that

stalled the construction of frigates and larger ships,²² the Kremlin shifted its focus to regional-level navies. The Russian Navy began to retire its older, larger ships and began building small vessels with strike missile capabilities. Moscow's ability to scale up the production of small missile ships created new complex threats in the Black Sea; its moderately successful creation of a modern naval component in Crimea relies on light-tonnage, relatively inexpensive craft armed with anti-ship and Kalibr cruise missiles that possess a range of over 1,200 miles.

Map 6. Russian A2/AD Zone in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov



Source: "Presentation of Quantitative Indicators of the Russian Military Presence in Crimea," Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the United Nations, March 7, 2017, <https://ukraineun.org/press-center/179-prezentatsiya-kilkisnyh-pokaznykiv-rosiyskoy-viyskovoy-prysutnosti-v-krymu/>.

Photo 2. Project 21631 Small Missile Ship Vyshniy Volochek (Buyan-M) Launches a Kalibr Missile, September 2019



Source: Anton Blinov, *MRK Vyshny Volochek Launched a Kalibr Missile in the Black Sea*, photograph, Crimea, Ukraine, August 29, 2019, <https://anton-blinov.livejournal.com/87060.html>.

When sanctions crippled Russia's ability to build Project 22350 and Project 11356 frigates, Moscow began supplying its Black Sea Fleet with Project 21631 Buyan-M and Project 22800 Karakurt small missile ships (see photo 2). The Karakurt should gradually replace the Buyan-M and become the main missile corvette not only of the BSF, but also of Russia's Baltic and Pacific fleets.²³ While these ships have engine problems due to Western sanctions, they have become the backbone of the BSF's offensive forces and pose a threat to all countries in the region. Project 636.3 submarines equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles also keep the navies of the region on guard.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet also created a squadron of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) equipped with Forpost drones—essentially Israel-manufactured Searcher II UAVs—to conduct reconnaissance and provide targeting for anti-ship missiles and Kalibr missile systems. This provided the BSF with a full suite of reconnaissance, control, and destruction capabilities.

Since late 2015, Russia has transformed occupied Crimea into one of the key strategic bases for engaging in Syria. Moscow's Black Sea Fleet has been a major contributor to that country's hostilities. 100 Kalibr sea-launched cruise missiles Russia used for strikes in Syria, 56 were deployed from ships belonging to the BSF. BSF vessels also facilitated the transportation of military equipment, provisions, and ammunition from occupied Crimea to both the Assad regime and to Russian military bases in Tartus and Khmeimim. Russian leaders dubbed this logistical route the "Syrian Express."

From 2014 to 2022, Russia successfully established a naval force in the Black Sea that was both cost-effective and formidable, exerting control over the region and posing a direct threat to Ukraine and NATO member states. This enabled the Black Sea Fleet and occupation forces in Crimea to support the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In preparation for that invasion, in spring 2021 Russia conducted a practical assessment of its forces in Crimea, preparing them for deployment in a large-scale operation against Ukraine. It conducted comprehensive exercises involving all elements of the occupation group, including aviation, ground forces, artillery, and the surface and submarine forces of the BSF.

Several aspects of these exercises warrant particular attention. New Russian Project 636.3 submarines equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles played an active role in these drills, throughout which crews underwent training to execute missile strikes against ground targets in Ukraine. Paratroopers from the Seventh Airborne Assault Division also deployed to Crimea from Novorossiysk to practice various elements of an offensive operation, including the seizure of airfields and other strategic enemy targets. Despite the official narrative that these exercises were centered around defending the Black Sea coast from a potential enemy landing, the paratroopers were honing their skills for conducting assault operations against Ukrainian territory. Marines also were trained for amphibious landings on the Ukrainian coast.

Russia integrated these exercises into a unified, network-centric framework, which substantially enhanced the efficiency of its troop deployments. Russian media reported that Southern Military District forces, for the first time

in a field operation, had utilized automated mobile control systems across all three armies (8th, 49th, and 58th) and the coastal forces of the Caspian Flotilla and the Black Sea Fleet.



THE OCCUPATION GROUP OF RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES IN CRIMEA, 2014-22

The Naval Component of Russian Occupation Forces in Crimea

Russia's naval forces in Crimea include the surface and submarine components of the Black Sea Fleet (see map 7). Its surface craft comprise strike forces (missile and artillery ships), amphibious components (large and small landing ships), and sea-area protection vessels (anti-submarine and minesweeping ships). The naval component of Russia's forces in Crimea consists of:

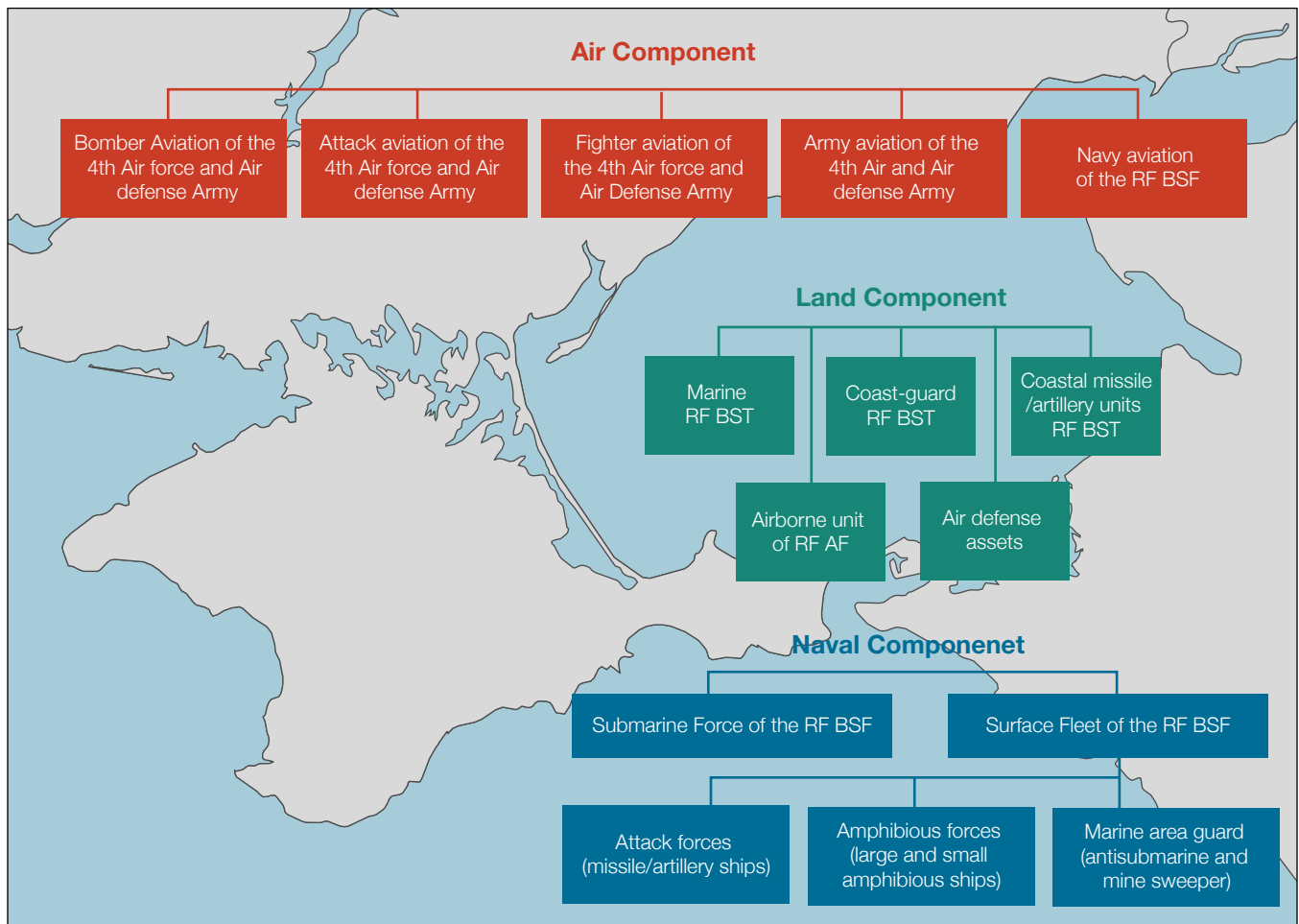
- 30th Division of Surface Ships
- 197th Landing Ship Brigade
- 41st Missile Boat Brigade
- 68th Brigade of Ships for the Sea Area Protection
- 4th Submarine Brigade

- 519th Separate Squadron of Reconnaissance Ships
- 176th Separate Squadron of Oceanographic Research Vessels
- 205th Auxiliary Fleet Detachment
- 145th Rescue Vessel Detachment
- 58th Support Vessels Group

The years 2014 and 2015 saw a notable surge in both the quantity and combat capabilities of the vessels in the Black Sea Fleet. In 2014, the fleet welcomed two new missile submarines from Project 636.3 that served as carriers for Kalibr missiles (see photo 3).

Photo: Russian army military vehicles are seen in Armyansk, Crimea, on February 25, 2022. (Photo by Stringer/AFP via Getty Images)

Map 7. Deployment of the Russian Armed Forces in the Occupied Crimea before the Beginning of Russia's Large-Scale Aggression against Ukraine.



Source: "Presentation of Quantitative Indicators of the Russian Military Presence in Crimea," Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the United Nations, March 7, 2017, <https://ukraineun.org/press-center/179-prezentatsiya-kilkisnyh-pokaznykiv-rosiyskoy-viyskovoy-prysutnosti-v-krymu/>.

In 2015, the BSF received two more new Project 636.3 missile submarines and two new Project 21631 small missile ships, all four equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles. In 2016, the fleet acquired two more Project 636.3 submarines and two Project 11356 frigates, the *Admiral Grigorovich* and *Admiral Essen*, both possessing Kalibr missiles. In 2017 the BSF received another Project 11356 missile frigate, the *Admiral Makarov*, and,

from 2018 to 2021, three more Project 21631 small missile ships. As of 2021, the Black Sea Fleet boasted 13 new missile carriers—both surface ships and submarines—with a total launch capacity of 104 cruise missiles.

The deployment of modular, containerized weapons, including Kalibr or Uran cruise missiles, on the new Project 22160 patrol

Photo 3. Project 636.3 Submarine in Sevastopol



Source: Vasya 21, "Project 636.3 Improved Kilo-Class Submarine in Sevastopol," Goodfon photo, October 12, 2016, <https://www.goodfon.ru/weapon/wallpaper-dizelnaia-podvodna-ia-loдка-636-3-proekt-sevastopol.html>.

ships facilitated an increase in the fleet's number of missile carriers. From 2014 to 2022, the BSF received four new Project 22160 ships.

The construction and production of Project 22800 (Karakurt) small missile ships faced delays, and at the commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, not a single vessel of this kind had been incorporated into the Black Sea Fleet. Only in July 2023 did the first Project 22800 ship join the fleet.²⁴

In all, from 2014 to 2022, the period dating from Moscow's annexation of Crimea to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia implemented a program to rearm its Black Sea Fleet with the most advanced ships it could acquire and placed an emphasis on strike missile capabilities.

The Land Component of Russian Occupation Forces in Crimea

After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, its 22nd Army Corps, headquartered in Simferopol as of late 2016, formed the bulk of Russian land forces on the peninsula.

The 22nd Corps included the main coastal troops of the BSF:

- 126th Separate Coastal Defense Brigade (Perevalne)
- 127th Separate Reconnaissance Brigade (Simferopol)
- 8th Artillery Regiment (Simferopol)
- 1,096th Air Defense Regiment (Sevastopol)
- 4th Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Protection Regiment (Sevastopol)

In addition, the land units of the Russian occupation forces in Crimea included:

- 810th Separate Marine Brigade (Sevastopol)
- 50th Separate Coastal Missile Brigade (Sevastopol)
- 68th Separate Marine Engineering Regiment (Yevpatoriya)
- 56th Air Assault Regiment (Feodosiya)
- Separate Airborne Assault Battalion (Dzhankoy)

The ground component of the occupation forces also included units of the Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) (see photo 4).²⁵

- 112th Separate Operational Brigade of Rosgvardia (Simferopol)
- Special Motorized Regiment of Rosgvardia (Simferopol)
- 35th Special Forces Detachment "Rus" (Simferopol)
- 42nd Separate Motorized Regiment of Rosgvardia (Sevastopol)
- 750th Separate Special Motorized Battalion of Rosgvardia (Yevpatoriya)
- 751st Separate Special-Purpose Battalion of Rosgvardia (Gaspra)
- 115th Separate Special Forces Brigade of Rosgvardia (Kerch)
- 39th Naval Detachment of Rosgvardia (Kerch)
- 144th Special Motorized Regiment of Rosgvardia (Kerch)

At the same time, the 144th Special Motorized Regiment, transferred from Feodosiya to Kerch in 2020, was assigned to protect

Photo 4. Rosgvardia Arrests Crimean Tatars in Crimea



Source: "Searches in Crimea: Five Crimean Tatars Are Accused of Organizing a Terrorist Group," *Crimea Realities*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 27, 2019, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/news-pyateryh-krymskih-tatar-obvinyaut-v-organizacii-terroristicheskoi-gruppy/29845628.html>.

the Kerch Bridge. That bridge is also guarded by the 115th Separate Special Forces Brigade and the 39th Naval Detachment.²⁶

After its illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia built an offensive force in the north of the peninsula consisting predominantly of battalion tactical units from the 7th and 76th Airborne Assault Divisions that operate on a rotational basis. Moscow also established multiple lines of field fortifications and rear areas in the north of Crimea.

The establishment of the 39th Helicopter Regiment in Dzhankoy in January 2015 presaged larger offensive operations in the region. This regiment, equipped with Mi-35, Mi-28, and Ka-52 attack helicopters and Mi-8AMTSh transport helicopters, played a crucial role in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The 97th Parachute Regiment was subsequently relocated to the same location. Russia created the second echelon of its Crimean forces in 2016–17 via the establishment of the 22nd Army Corps of the Black Sea Fleet.²⁷

The Air Component of Russian Occupation Forces in Crimea

Russia defends the skies of occupied Crimea with the 31st Air Defense Division of the Fourth Air Force and Air Defense Army of the Russian Armed Forces:

- 12th Air Defense Regiment (Sevastopol)
- 18th Air Defense Regiment (Feodosiya)
- Air Defense Squadron (Yevpatoriya)
- Air Defense Squadron (Dzhankoy)

In 2017, Moscow re-equipped the Air Defense Regiments in Sevastopol and Feodosiya with S-300 systems and the latest S-400 systems,²⁸ and re-equipped the Air Defense Squadrons in Yevpatoriya and Dzhankoy with S-400 systems in 2018 (see photo 5).²⁹

Russian air components in Crimea included units of bomber, assault, fighter, and army aviation—part of the Fourth Air Force and Air Defense Army—as well as naval aviation units from its Black Sea Fleet.

Occupation forces strengthened their aerial component through the systematic build-up and redeployment of existing units of the BSF. In July 2014, the 43rd Naval Assault Aviation Regiment relocated from the Hvardiiske airbase near Simferopol to the Saki airbase in Novofedorivka. Since 1999, the 43rd Naval Assault Aviation Regiment has been armed with Su-24M bombers. In that same year, the 37th Aviation Regiment of the Russian Air Force took shape in Hvardiiske. That new regiment included a squadron of Su-24M bombers and a squadron of Su-25SM assault aircraft.

Russia also created the 38th Fighter Aviation Regiment, armed with Su-30M2 and Su-27SM, at the Belbek airfield near Sevastopol, and transferred Su-30SM fighters to the 43rd Naval Assault Aviation Regiment at Saki (see photo 6).

With these moves, Russia constituted the aviation component of its occupation forces in Crimea:

- 43rd Naval Assault Aviation Regiment (Saki)
- 318th Separate Mixed Aviation Regiment (Kacha)
- 27th Mixed Aviation Division

Photo 5. S-400 Triumph Air Defense System in Crimea



Source: "Anti-aircraft Gunners in Crimea Received the S-400 'Triumph,'" RIA Novosti, August 12, 2016, <https://riamediabank.ru/media/948685.html>.

- 37th Mixed Aviation Regiment (Hvardiiske)
- 38th Fighter Aviation Regiment (Belbek)
- 39th Helicopter Regiment (Dzhankoy)

This aviation group can perform combat missions. It received new Su-30SM fighters, upgraded Su-27SM and Su-24M bombers, and Su-25SM assault aircraft, in January 2015. The 39th Helicopter Regiment also possesses Ka-52, Mi-28N, and Mi-8AMTSh helicopters.

Russia paid special attention to building up its missile capabilities in occupied Crimea. In March and April 2014, it deployed Bastion coastal missile systems equipped with Oniks cruise missiles boasting a range of almost 500 miles. These systems were specifically designed for striking surface ships and land targets. Simultaneously, Russia augmented its deployment by introducing a Bal coastal missile system armed with Kh-35 anti-ship missiles, which have a range of up to 160 miles. The Bal missile system squadron became part of the newly established Fifteenth Coastal Missile Brigade. Immediately after the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the Soviet-era Utes coastal missile system, located near Cape Aya in the Balaklava district of Sevastopol, was restored with anti-ship Progress missiles possessing a range of up to 285 miles.

In November 2014, Russia placed its first Iskander-M tactical missile systems, accompanied by ballistic missiles, in occupied Crimea. Iskander-K systems equipped with cruise missiles were soon to follow.

Moscow also deployed Tu-22M3 long-range bombers to the Hvardiiske airbase near Simferopol,³⁰ intended to serve as Russia's response to NATO's efforts to strengthen its eastern front. The Kremlin designed the Tu-22M3 aircraft to carry the latest modifications of Kh-32, Kh-101, and Kh-555 cruise missiles and Kh-47 Kinzhal³¹ aeroballistic missiles, thus posing a threat to important facilities in NATO countries. Russian leaders emphasized that the Tu-22M3 could also serve as a nuclear weapons carrier that could threaten the whole of Europe from its base in Crimea. To ensure infrastructure support for the basing of its Tu-22M3 long-range bombers, Moscow ordered the repair and modernization of runways at airbases in Hvardiiske, Belbek, and Dzhankoy.

Russia also may have enhanced its missile capabilities even further by deploying nuclear weapons in Crimea. From March to May 2014, the Russian military assumed control and conducted inspections of the Feodosia-13 facility, a key Soviet-era nuclear weapons storage and maintenance base.³² In January 2015, Moscow created the Crimean territorial department of the Twelfth Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff to ensure the storage, transportation, and disposal of nuclear units for tactical and ballistic missiles. As early as April 2015, cargo labeled with "nuclear danger" signs was spotted moving toward the peninsula from Rostov-on-Don. Earlier, similar cargo had repeatedly been identified near the city of Sudak. In 2016, the InformNapalm international intelligence community noted the presence of members of the Russian National Guard and servicemen from chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) units at the former Feodosia-13 nuclear armory in the Kyzyltash area near Sudak.³³

If these reports are accurate, they provide evidence that Moscow violated bilateral treaties between Ukraine and Russia

Photo 6. Su-30SM Aircraft of the 43rd Naval Assault Aviation Regiment of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Saki, Crimea



Source: "The Black Sea Fleet Air Regiment in Crimea Received Another Su-30SM Fighter," Top War, October 2, 2016, <https://topwar.ru/101499-aviapolk-chf-v-krymu-poluchil-ocherednoy-istrebitel-su-30sm.html>.

obliging the Kremlin to keep its Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine free of nuclear weapons. Regardless, Russia had kept systems capable of carrying nuclear weapons in Crimea even before 2014: the missile systems of the *Moskva* cruiser and of the missile ships of the BSF; Su-24M and Be-12 aircraft; and Ka-27 helicopters. Moscow's currently deployed Bastion and Iskander missile systems and ships and submarines carrying Kalibr missiles are also capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

The Industrial and Economic Militarization of Crimea

While Moscow militarized occupied Crimea and strengthened its capabilities there, it also reconfigured seized Ukrainian military enterprises to produce weapons and military equipment and repair the ships and aircraft of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Occupying forces created shipbuilding, ship repair, and aircraft repair bases using the infrastructure of seized Ukrainian facilities.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, highlighting the significance of the "efficient utilization of the production and techno-

logical capabilities of Crimea's defense industry," declared on April 4, 2014, his plans to allocate defense orders to enterprises on the occupied peninsula. As of April 2014, the Russian Ministry of Defense had identified 23 Ukrainian enterprises to be used for occupiers' interests.³⁴

During the first months of its illegal occupation of Crimea, Russia seized all Ukrainian defense enterprises for its own use. Most were assigned to Russian "curators," or specialized Russian military-industrial plants and companies, tasked with the division of orders and modernization of enterprises.³⁵

The Monitoring Group of the Black Sea Institute for Strategic Studies and the *Black Sea News* together recorded 59 Russian companies working with enterprises seized from Ukroboronprom, a Ukrainian defense industry company. A total of 149 Russian companies seized Crimean plants for military production. These include:³⁶

- The Leningrad Oblast-based Pella OJSC Shipyard became the "curator" and subsequently the lessee of the state-owned Ukrainian More shipyard in Feodosia, Crimea. After occupying the peninsula, Russian forces seized the More Shipyard and expropriated it to Russian federal ownership. Owners of the Russian Pella Shipyard used the captured plant to build three 22800 project Karakurt missile corvettes.
- The Zelenodolsk Gorky Plant JSC, from Russia's Republic of Tatarstan, seized the Ukrainian Zaliv shipyard in Kerch, where it implemented several shipbuilding programs for the Russian Navy: the construction of patrol missile ships for Project 22160; the production of missile corvettes for Project 22800 (Karakurt) (see photo 7); the assembly of warships for Project 15310 (Kabel); the fabrication of military tankers for Project 23131; and the manufacture of landing ships for Project 23900.
- Russia's Ministry of Industry and Trade assigned the Moscow-based United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) PJSC as a curator of the Ukrainian state-owned Yevpatoria Aircraft Repair Plant.

Photo 7. The New Ship Cyclon of the 22800 Karakurt Project at the Zaliv Plant in Occupied Crimea, July 25, 2020



Source: "In Crimea, the Small Missile Ship Cyclone Was Launched," *Crimea News*, July 25, 2020, <https://crimea-news.com/society/2020/07/25/681708.html>.

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- Russian Helicopters JSC, another Moscow-based consortium, was assigned as curator of the Ukrainian Sevastopol Aviation Enterprise, which was later de facto integrated into the Russian Helicopters holding.

- Technodynamics JSC, a leading Russian developer and manufacturer of aviation equipment, was assigned as curator of the Ukrainian enterprise Research Institute of Aeroelastic Systems in Feodosia, which was later transformed into a joint-stock company and subsumed into Technodynamics JSC.
- Aircraft Repair Plant 121 JSC, a leading Russian company that repairs and modernizes aircraft and aircraft engines, established a separate subdivision, the Saki Service Centre 121 ARZ, at the Yevpatoria Aircraft Repair Plant site in Novofedorivka.

Between 2014 and 2021, Russia fundamentally reshaped the defense industry in Crimea. Its military-industrial base now caters to Russian units stationed in the occupied territory. After an initial phase in which factories received significant orders to produce new equipment, particularly in shipyards, military enterprises shifted their focus—in part due to Western sanctions—toward the repair and maintenance of Black Sea Fleet ships. Crimean military enterprises are now actively involved in the repair and maintenance of Russian military aircraft, helicopters, air defense missile systems, and coastal cruise missiles.



RUSSIA'S USE OF HYBRID METHODS TO DOMINATE THE BLACK SEA

After its illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia began using hybrid methods to establish dominance of the Black Sea region.

Obstructing Freedom of Navigation in the Kerch Strait

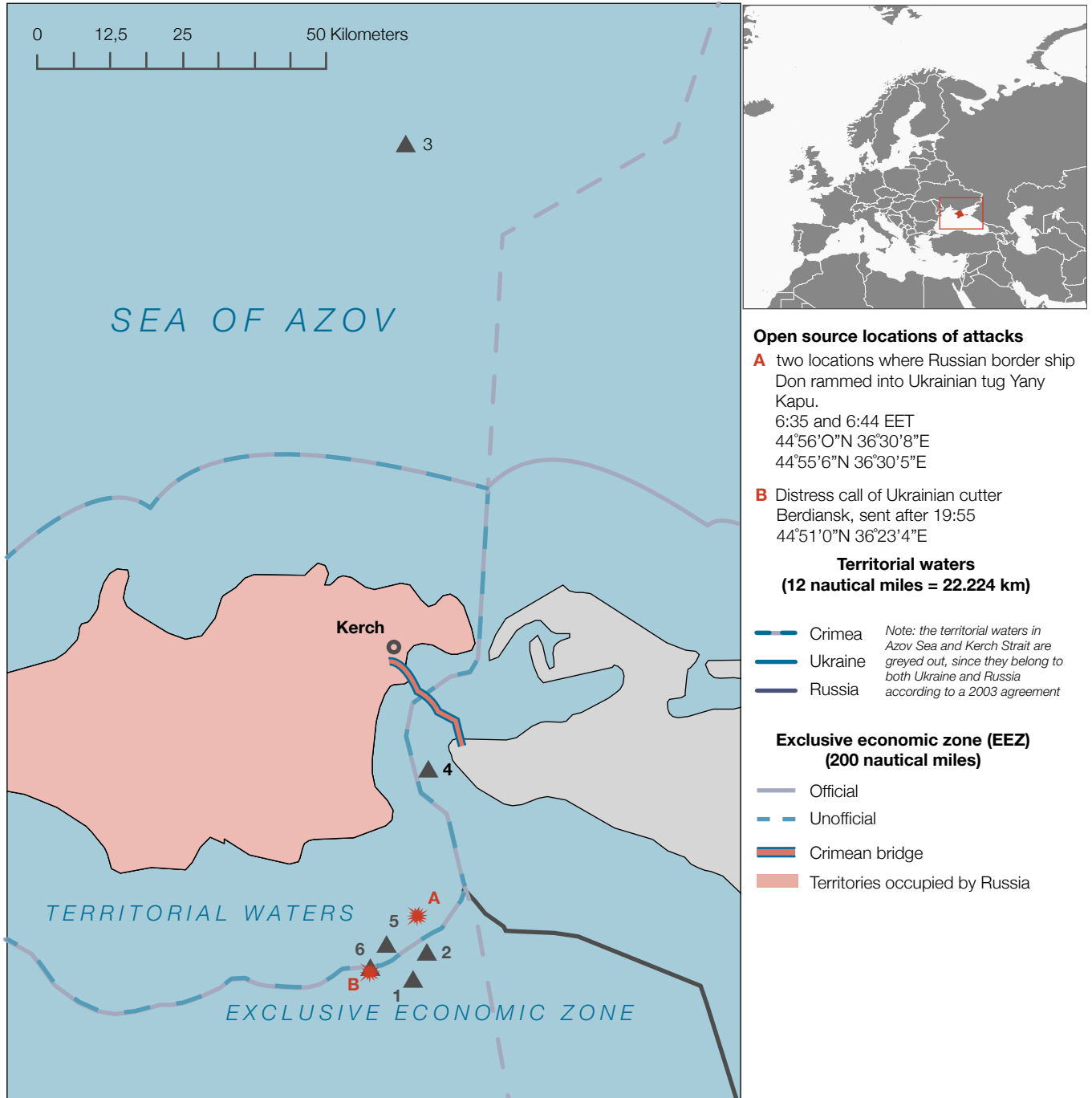
After 2014, Russia declared the Kerch Strait, the narrow slice of water connecting the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, to be part of Russia's "internal waters." Since then, Moscow has exercised complete navigational and military control over the strait, despite its international status. Furthermore, Russia enforced a ban on passage through the strait for any warships, including those from Ukraine, and imposed continuous intrusive inspections on commercial vessels bound for Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov.

From May to June 2018, following the construction of the Kerch Bridge, Russia also instituted routine and extensive inspections of all ships plying the strait. The Kremlin justified these inspections by citing the potential presence of sabotage groups and explosives on ships departing Ukrainian ports intent on harming the newly completed bridge.

A Russian attack on Ukrainian warships attempting to transit the Kerch Strait on November 25, 2018, served as a turning

Photo: The Liberia-flagged bulk carrier *Asl Tia* on November 2, 2022, transits the Bosphorus Strait carrying 39,000 metric tons of sunflower meal from Ukraine after Russia rejoined the Black Sea Grain Agreement. (Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

Map 8. Map of the Russian attack against Ukrainian Warships near the Kerch Strait on November 25, 2018



Source: Alya Shandra, "Ukrainian Prosecutors Publish Reconstruction of Russian Attack on Ukrainian Ships in Black Sea," Euromaidan Press, August 12, 2018, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2018/12/07/ukraine-prosecutors-show-reconstruction-of-russian-attack-on-ukrainian-vessels-near-kerch-strait/>.

Photo 8. Ships Waiting for Permission to Pass through the Kerch Strait Due to the Russian Blockade, 2018



Source: Olena Yurchenko, "The Kerch Strait and Russia's Threats: What Ukraine Should Prepare For," *Crimea Realities*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 6, 2020, <https://ua.krymr.com/a/kerchenska-protoka-i-zahroza-rosii-do-choho-hotuvatysia-ukraini/30421145.html>.

point.³⁷ A Russian tanker in the vicinity of the strait obstructed the Ukrainian vessels' path, impeding passage beneath the bridge. The Ukrainian craft then found itself under attack from both the Russian Navy and the Russian Coast Guard. Russian forces forcefully rammed the tugboat *Yany Kapu*, and strafed artillery escort boats with gunfire. Russia seized all three warships and captured 24 Ukrainian sailors, six of whom sustained injuries (see map 8). Russia repatriated the sailors in September 2019 and returned the ships in November 2019.

While Kyiv obtained the release of its sailors and ships, the incident demonstrated that the international community was ill prepared to counter Russia's efforts to establish dominance in the Black and Azov Seas. During the years before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow regularly varied the duration and intensity of its detentions and inspections to avoid lawsuits from ship owners and prevent stronger sanctions.

The Monitoring Group of the Institute for Black Sea Strategic Studies and *Black Sea News* reported that Russia imposed a de facto blockade of the Kerch Strait for ships traveling to Ukrainian

ports in the Sea of Azov starting in May 2018 (see photo 8).³⁸ In the second half of 2018, the average wait time for passage through the Kerch Strait ranged from 80 to 115 hours. Russia only reduced this wait time in December 2018 in the face of Western threats to hit Moscow with the "Azov package" of international sanctions against its ports in the Azov and Black Seas and restrict construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

Accordingly, in 2019 the wait to transit the strait averaged 37.4 hours, and in 2020 dropped even further to 29.6 hours. Between November 2020 and April 2021, however, the wait time rose again, to 53 hours. The longest delays for vessels wishing to exit the Sea of Azov occurred in the first half of April 2021: 220 hours, or almost 10 days.

That month, not coincidentally, saw the Russian military deploy significant forces and equipment to the peninsula during military exercises in southern Russia and occupied Crimea. From 2014 to 2022, Russia established its own regime of navigation in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov, completely ignoring international maritime law in the process.

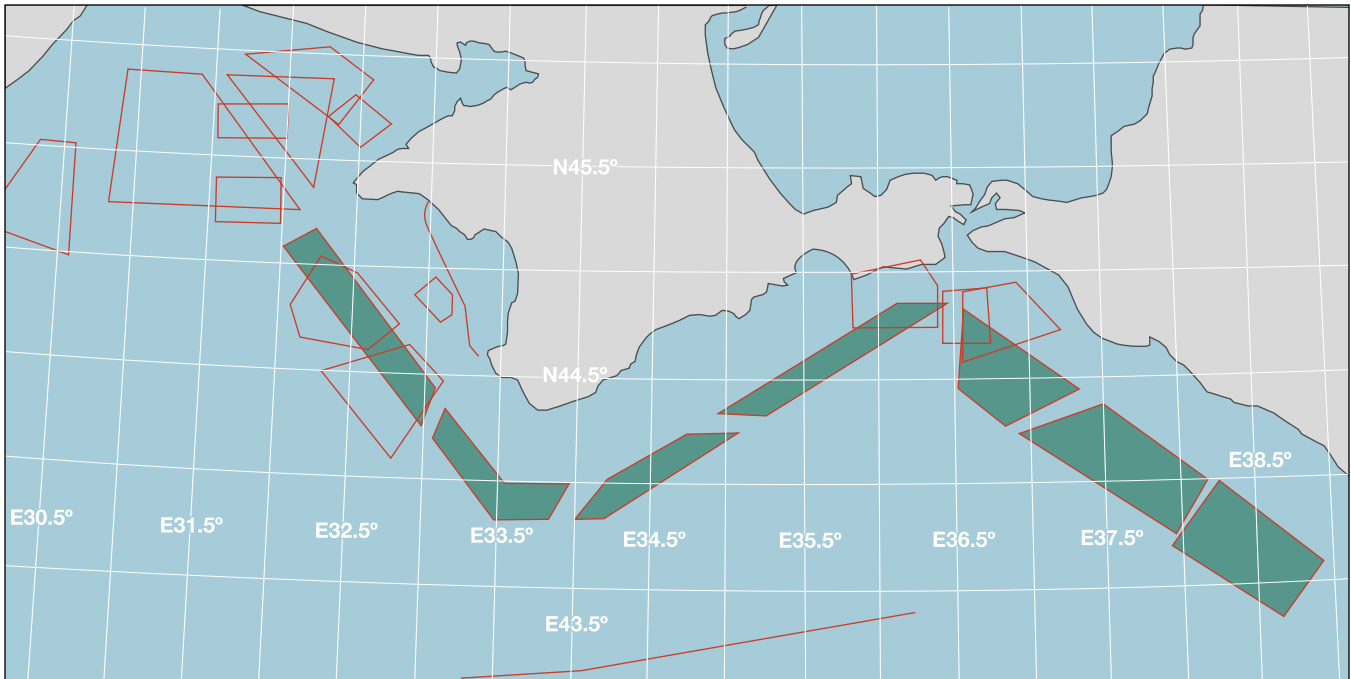
Using Military Exercises as a Pretext to Block the Black Sea

Russia has imposed its own no-go zones for international shipping, blocking freedom of navigation through the Black Sea for long periods of time and hindering the commercial interests of the region's littoral countries.

The Monitoring Group of the Institute for Black Sea Strategic Studies and *Black Sea News* reported that in September 2020 Russia used the pretext of military exercises to close almost the entire maritime perimeter of the occupied peninsula outside the so-called 12-mile zone (see map 9).³⁹

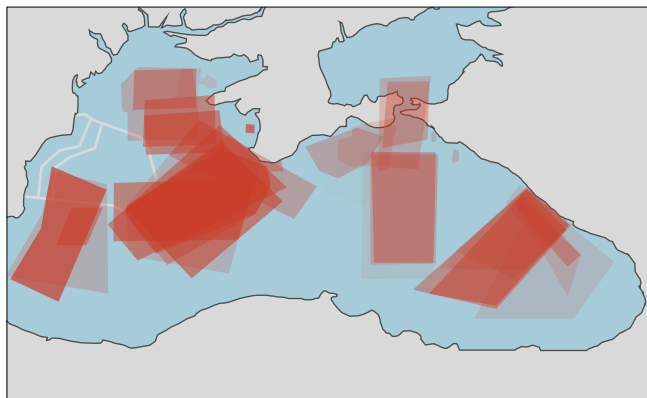
The perimeter around Crimea remained closed for almost three months, from September 17 until December 9, 2020. Russia then began to pull the same stunt regularly. The inter-

Map 9. The Black Sea around Occupied Crimea, with Areas Closed by Russia under the Pretext of Exercises as of September 21, 2020



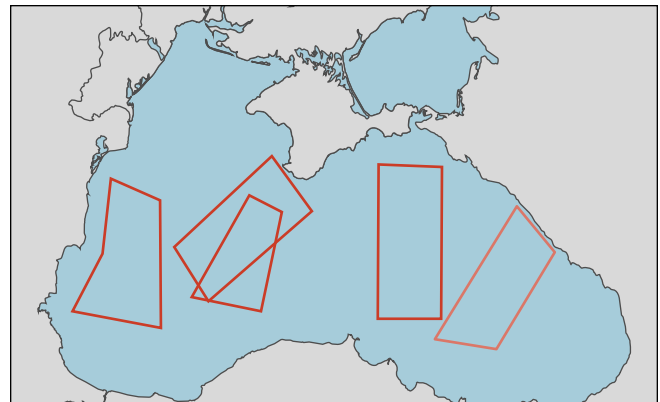
Source: Source: Andrii Klymenko, Tetyana Guchakova, and Olha Korbut, "Security Risks in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov in 2021," Black Sea News, January 9, 2021, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/183685>.

Map 10. Areas of the Black Sea in Which the Russian Federation Conducted Military Exercises in 2019



Source: New Strategy Center.

Map 11. Perimeters Blocked by Russia, July–August 2019



Source: Andrii Klymenko, "A 'Russian Lake': The Nine Aspects of the Current Situation in the Black Sea," Black Sea News, August 4, 2019, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/153503>.

national community was unable to counteract the maneuver as Russia, like other Black Sea littoral states, had the right to close its exclusive economic zone for exercises to ensure safe navigation. But Moscow openly abused this right, posing threats to commercial vessels and blocking regular shipping for long periods of time.

Since 2018, Russia has not only restricted the perimeter of Crimea but has also exhibited a pattern of aggressive behavior in numerous areas of the Black Sea region.

This assertiveness peaked in July and August 2019 (see maps 10 and 11), when Russia used the pretext of naval exercises to effectively close off a significant quarter of the Black Sea. This affected trade and maritime traffic not only in the Black Sea but also in the Sea of Azov.

Consequences: Crimea – The First Leg of Russia’s 2022 War Strategy

The illegal occupation of Crimea changed the situation in the Black Sea region radically from 2014 to 2021, transforming it into a theater of war.

Russia leveraged Crimea as an armed stronghold to establish regional military dominance. Its consolidation of missile strike capabilities on the occupied peninsula gave Moscow an unparalleled military and strategic advantage in the Black Sea, extending its influence over the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Russian forces in Crimea now pose a threat to all BSR states, including NATO members. Moscow’s military behavior reflects its ambition to dismantle the norms of international maritime law that have historically

governed the body of water and institute its own order in the Black Sea.

Russia’s military prowess, aggressiveness against Ukrainian naval and civilian vessels, and application of hybrid measures have established a new normal in the Black Sea. The international community, including NATO, acquiesced to Russia asserting dominance over large portions of the region. Moscow’s establishment of an extensive A2/AD zone in the region extended its military control and diminished the abilities of the area’s littoral states and NATO nations to safeguard their military, strategic, geopolitical, and economic interests.

Russia also has imposed limitations on navigation and freedom of commercial shipping, compelling the global community and international organizations, including specialized maritime groups, to acknowledge that Moscow has exploited loopholes in international law to undermine stability with impunity.

Russia’s arbitrary ship inspections and blockage of maritime perimeters have increased shipping and insurance costs and obstructed Ukraine’s exports and imports via the Black Sea. Moscow’s actions also have diminished global food security, as Ukraine, a key player in the global cereals market, is particularly vulnerable to its tactics. The Kremlin’s weaponization of Ukrainian food exports has had alarming international consequences, instigating social crises across Africa and the Middle East. By manipulating the flow of essential commodities, Russia has leveraged its control over vital trade routes to sow global instability. By using the hybrid tactics it honed from 2014 to 2021, the Kremlin has been more effective in prosecuting its war against Ukraine.



THE BATTLE FOR THE BLACK SEA DURING TWO YEARS OF WAR

Since the Kremlin launched its full-scale war against Ukraine, it has removed all doubt that it seeks to occupy the country fully. In the lead-up to its invasion, Moscow examined options for dividing Ukraine into several puppet states that could destabilize eastern and southeastern Europe.

Depriving Ukraine of access to the Black Sea has been one of Russia's main objectives. A Ukraine shut off from the Black and Azov Seas would be limited in its economic, logistical, energy, and security capabilities. Russia's occupation of Ukraine's littoral regions would make the country dependent on the Kremlin and make it easier for Russia to eradicate Ukraine as a state.

Russia's occupation of Ukraine's Black Sea and Azov littorals would solidify its dominant role in the region and extend its influence into

the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East. With control over Crimea, the ports of Odesa, Izmail, Ochakiv, Mykolaiv, Kherston, and the Sea of Azov, Russia would establish direct military dominance over much of the Black Sea. This would create a hostile military and strategic environment for NATO member states, making it even more difficult for them to uphold international maritime law and pursue their security, economic, energy, and other interests.

That is why, on February 24, 2022, Russia sought to quickly occupy Ukrainian territory on the Black and Azov Seas with rapid attacks in key areas and amphibious assaults designed

Photo: A soldier stands guard over the Odesa Opera and Ballet Theater on March 14, 2022, in Ukraine. (Photo by Scott Peterson/Getty Images)

to block Ukraine from the sea and deprive it of its maritime territory.

The Kremlin initially thought this would be easy. Its dominance of the Black Sea since 2014 had gone largely unchallenged. The Ukrainian Navy's inability to form a new fleet based on promising principles like the mosquito model⁴⁰ forced Kyiv to confront Russia with limited capabilities—mostly old Soviet-era ships and a few new boats that were no match for the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Indeed, before 2022 Ukraine had been studying ways to build a new navy. Kyiv's "Strategy of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2035,"⁴¹ published in 2019, demonstrated vision but failed to provide a framework for countering Russia in the Black Sea. Its timeframe for implementation also was unrealistic.

Meanwhile, NATO acted within the framework of passive deterrence against Russia. It signaled its intent to respond with force if NATO members were threatened but avoided escalation and involvement in a direct conflict with Moscow. NATO also did not adopt a separate strategy for the Black Sea or decide on a permanent presence in the region.

Russia's Attack on the Black Sea Theater of Operations

Russia began preparations to invade mainland Ukraine from Crimea immediately after occupying the peninsula and attacking the Donbas in 2014. The Kremlin created an offensive grouping of forces in the north of Crimea, consisting of a ground component (the 97th Parachute Regiment, with battalion task forces of the 7th and 76th Airborne Assault Divisions) and a helicopter component (the 39th Helicopter Regiment in Dzhankoy, with Mi-35, Mi-28, Ka-52, and Mi-8AMTSh helicopters). In 2016 and 2017, the 22nd Army Corps became the second echelon of Russia's offensive forces in Crimea. Moscow also created aviation, naval, and mis-

Photo 9. A Symbolic Depiction of the Attack by the Missile Cruiser Moskva on Snake Island and the Resistance of the Ukrainian Garrison



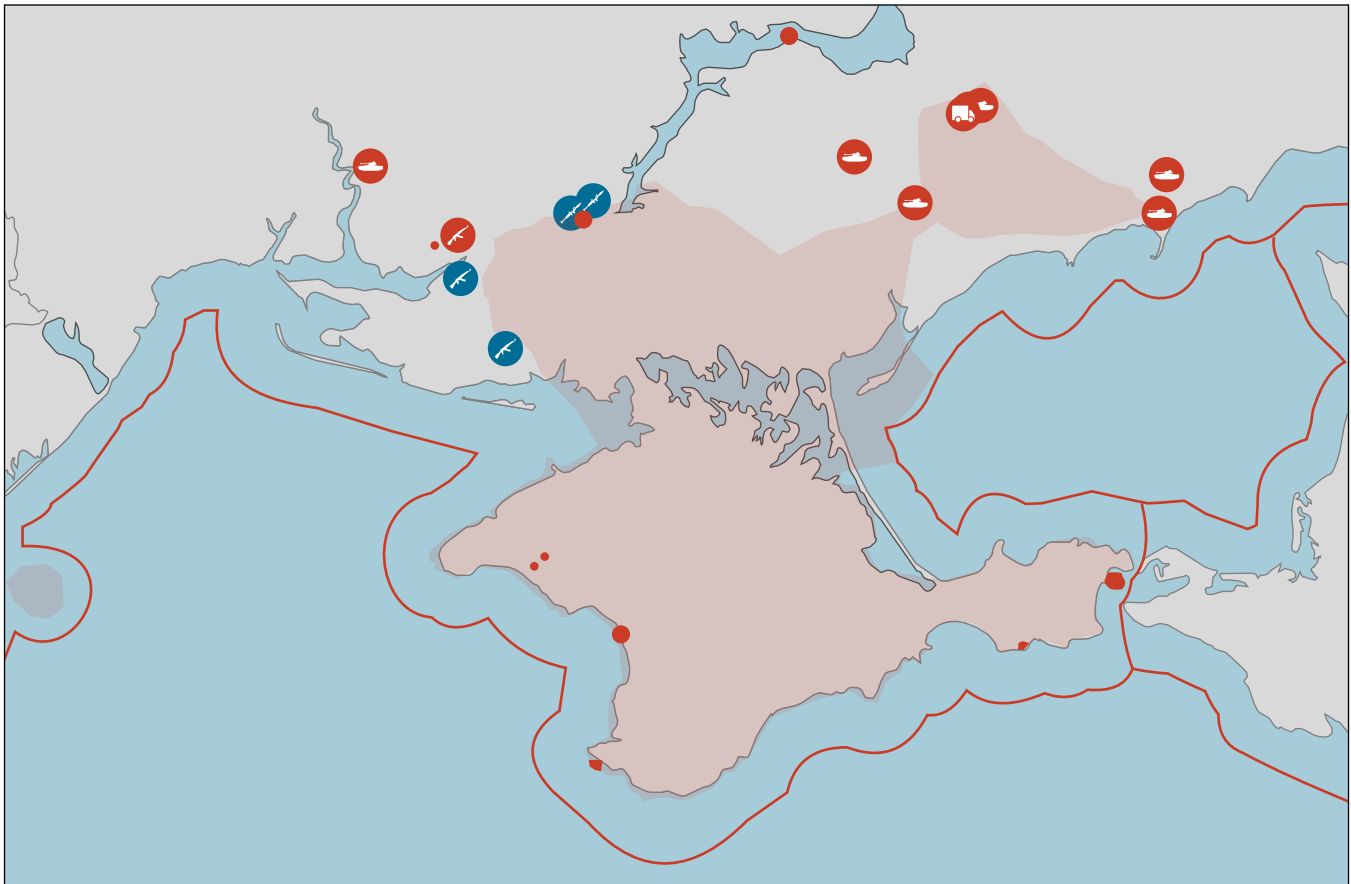
Source: Boris Groh, *Russian Warship, Go Fuck Yourself*, 2022, offset printing, <https://archive.org/details/russian-warship-go-fuck-yourself/y-Borys%20Grokh.jpeg>.

sile components of the occupation group with a pronounced offensive character.

On February 24, 2022, Russian troops concentrated in Crimea—including additional troops deployed from the Southern Military District in cooperation with units and formations of the Eighth and 58th Combined Arms Armies and the Fourth Air Force and Air Defense Army—broke through Ukrainian defenses on the Crimean isthmus. Russian forces advanced towards Melitopol, Berdiansk, and Mariupol to the east and Nova Kakhovka, Kherson, and Mykolaiv to the west. Ukrainian forces held the line in heavy defensive battles on the outskirts of Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia (see map 12).

From naval bases and staging points in Krasnodar and occupied Crimea, Russia's Black Sea Fleet established a naval blockade of Ukraine, isolating areas of combat operations from the sea, facilitating the actions of its ground forces, and conducting missile strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure. Russia also formed a naval strike group containing up to five frigate or corvette warships equipped with Kalibr missiles in the northwest

Map 12. Situation in the Southern Operational Area as of February 25, 2022



Source: "Ukraine," interactive graphic, Live Universal Awareness Map, <https://liveuamap.com/>.

Note: Red dots represent Russian units, and blue dots represent Ukrainian units.

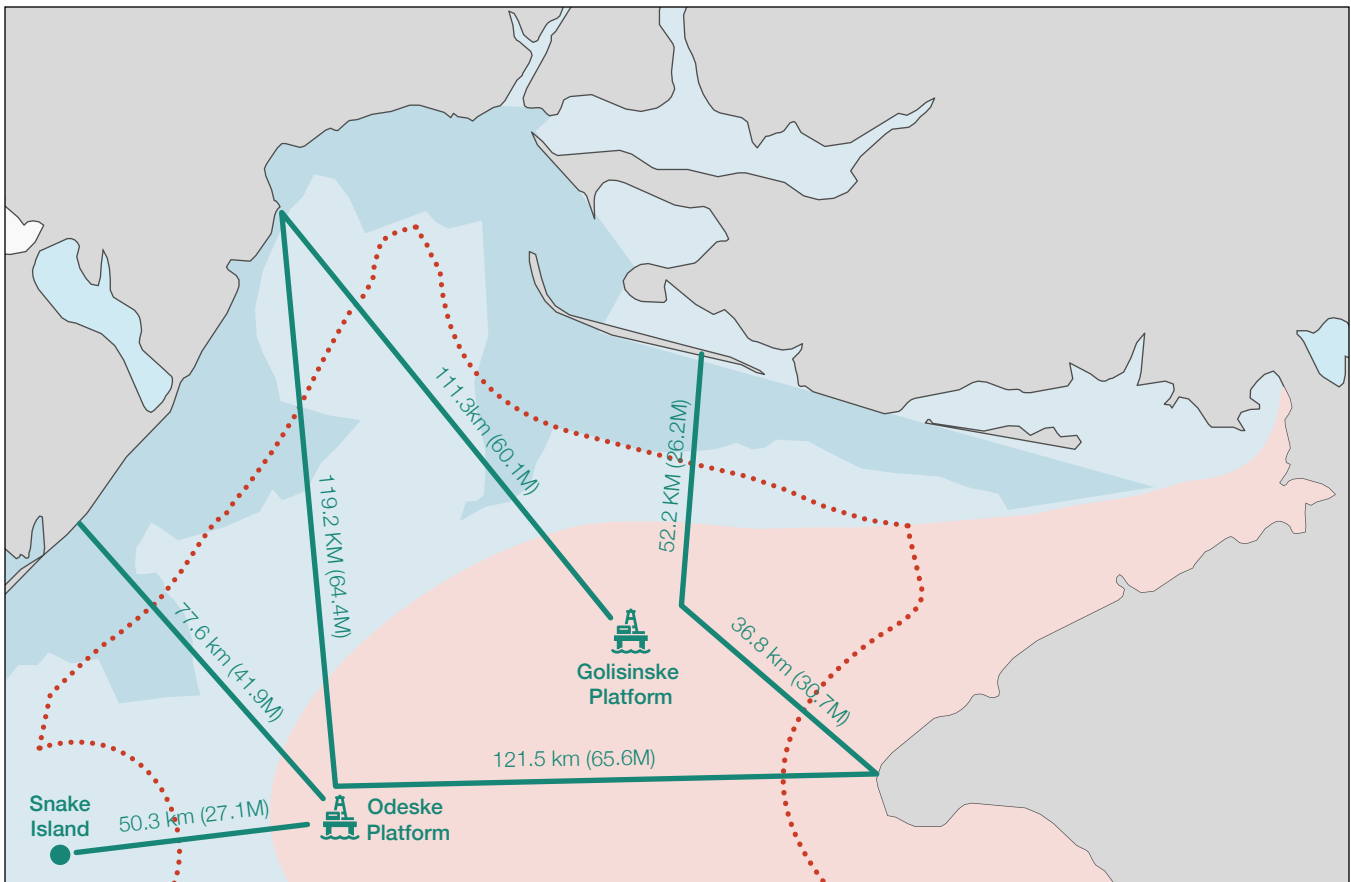
of the sea, supported by Project 636 submarines armed also with Kalibrs.

Russian naval forces then moved to occupy Snake Island. On February 24, 2022, the missile cruiser *Moskva*, the frigate *Admiral Essen*, and the patrol ship *Vasily Bykov* of the Black Sea Fleet approached the island and gave the Ukrainian garrison an ultimatum to surrender.⁴² The garrison's response—exhorting the Russian seamen, in so many words, to engage in coitus with themselves—became a legendary exemplar of resistance

to Russian aggression for the entire Ukrainian nation (see photo 9). After the garrison refused to surrender, Russian aircraft, along with the missile cruiser *Moskva* and the corvette *Vasily Bykov*, attacked the island, captured it, destroyed its infrastructure, and took the entire garrison captive.

The Kremlin then imposed a complete blockade on navigation in the northwest Black Sea under the pretext of a counter-terrorist operation. To facilitate its blockade, Russian forces used Snake Island and several Ukrainian gas drilling platforms seized

Map 13. Distances between Important Points in the Northwestern Part of the Black Sea, including between Snake Island and the Seized Drilling Platforms



Source: Andrii Klymenko, Tetyana Guchakova, and Olha Korbut, "Security Risks in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov in 2021," Black Sea News, January 9, 2021, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/183685>.

in 2014 as bases for special forces and reconnaissance and surveillance equipment. Roughly 30 miles separated Snake Island and these drilling platforms, allowing Russia to restrict Black Sea access to Ukraine and block Ukrainian maritime communications (see map 13).

On February 26, 2022, Russia disseminated a message through shipping channels that "the presence of ships and vessels in the area will be regarded as a terrorist threat."⁴³ Making good on its

threat, on the same day Russia seized the civilian rescue ship *Sapphire* near Snake Island as the vessel was attempting to evacuate Ukrainian military personnel.⁴⁴ This allowed Moscow to establish a blockade of Ukraine from the sea and full control over the adjacent waters.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet then conducted amphibious landings in several areas, prioritizing the coast near Odesa. A group of four or five large amphibious assault ships from Projects 775

Map 14. Possible Landing Areas for Russian Troops on the Black Sea Coast of Ukraine



Source: New Geopolitics Research Network analysis.

and 1171 of Russia's Black Sea, Baltic, and Northern Fleets stationed off the coast of Odesa was directed to land as soon as Russian ground forces broke through Ukrainian defenses around Mykolaiv (see map 14).

Russian troops also eyed landings in the areas of Prymorske, Rozivka, Lebedivka, the Budatska Spit, and Karolino-Bugaz that would enable them to cut Ukraine off from the Danube area and Bessarabia and launch an offensive toward the Transnistrian region of Moldova to unite with breakaway Russian forces there. Moscow likely hoped to use the Transnistrian Budjak, the territory between the mouth of the Danube and the estuary of the Dniester River, as a staging ground for operations into Ukraine and Moldova.

The Kremlin intended its operations near the Danube and on Snake Island to be starting points for its special operations forces, marines, air defenses, intelligence services, and electronic

warfare efforts. From Snake Island, Russia hoped to project power into Ukraine and Moldova.

It is likely that Russia also aimed to use Snake Island as a platform for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and electronic warfare efforts against Romania and NATO. The island lies approximately 23 miles from the Romanian port of Sulina and 100 miles from Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase, the headquarters for US forces deployed on the western coast of the Black Sea. The island could play an important role in a blockade of the mouth of the Danube, as any power holding it could close all naval traffic to and from the Ukrainian ports of Reni and Izmail and the Romanian port of Sulina.

While Ukraine recaptured Snake Island in June 2022, both Ukraine and Romania would have major security problems were it to fall back under Russian control considering the major gas

reserves located south of the island, in the Romanian exclusive economic zone. Possession of the island would offer Russia a valuable platform from which to threaten not only freedom of navigation, but also the platforms that extract energy resources from the Black Sea.

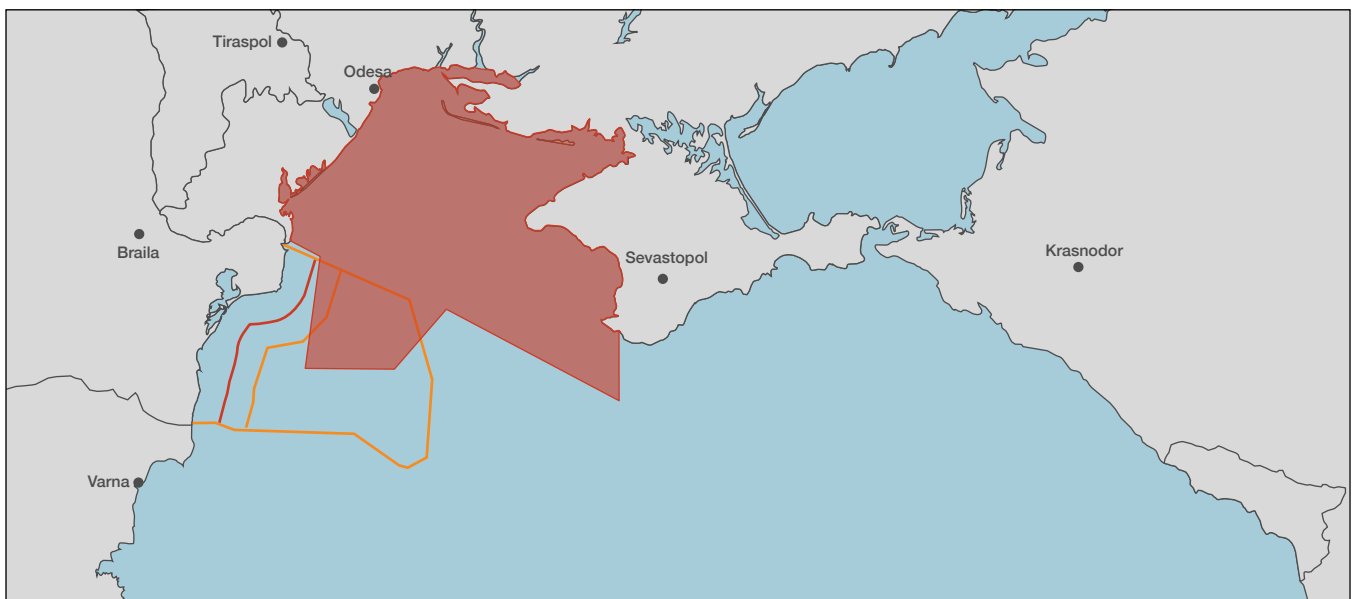
Lessons Learned from Russia's Use of Hybrid Tactics, 2014–22

After implementing its naval blockade of the Black Sea, Russia barred access to a significant segment of Romania's exclusive economic zone and contiguous zone (see map 15). This blockade lasted for several months, with Russia maintaining a naval presence in Romania's EEZ throughout that time. Between February 24 and August 1, 2022, no ship could leave Ukrainian ports. Only when the UN, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine negotiated the Black Sea Grain Initiative were ships allowed to enter the Port of Odesa from August 1, 2022.

In 2021, Ukrainian ports in the Odesa region handled 7,626 ships with a total cargo volume of 107.18 million tons, of which 81.99 million tons were designated for export.⁴⁵ As the fifth-largest global exporter of grain, Ukraine heavily relies on its ports; Russia's blockade of those facilities on the Black and Azov Seas hit Kyiv with an estimated daily economic loss of \$170 million.

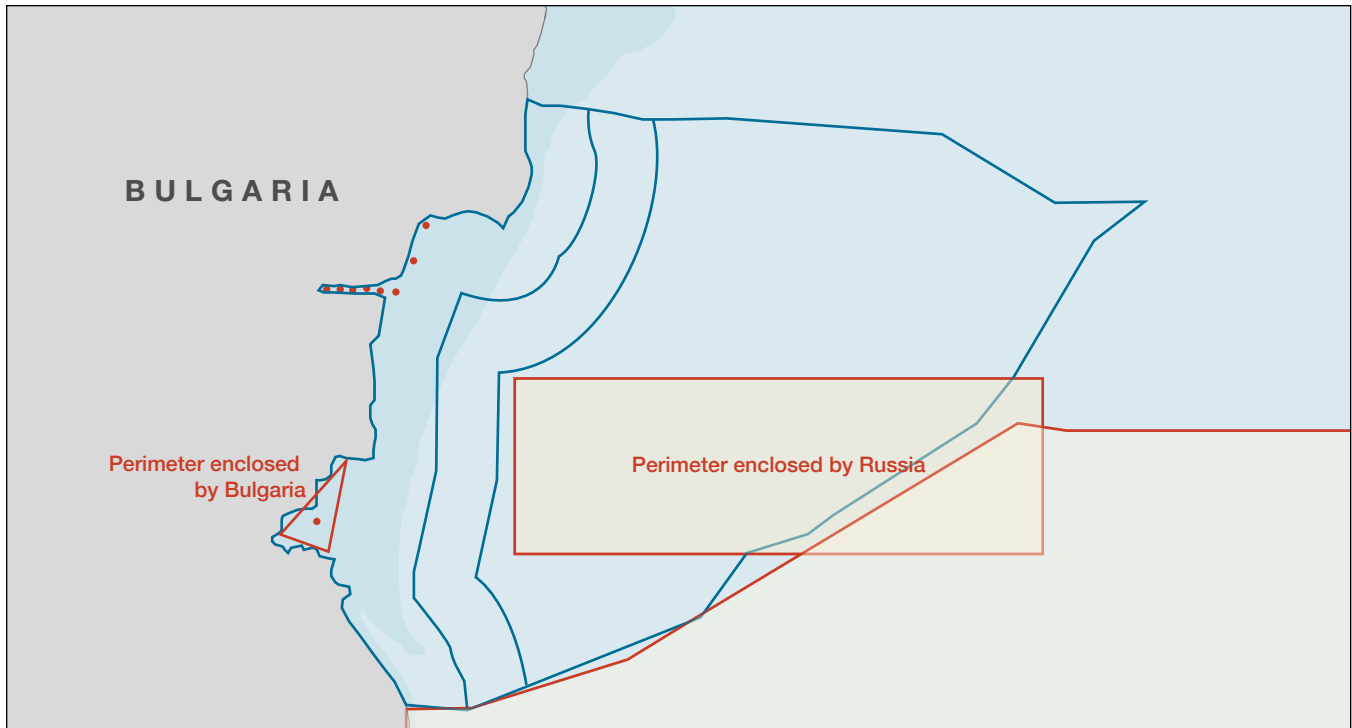
On July 18, 2023, the day after Russia withdrew from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, its Black Sea Fleet blockaded a significant area within Bulgaria's EEZ and deployed three corvettes to obstruct and intimidate ships originating from the Odesa region. Russia's Shipping Safety Service stated that the Russian Navy would continue to conduct missile and artillery firing exercises in the region, a practice Moscow frequently employed prior to February 2022. Russia blocked a perimeter in the Bulgarian EEZ until mid-December 2023 to

Map 15. Blockade Imposed by the Russian Federation in 2022 in Ukrainian Waters and the EEZ and Contiguous Zone of Romania



Source: New Strategy Center.

Map 16. Bulgarian EEZ Naval Blockade in 2023–24



Source: Screenshot from the Black Sea Maritime Coordination Element in Lyubomir Gigov, "Russia Extends Black Sea Temporary Warning Area Notification until August 19," Bulgarian News Agency, August 10, 2023, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/504432-russia-extends-black-sea-temporary-warning-area-notification-until-august-19>.

Note: From left to right, the first blue line represents the extent of Bulgaria's territorial waters; the second represents the extent of Bulgaria's contiguous zone; the third represents the extent of Bulgaria's EEZ.

harass naval traffic between Odesa and Istanbul, on multiple occasions placing two naval vessels there to pressure commercial ships (see map 16).⁴⁶

In August 2023, Russian forces unlawfully intercepted the *Sukru Okan*, a commercial vessel flying the flag of Palau and owned by Turkey, as it sailed to the Ukrainian port city of Izmail. The Kremlin justified its interference on the pretext of an inspection for prohibited materials. The Russian inspection ship employed warning shots to compel the Turkish vessel to halt, and a helicopter facilitated boarding by Russian soldiers, who conducted a thorough search.⁴⁷

Russia persistently employed this tactic, progressively encompassing larger areas and involving more extended blockades. The Kremlin seemed to be conditioning the international community to accept a new normal in the Black Sea, in which Moscow dictated other nations' usage of the water. It aimed to demonstrate that international law could no longer function effectively in the region.

The Maritime Domain Since Ukraine's Recapture of Snake Island

Ukraine's recapture of Snake Island on June 30, 2022, marked the beginning of Kyiv's efforts to end Moscow's blockade, free

Photo 10. The Damaged Missile Cruiser Moskva before Sinking



Source: OSINTtechnical (@Osinttechnical), "Reportedly the Moskva on 4/15," X photo, April 17, 2022, 6:22 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Bormanlke/status/1515816220393713665>.

Photo 11. Ukrainian Soldiers Plant the National Flag on Snake Island in the Black Sea, July 7, 2022



Source: *Soldiers Raise the Ukrainian National Flag on Snake Island, July 2022*, Ukrainian government photo via Wikimedia Commons, July 7, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_Island_campaign#/media/File:Snake_Island,_2022-07-07_\(03\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_Island_campaign#/media/File:Snake_Island,_2022-07-07_(03).jpg).

the northwestern Black Sea from a Russian naval presence, and prepare for liberating Crimea. The Ukrainian Armed Forces executed these operations without naval support, relying on asymmetric options, precision strike capabilities, and advanced technologies.

Ukraine began its efforts to recapture Snake Island on April 13, 2022, when it destroyed the Russian missile cruiser *Moskva*, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and the most powerful ship in the region (see photo 10). Open-source intelligence indicates that a Ukrainian Navy Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) initiated the attack on the *Moskva*, targeting and distracting the vessel's crew while Neptune cruise missiles delivered the decisive blow. Two Neptune missiles hit the port side of the missile cruiser, causing a fire and destroying and eventually sinking the ship.⁴⁸

Immediately afterward, Russia deployed additional air defense systems to Snake Island to replace the air defense umbrella the *Moskva* had provided. On May 2, 2022, another Bayraktar UAV destroyed two Russian Raptor-class patrol boats near the island and a Russian air defense system on the island itself. On May 7, a Bayraktar hit a Russian Serna-class landing boat and two Tor anti-aircraft missile systems. On June 17, the Ukrainian Armed Forces destroyed the new Russian large-capacity tugboat *Vasily Bekh* while it was transporting ammunition, weapons, and personnel to Snake Island, and then carried out a massive artillery barrage using the new Bogdana long-range self-propelled artillery system.

On June 30, Russian troops fled Snake Island,⁴⁹ and on July 7, Ukrainian military intelligence and special forces installed the flag of Ukraine there (see photo 11). According to Ukrainian Armed Forces Command, 19 pieces of equipment and an ammunition depot worth up to \$900 million were destroyed during the retaking of the island.⁵⁰

The liberation of Snake Island significantly weakened Russia's position in the northwestern part of the Black Sea. It enabled Ukraine to resume transport of grain to international markets; Kyiv signed a grain agreement with Turkey and the UN on July 22, 2022.⁵¹ Russia, in an attempt to prove it could still influence developments in the region, violated a similar agreement it had signed by attacking the port of Odesa with Kalibr missiles.⁵² Af-

ter constant provocations and conflicts, Russia withdrew from the grain deal altogether on July 17, 2023.⁵³

Losing Snake Island deprived Russia of the ability to blockade Ukrainian ports and the option to conduct amphibious landing operations on the Black Sea coast. In addition, Russia could no longer establish a comprehensive A2/AD zone in the northwestern Black Sea, as it no longer could control the skies with ships and air defense systems on the island. Ukraine immediately took advantage of Russia's weakened position and launched counteroffensive operations in Kherson region in August 2022, which led to the liberation of the right bank of the Dnipro River there.

Asymmetric Tools to Suppress the Black Sea Fleet

In August 2022, Ukraine attacked Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea. On August 9, it launched a missile strike against the Saki airbase of the Black Sea Fleet and destroyed an estimated 10 Russian combat aircraft. This strike opened a new phase of the war, when Ukraine began to systematically damage or destroy Russian assets on the peninsula, including airbases and aircraft, air defense systems, radars, fleet bases, and ships.

On October 8, 2022, a powerful explosion occurred on the Kerch Bridge, the main artery connecting the peninsula to Russia, destroying two spans and burning seven fuel tanks on the bridge's rails (see photo 12).⁵⁴ This incident disrupted Russian troop movements and damaged the reputation of the occupation authorities in Crimea. The bridge was a symbol of Russia's imperial policy; its destruction demonstrated the vulnerability not only of the bridge itself, but also of the occupying forces. Ukrainian media reported that the explosion was the result of a special operation by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).⁵⁵

Ukraine began actively using sea drones in October 2022, signifying its growing asymmetric warfare capabilities. An unmanned mosquito fleet became Kyiv's answer to Russia's Black Sea

Photo 12. Explosion on the Kerch Bridge, October 8, 2022



Source: Victoria Veselova and Maxim Stepantsov, "We Want a Peaceful Sky": Crimea after the Explosion on the Kerch Bridge," *Crimea Realities*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 16, 2022, <https://ua.krymr.com/a/krym-kerchensiy-mist-vybukh-nasilidky/32080997.html>.

Fleet: fast, nearly invisible, and unmanned, Ukraine's drone platforms have transformed the Black Sea theater of operations.

On October 29, 2022, some of these drones hit the Russian frigate *Admiral Makarov* (Project 11356) and the minehunter *Ivan Golubets* (Project 266M)⁵⁶ at the naval base in Sevastopol. Ukrainian naval drones later also destroyed several important warships of the Russian Navy: the medium-sized reconnaissance ship *Ivan Khurs*, 86 miles northeast of the Bosphorus Strait, on May 24, 2023;⁵⁷ the large landing ship *Olenegorskiy Gornyak* in Novorossiysk Bay on August 4, 2023;⁵⁸ the oil tanker *Sig* in the Kerch Strait on August 4, 2023;⁵⁹ the missile corvette *Samum* (Project 1239) in Sevastopol Bay on August 14, 2023;⁶⁰ the patrol corvette *Sergey Kotov* (Project 22160) in the southwestern Black Sea on September 14, 2023;⁶¹ and a number of other boats and auxiliary vessels.

Ukraine has achieved a technological breakthrough that has placed the Russian Black Sea Fleet at risk for the first time, forcing Moscow to relocate many of the fleet's assets closer to Russia. Ukraine, initially funded by volunteers and later by its

Photo 13. The Kozak Mamai Naval Drone



Source: Screenshot from "Secret Factory: The SBU for the First Time Showed the Same Drone That Struck the Amphibious Assault Ship in Novorossiysk," *Television Service News*, YouTube, 9:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBeRyIGi_NA&t=340s.

Photo 14. Missile Strike on the Headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, September 22, 2023



Source: Photo in "Ukraine's Special Forces Say Russian Black Sea Fleet Chief Killed in Sevastopol Attack," *LB Ukraine*, September 25, 2023, https://en.lb.ua/news/2023/09/25/22688_ukraines_special_forces_say_russian.html.

Ministry of Defense and other security and intelligence agencies, has successfully developed multiple types of sea drones. Kyiv is currently using the surface and underwater variants of these platforms.⁶²

The Magura V5 is the main naval unmanned platform of the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine;⁶³ the Sea Baby drone, developed by the SBU, is a multi-purpose platform that can utilize various weapons. It was two Sea Babies that hit and damaged the Kerch Bridge on July 17, 2023.⁶⁴

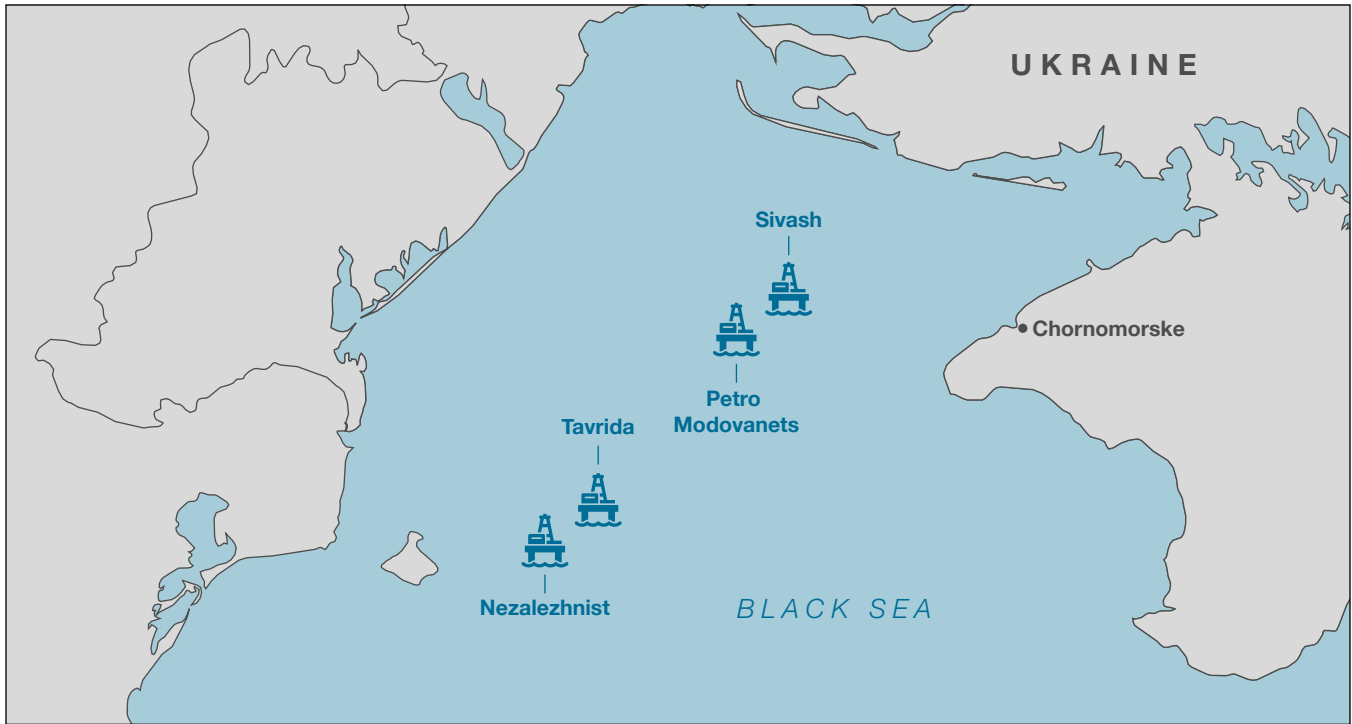
The Kozak Mamai drone is another SBU innovation (see photo 13).⁶⁵ On August 5, it hit Russia's *Olenegorskiy Gornyyak* large landing ship and the *Sig* military tanker, demonstrating that Ukraine can reach as far as Novorossiysk. In 2023, Ukraine presented its first underwater maritime drone, the *Marichka*,⁶⁶ specifically designed to target ships, bridges, coastal fortifications, and submarines.

To capitalize on its innovations in unmanned vehicles, the Ukrainian Navy has established a brigade specifically dedicated to naval drones,⁶⁷ the first of its kind. These naval drones are not only employed by the Ukrainian Navy but also by the SBU and Defense Intelligence.

In 2023, Ukraine carried out even more attacks—using different weapon systems—on Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea. According to the Monitoring Group of the Black Sea Strategic Studies Institute and *Black Sea News*, from January to December 2023, the Ukrainian Defense Forces carried out at least 184 attacks on facilities in occupied Crimea and against the BSF.⁶⁸ These included at least 45 attacks on the naval base in Sevastopol; at least 26 attacks on Russian Black Sea Fleet ships at sea; at least 33 attacks in the Yevpatoria, Saki, Chornomorsk, and Razdolnenskiy districts of western Crimea; at least 21 attacks in the Dzhankoy district; at least 15 attacks in the Feodosiya region; and five attacks on the Kerch Bridge.

These attacks targeted air defense systems guarding the skies over Crimea and Russian military bases. Several Russian S-400 systems and radar systems—in particular, the Nebo-M and Kasta-2E2 radars—were destroyed, significantly reducing the capabil-

Map 17. Ukrainian Platforms Seized by Russia in the Black Sea



Source: "‘Got Out the Enemy’s Eyes.’ What Does It Mean to Return the ‘Boik Towers’ under the Control of Ukraine?," Liga, September 2023, <https://www.liga.net/ua/politics/articles/vykolo-li-vragu-glaza-cto-oznachaet-vozvrashchenie-vyshek-boyko-pod-kontrol-ukrainy>.

ities of Russian air defenses in the peninsula and adjacent areas of the Black Sea. Kyiv also destroyed Russian airbases: on September 21, 2023, Ukrainian missiles hit the Saki airfield, where up to 12 Su-24 and Su-30 combat aircraft and Pantsir surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems met their end. A missile strike also destroyed the Black Sea Fleet headquarters on September 22, 2023 (see photo 14).⁶⁹ The reserve command posts of the fleet were also attacked.

The BSF has been significantly weakened; even ships undergoing repairs have not been spared. On September 13, 2023, a missile launched on the Sevastopol Naval Shipyard destroyed a large landing ship, the *Minsk* (Project 775), and the submarine *Rostov-on-Don* (Project 636.3). On November 4, 2023, a missile was launched against the Zaliv shipyard in Kursk, which

destroyed the Project 22800 missile ship *Askold* (*Karakurt*). On December 26, 2023, a missile launched at the Russian base in Feodosiya destroyed the large landing ship *Novocherkassk* (Project 775) and damaged the tugboat *Captain Guryev* and the training ship *UTS-150*.

Ukraine has also attacked the Kerch Bridge five times: on October 8, 2022; July 9, 2023; July 17, 2023; August 12, 2023; and September 1, 2023. Not all these attacks were successful, but two damaged the bones of the bridge and forced its closure for repairs, limiting its transport capacity.

Ukraine has also been successful in liberating the offshore gas and oil drilling platforms Russia seized in 2014 (see map 17).⁷⁰

Photo 15. The Defense Intelligence of Ukraine's Special Forces on a Liberated Platform in the Black Sea



Source: Screenshot in "After the Defeat of the Headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation in Sevastopol, 34 Officers Died, Including the Commander—SSO of the Armed Forces of Ukraine," LB Ukraine, September 25, 2023, https://lb.ua/society/2023/09/25/576433_pislya_urazhennya_shtabu.html.

Since Russia seized Ukrainian drilling platforms in the Black Sea, it has used them not only to steal gas from Ukrainian fields but also to use as military infrastructure. Russia has deployed radars on these platforms to monitor the air and surface situations in the northwest of the sea, keeping a close eye on the activities of Ukrainian units and providing target-

ing for Russian naval and aviation forces. Russia equipped its purloined platforms with Neva-B water-surface surveillance radar, which transmitted information about potential threats at sea and in the air to command centers in occupied Crimea. Moscow also used the platforms as helipads, logistics bases, and staging points for special operations units. The drilling rigs played an important role in supplying Russian troops on Snake Island and provided a way to block shipping in the Black Sea adjacent to Ukraine.

Special operations units of Ukrainian Defense Intelligence carried out an operation on September 11, 2023, to regain control of the platforms Petro Godovanets, Nezalezhnist, Tavrida, and Syvash (see photo 15). Media report that Ukrainian forces arrived at the platforms in several groups on Willard Sea Force 730 combat boats armed with M2 Browning heavy machine guns. They then seized the Neva-B radar, dismantled it, and removed it from the platforms. A stockpile of unguided helicopter missiles was uncovered on the platforms, confirming that they could be used as a staging area for helicopters. Ukrainian special forces on boats fought a Russian Su-30 fighter jet, which was hit by a man-portable air-defense system and forced to retreat.⁷¹



SCENARIOS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

The Current Context in the Black Sea: The Momentum in the Maritime Domain Favors Ukraine

During the last year, Kyiv has scored major successes against Russia in the maritime domain, especially since fall 2023. This has contributed to the narrative that the tide of the war is turning, with some even positing that Kyiv is “winning the battle of the Black Sea.”⁷² After initial successes in the months after February 2022, the Russian Black Sea Fleet did not acquit itself well, suffering from poor leadership, aging equipment, and hubris, and

began to lose ground. The decline of the BSF began after Ukraine retook Snake Island in June 2022, after which the fleet slowly became increasingly “broken.”⁷³ Kyiv also sank the BSF flagship *Moskva* in April 2022, its other major achievement of that year.

Ukraine's most impressive gains, however, resulted from numerous successful attacks in August, September, October, Novem-

Photo: Explosion causes fire at the Kerch Bridge on October 8, 2022. (Photo by Vera Katkova/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

ber, and December 2023 that destroyed or damaged the headquarters of the Russian Navy in Crimea, naval air stations, S-400 air defense sites and radar stations, naval dry docks in Kerch and Sevastopol, missile corvettes, landing ships, and submarines. In fall 2023, Ukraine regained control of the four Boyko Towers oil rigs (see photo 16), which had served as key Russian intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms. Kyiv also sank the *Pavel Derzhavin* patrol ship and damaged the *Professor Nikolai Muru*. Had German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the Biden administration supplied Kyiv with long-range missiles—the Taurus and Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), respectively—Ukraine’s record would have been even more impressive.

Over two years, Ukraine has sunk or damaged some 28 warships—at least 30 percent of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. It also has forced the retreat of major Russian naval assets from occupied Crimea to Novorossiysk some 200 miles away. Russia has transferred at least 14 ships to Novorossiysk,⁷⁴ including three Kilo-class submarines, two guided missile frigates, and a patrol ship. More ships have been transferred to other ports. Ukrainian drones and missiles have inflicted embarrassing damage on the BSF and other assets using new weapons such as unmanned surface vessels (USVs) and France- and United Kingdom-supplied SCALP and Storm Shadow missiles. Kyiv has also gone on the offensive rhetorically, in August 2023 declaring all ships traveling to Russian ports in the Black Sea or occupied territories as “military carriers” and thus legitimate targets for its armed forces.⁷⁵

Ukraine’s successes have done much to weaken the Black Sea Fleet—an impressive feat given that Ukraine lost almost all its navy in 2014 and lacks air superiority. The attrition of Russia’s naval forces has changed the balance of power on the water. The BSF is increasingly vulnerable, and Russia is on the defensive in the maritime domain. Moscow is now unable to project power as easily as it could in February 2022. It has lost undisputed control over areas it used to clearly dominate, and its naval forces are only partially deployable.

Photo 16. Ukrainian Intelligence on the Boyko Towers



Source: Defence Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, “Ukrainian Soldiers on an Oil and Gas Drilling Platform in the Black Sea,” Telegram post, September 11, 2023, 8:00 a.m., <https://t.me/DIUkraine/2836>.

Kyiv has been able to regain use of parts of its exclusive economic zone, and Russia has been unable to shut down international maritime commerce. That Ukraine is exporting increasing amounts of grain indicates that it has effectively broken Russia’s blockade (see map 18). These advances have helped Ukraine to feed the world, as its grain exports via sea are higher and the prices on the world market lower now than when the Black Sea Grain Initiative expired on July 17, 2023.

In October 2023, UK Armed Forces Minister James Heappey went so far as to speak of the “functional defeat” of the Russian Navy, likening Ukraine’s achievements to the liberation of Kharkiv Oblast in 2022, “because the Black Sea Fleet has been forced to disperse to ports from which it cannot have an effect on Ukraine.”⁷⁶ On January 25, 2024, US State Department Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O’Brien struck a less effusive but concordant note, observing that Ukraine had achieved “remarkable success” in the Black Sea.⁷⁷ Russia’s control over the waters near Ukraine is weaker than at any point

Map 18. Ukraine's Alternative Black Sea Export Corridor



Source: "The War in Ukraine Is Threatening to Wash across the Black Sea," *The Economist*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/10/05/the-war-in-ukraine-is-threatening-to-wash-across-the-black-sea>.

since 2014. On March 24, UK Defence Minister Grant Schapps tweeted the BSF is "functionally inactive," observing Russia had been forced to constrain its fleet to port after it had sailed the Black Sea since 1783, and even there its ships are sinking.

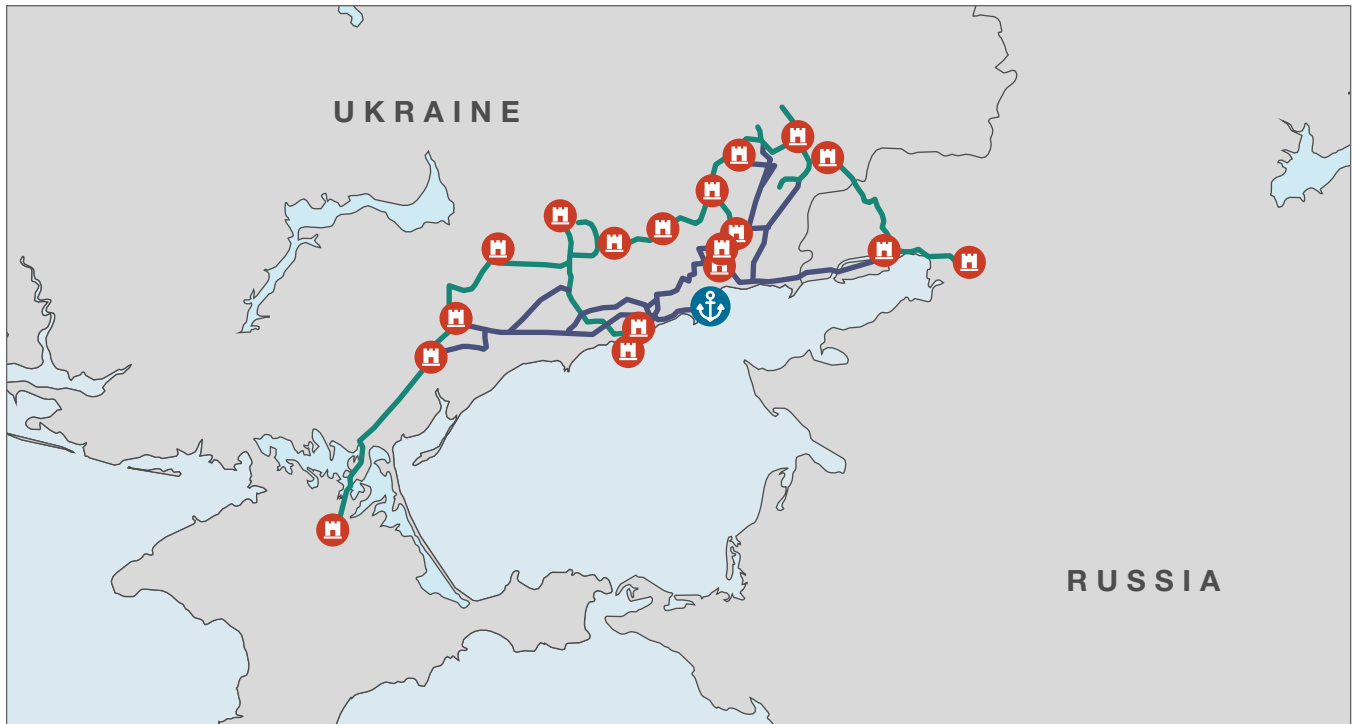
But Russian Threats Remain

But it is much too early to declare that Ukraine has won the fight for the Black Sea. It has clearly inflicted major damage on Russia's Black Sea Fleet and limited its ability to operate freely in the

region, challenging the narratives that the war is a stalemate or that Russian victory is inevitable. Ukrainian efforts have created a dynamic battle space in which Ukraine is able to inflict major damage on enemy forces.

Yet these successes, while real and significant, have not defeated the Black Sea Fleet. Overall, the Black Sea shows no signs of returning to the status quo ante before 2014. Russia remains strong in the land and air domains, where it could make import-

Map 19. Schematic Representation of the New Railway from Rostov to Crimea, through the South of Occupied Ukraine



Source: Sergii Starushko, "Russian Federation Has Started the Construction of a New Railway Section from Mariupol to Crimea," Center for Journalistic Investigations, February 26, 2024, <https://investigator.org.ua/en/news-2/pivden/264548/>.

Note: Existing routes are marked in green. Red dots denote Russian bases.

ant gains in the future. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the guns could fall silent with Moscow retaining control over Crimea and Ukraine's exclusive economic zone along the northern coast of the Black Sea.

Russia's Capabilities

Russia may have lost major naval assets in Crimea and moved others away, while those assets it retains on the peninsula may not be of the highest quality. But Moscow's forces in occupied Crimea remain lethal. A large store of Crimea-based cruise and other missiles can still reach targets in the Black Sea region. Russian warships and planes can still fire missiles to targets over 1,500 miles away, which leaves most of the Black Sea vulnerable.

The Kremlin's missile assets in Crimea can reportedly take down "anything that moves"⁷⁸ in the Black Sea. Russia possesses considerable air capabilities and is determined to retain air superiority, while its A2/AD assets remain formidable and regularly intercept Ukrainian projectiles. Russia's land forces will be extremely difficult to dislodge.

Diversifying Land Routes to Crimea

Russia has also begun to diversify its land routes to Crimea as Ukraine continues to threaten the Kerch Bridge. In early November 2023, the head of the occupied Zaporizhzhia region, Yevhenii Balitskii, stated the construction of a new railway linking Crimea to Rostov-on-Don had begun (see map 19). He

commented, “The railway will go from Akimovka to Rostov, via Berdiansk and Mariupol. This project has already started. Akimovka is below Melitopol, to the southwest is just a railway junction, from where the construction will depart.”⁷⁹ Construction is reportedly underway from the Donetsk side.

Satellite images from late February 2024 confirm that Moscow is conducting preparatory work for this railway.⁸⁰ Journalists have speculated on the railway’s possible routes, such as branches linking Mariupol, Berdiansk, and Akimovka. Other routes envisage connections between Berdiansk and Mariupol, with possible routes going through the settlements of Troiani and Novopavlovka.

Russia is also seeking to expand highway routes to Crimea. Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin noted at a Transport of Russia forum in November 2023 that part of the existing rail route passes near the front line,⁸¹ so work on alternatives, such as building a new road, are under consideration. The head of the occupied Kherson region, Vladimir Salido,⁸² said in early 2023 that construction of the Djankoi–Rostov-on-Don highway through occupied Ukraine would begin in 2023. Costing about 400 billion rubles, the road would be roughly 870 miles (1,400 kilometers) long, and it could be completed in five years.⁸³

The Black Sea Fleet

What is left of the Black Sea Fleet is aging and of poor quality—much of it dates to the Soviet era—but is still lethal. Even in its diminished state, the BSF retains enough firepower in Crimea, Novorossiysk, and elsewhere to keep threats real and risks high, and to remain a strategic factor that complicates the calculations of any actor operating in the broader region. The new naval base that Russia is planning at Ochamchire, in the occupied Abkhazia region of Georgia (see photo 17), is some 430 miles away from Ukraine and thus beyond the easy range of Ukrainian systems; this base may become operational within a few years. And while the Montreux Convention prevents Moscow from reinforcing the BSF via the Dardanelles, it can still

Photo 17. Satellite Images of Work at the Port of Ochamchire in Abkhazia to House the Black Sea Fleet



Source: Rayhan Demytrie, Paul Brown, and Joshua Cheetham, “Russia’s New Black Sea Naval Base Alarms Georgia,” BBC, December 12, 2023, data from Google, Planet Labs PBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67625450>.

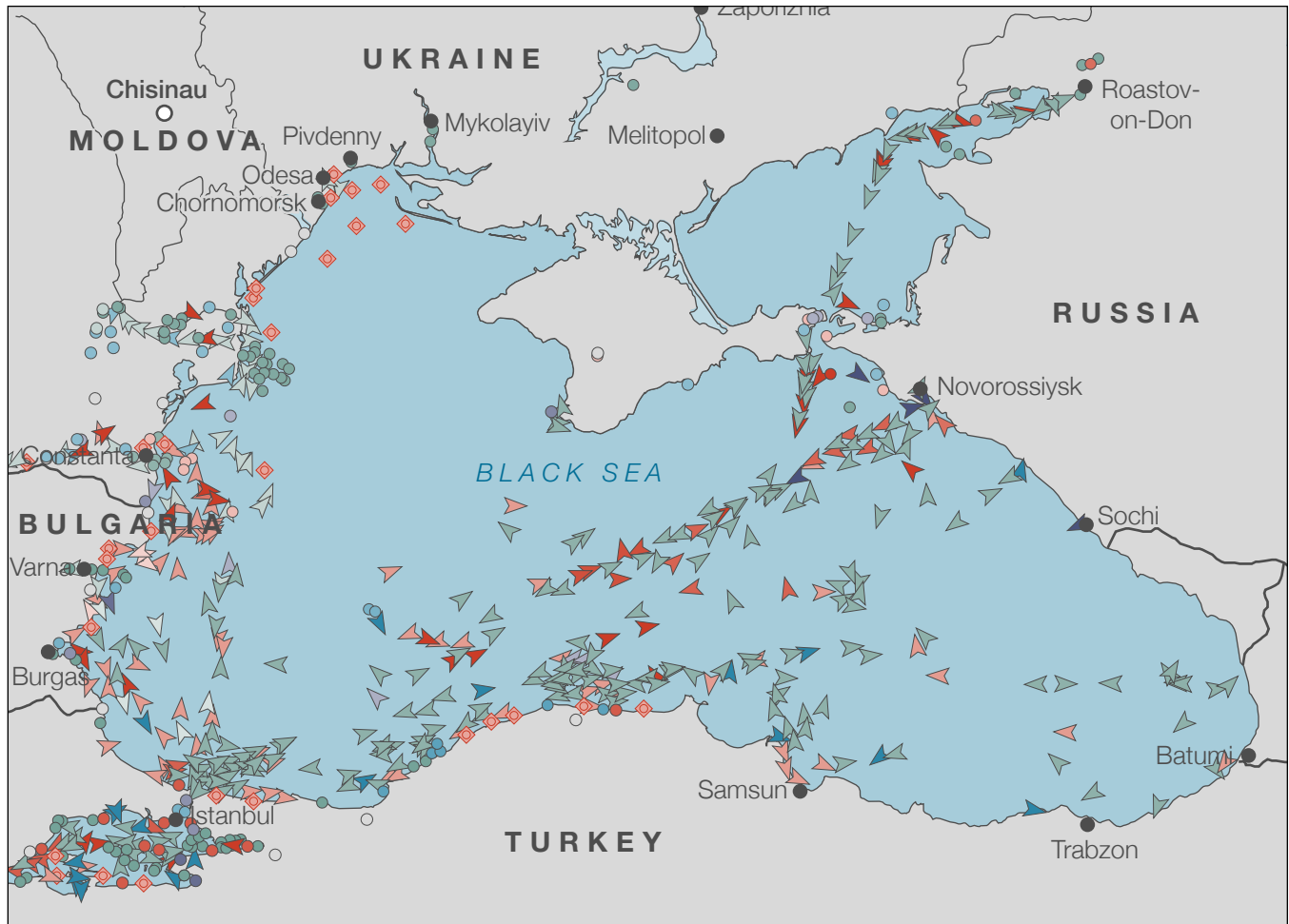
augment its naval assets via the Volga-Don Canal connecting the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Azov. The Ukrainian Navy assesses that the BSF still has three submarines.⁸⁴

Ukraine

The war will be won or lost on land and in the air. While Moscow occupies Crimea and the Donbas, it can act like a “boa constrictor around Ukraine’s neck, squeezing and squeezing and squeezing” the Black Sea coast, as the former commander of US Naval Forces Europe-Africa (NAVEUR-NAVAF), Admiral James Foggo, colorfully put it in 2022.⁸⁵ This represents a serious long-term threat to Ukraine’s survival, and thus to the Black Sea as a free and open body of water.

Ukrainian ports and shipping remain vulnerable, which complicates and reduces commercial flows through the Black Sea even if Moscow has not attacked ships there in recent months. Ukraine’s access to the global commons and international markets continues but is not guaranteed in perpetuity. The grain corridor may currently be operating well, but Moscow could disrupt it at any time.

Map 20. Maritime Traffic in the Black Sea on March 15, 2024



Source: Marine Traffic, interactive graphic, Kpler, <https://marinetraffic.com>.

Mines

The Black Sea contains an unknown number—estimated to be in the thousands—of naval mines, both anchored and drifting. These mines pose significant threats to maritime commercial activity. At least 400 mines filled the sea at the beginning of the war,⁸⁶ and Russia has laid thousands more since then, mostly in the waters along the northern coast of the Black Sea. At least 90 mines have been discovered and neutralized, most in Ukrainian but also in Romanian and Bulgarian territorial wa-

ters. As of November 2023, there were an estimated 400–450 further explosives in the Romanian EEZ leading to the Sulina Channel.

Mines represent a continuing threat to maritime commerce. Commercial vessels have struck charges that have drifted into the EEZs and territorial waters of NATO member states. An Estonian-flagged ship sank from a mine strike in March 2022, and a Panama-flagged ship was hit in December 2023. Mines

have raised insurance rates, making both exports and imports more expensive. Maritime commerce continues, but at nowhere near its levels prior to 2014, and tourism in prime coastal areas has fallen. In fact, only shipping routes close to the western coast of the sea are currently operational, with most of the northern and central Black Sea seeing no commercial activity (see map 20). Ukraine has concluded agreements with firms like Marsh McLennan, via Lloyds of London, for hull and liability insurance for agriculture shipments, but it is not clear how this arrangement will continue.⁸⁷ The UN has stated that commodity shipments continue to face significant risks from airstrikes and sea mines.⁸⁸

In January 2024, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish officials signed a memorandum of understanding establishing a Mine Countermeasures Naval Group tasked with creating a mine-free area of the Black Sea to assist Ukraine with its exports. Experts estimate it will take at least five to 10 years to clear the sea of existing mines.

Military Activity

The militarization of, and restrictions on freedom of navigation in, the Black Sea have negatively affected the interests of NATO member states in concrete ways. NATO air policing missions have faced aggressive Russian action. There have also been numerous instances of illegal Russian overflights of NATO airspace, including dangerous maneuvers, close encounters, and unsafe interceptions.⁸⁹

In July 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense threatened that ships plying the Black Sea would be considered party to the conflict, and declared the exclusive economic zones of NATO member littoral states “temporarily dangerous for navigation.”⁹⁰ Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin attempted to walk this back by stating that Moscow reserved the right to inspect all ships in the Black Sea “before destroying them,”⁹¹ but his language proved hardly reassuring. In October 2023, Vladimir Putin announced that he had ordered Russian warplanes

equipped with Kinzhal missiles to patrol the Black Sea, which Russia regularly launches at Ukrainian cities.

In September 2023, the UK accused Russia of launching multiple missiles at a civilian cargo ship; this attack failed only because of successful Ukrainian air defenses. Moscow has targeted aircraft in international airspace, attempting to shoot down a UK surveillance plane with some 30 crew on board. A disaster was only avoided in this attempted attack because one Russian missile failed and the other missed altogether. Russia has also targeted the region with malign influence campaigns: disseminating disinformation or misinformation, promoting pro-Moscow political parties, undermining support for Western institutions and values, and threatening infrastructure.

Romania

Russia has attacked the Ukrainian Danube River ports of Reni, Izmail, and Kiliia, raising concerns that future attacks could stray to the opposite bank of the river and strike Romania, a key NATO ally. A Romanian cargo ship in Reni was damaged during strikes in July 2023. Fragments of Iranian Shahed drones also have been found five times in Romanian territory. Romania has had to deploy additional systems on its borders to detect these drones, which fly low and approach ports in Ukraine by flying over the Danube and its adjacent, sparsely populated areas. Romania’s civil protection department sends alert messages to people living in areas bordering the Danube near Ukraine’s ports every time drone attacks occur.

Perhaps the greatest risk is that drones or missiles struck by Ukrainian air defenses will land in Romania as they fall uncontrolled to earth. In Poland, in November 2022, fragments of a Ukrainian air defense missile killed two Polish farmers. Attacks bordering Romania increased in intensity from July 2023, after Russia’s exit from the grain initiative, and peaked in fall of that year. Since then, Russia has attacked Danube port infrastructure more than 30 times, destroying or damaging 109 facilities and six civilian buildings.⁹² Drone attacks on Ukraine’s Danube ports

have been decreasing in intensity in early 2024, but occurred on February 10 and March 5, 2024; more can be expected.

Such attacks could continue in 2024 as Russia attempts to undercut Ukraine's ability to export grain to bolster its revenues available for defense. With Ukrainian port infrastructure on the Danube just miles away from Romania, collateral damage cannot be excluded, especially if Russia increases its attacks. Moreover, given Romania's plans to start building offshore energy infrastructure in 2024,⁹³ Russia will likely intensify its hybrid war tactics in the area.

Bulgaria

The war in Ukraine has also impacted Bulgaria. Russia has conducted several exercises in Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone, prompting the NATO-Ukraine Council in its July 2023 communiqué to state that "Russia's new warning area in the Black Sea, within the Bulgarian EEZ, has created new risks of miscalculation and escalation as well as serious impediments of navigation."⁹⁴ The Bulgarian Defense Ministry reports that Russia has declared exercises in the Bulgarian EEZ that it has failed to execute, suggesting that Moscow seeks to intimidate the region's littoral states and hinder grain exports.⁹⁵

On August 13, 2023, Russian forces boarded Turkish ships in Bulgarian territorial waters sailing to Odesa. Then Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov downplayed these incidents, but

also said that Russian ships have lingered in Bulgarian waters for as long as 20 days. While Sofia has acknowledged that Russian warships have the right to sail through its EEZ, Russia blocked a considerable portion of Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone from July 18, 2023, until mid-December 2023.

Other forms of hybrid war

Electronic warfare is an increasingly successful element of Russia's hybrid war efforts that Moscow has used with increasing frequency in the Black Sea region. It has jammed Global Positioning System (GPS) signals in aircraft flying in Bulgaria, affecting civilian air travel. In September 2023, Romania's chief of the Defense Staff, General Daniel Petrescu, accused Russia of "actively and constantly" jamming GPS communications for ships in its territorial waters.⁹⁶ Since Russia downed Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014, the international aviation community has not considered the Black Sea region safe, and has directed airlines to avoid certain areas of it.⁹⁷

As Russia has effectively and illegally redrawn the borders of regional exclusive economic zones, it has become a de facto neighbor of Romania, complicating Bucharest's strategic calculus. Russia also has weaponized civil society groups and caused catastrophic ecological damage to the Black Sea ecosystem. While these threats affect NATO allies, partners, and friends most directly, they also negatively affect US interests.



THE FUTURE OF THE WAR

Western Politics and the Current State of Affairs in the Black Sea

Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive failed to achieve its objectives of reaching the Sea of Azov and severing the land corridor connecting the Donbas and Crimea. Russian defenses, fortified over the course of more than a year, prevented Ukraine from making breakthroughs. The war became one of attrition, with intense use of artillery and unmanned systems and significant loss of life and material on both sides.

The crisis in Gaza has generated additional pressure on the Biden administration, while Iran-inspired attacks by the Houth militia in the Red Sea, through which 12 percent of global trade and 30 percent of global container flows transit, divert Western attention from Ukraine. Accordingly, it is unlikely that European states will meaningfully supplement US supplies of equipment and ammunition to Ukraine. Europe's stocks were low to begin

with and are greatly reduced from previous deliveries. Moreover, long lead times are necessary before pledges and anticipated investments can be translated into production and deliveries to the front.

Yet the outcome of Russia's war depends on the extent of military and financial support that the West is able to provide. Ukraine's allies currently seem unprepared to assist at the levels necessary for Ukraine to achieve a clear victory as Kyiv currently defines it.

Domestic political disagreements over support for Ukraine continue to dominate US politics in the lead-up to its 2024 presidential and congressional elections, affecting institutional

Photo: Russia's Black Sea Fleet warships take part in the Navy Day celebrations in the port city of Novorossiysk on July 30, 2023. (Photo by Stringer/AFP via Getty Images)

coherence and public opinion. Inconsistent decision-making in Washington suggests that the Biden administration remains overly focused on the potential implosion of Russia and the fate of its nuclear arsenal.

NATO and EU member states have provided different levels of support for Ukraine, due in part to their limited defense industrial base and dependence on Russian energy and the impact of Ukrainian exports on their national economies. Some of these issues remain highly political in Europe, given elections in 2024 at the national and EU levels.

While EU heads of state agreed at the December 2023 European Council to begin accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, Hungary's opposition to Ukrainian EU membership raises questions about the level and nature of Europe's financial support for Kyiv in the coming years.

Plausible Scenarios for the Evolution of the War in Ukraine

Three scenarios remain plausible as future trajectories of the war, each carrying varying levels of probability and divergent consequences for Ukraine and the West.

Scenario 1: Increased probability of a frozen conflict—mixed consequences

A freeze in the conflict roughly where the front lines currently are (see map 21) appears to be the most likely scenario going forward. Many countries are reducing their support for Ukraine or increasing it slowly. This trend could accelerate if the political consensus in the United States on support for Ukraine continues to erode.

The Kremlin shows no interest in negotiating an end to the war, which only hardens Kyiv's refusal to agree to negotiations. Absent major increases in Western support and a Ukrainian breakthrough in 2024, a frozen conflict seems likely. However, major segments of Ukraine's leadership, military, and society

will not accept a ceasefire, let alone a surrender of territory. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will have to manage these sentiments.

Kyiv would require major Western financial support to accept a diplomatic solution that entails freezing the conflict. It would also require security guarantees for Ukraine's remaining territory that are far more substantial than those Kyiv received under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum—signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia—when it agreed to transfer its former Soviet nuclear arsenal to Russia.

A frozen conflict would mean an uncertain future for Ukraine, placing the country in a gray area with little prospect of EU or NATO membership. This could turn Ukraine from a bulwark against Russian revanchism into a potential source of instability for Europe.

At the end of a frozen conflict, Ukraine would have hundreds of thousands of well-trained military personnel and significant quantities of weapons, and would face economic, social, and possibly political instability. It would be a frustrated nation with deep anti-Russian sentiment, quite possibly with nationalist and even anti-Western overtones. Many Ukrainians would also believe that Western indecision, even cowardice, had caused them to lose the war, because Western leaders could not sufficiently support their heroic efforts to retain their independence and forced them to accept a humiliating deal with Moscow.

If Moscow assesses that Kyiv could accept a frozen conflict, especially as a result of diminishing Western support, the Kremlin will have little incentive to end the war. Russia could then continue to hold out, even if its losses are enormous and mobilization increases pressure on its workforce. Moscow would likely continue the war with increased intensity in 2024 and 2025 in the hope of achieving better results on the ground as Ukrainian forces face exhaustion and declining military and economic as-

Map 21. Russian-Controlled Ukrainian Territory on February 24, 2024



Source: "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 14, 2024," Institute for the Study of War, March 14, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-14-2024>.

sistance. Russia could then try to open negotiations, especially if there is a change in administration in Washington.

A freeze in the conflict would bring Russia territorial and other benefits, which would feed its neo-imperial ambitions and the illusion of parity with the West, incentivizing Moscow to continue its aggressive and militaristic behavior. In such a scenario, the Black Sea region would remain an unstable and contested space, where Moscow would likely continue its naval presence and hostile hybrid actions: blockades of perimeters under the pretext of naval exercises, electronic warfare, mining sea

routes, cyber attacks, and disinformation campaigns against energy projects.

Scenario 2: Medium probability of a partial Russian victory—very negative consequences

The likelihood of a partial Russian victory (see map 22) is directly correlated to Western support for Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin has been doubling down on his goal of destroying Ukraine, but he cannot achieve this if Kyiv maintains access to the Black Sea. Therefore, the Kremlin needs to conquer

Map 22. Territory Moscow Could Acquire from Ukraine in a Partial Russian Victory Scenario



Source: Adapted from Institute for the Study of War map.

Ukraine's entire Black Sea littoral. Without Black Sea access, Ukraine will have difficulty maintaining its trade with the world, risk suffocation of its economy, and lose strategic relevance. If Russia does not make large-scale advances in spring 2024, Putin will continue his war of attrition, which is not to Ukraine's advantage. A war of attrition will deplete Ukraine's resources, not only because Russia has 100 million more people than Ukraine. Moreover, losses on the front have not generated major political pressure against the Kremlin or against Putin personally. Moscow can likely continue its attrition strategy for a longer time than Kyiv can resist.

Russia has increased its defense spending for 2024 to \$110 billion, which for the first time in recent history will exceed its social spending. If Western support for Ukraine continues to decline, the Kremlin's appetite for continued war will grow. The question is whether Moscow will agree to negotiations and a frozen conflict or will only accept a diplomatic solution after it has conquered the entire Ukrainian littoral and reached the mouth of the Danube.

Russia's establishment of a land bridge to Transnistria would substantially increase the likelihood of it destabilizing or even attempting to conquer the Republic of Moldova. Such a sce-

nario could leave Romania with a common border with Russia, for example on the Prut River and at the mouth of the Danube. Hundreds of thousands of refugees would likely flow into Romania as well. Russia on the Prut and at the mouth of the Danube, needless to say, is Romania's security nightmare.

Scenario 3: Medium probability of Ukraine's victory and the liberation of Russian-occupied territories — positive consequences

A Ukrainian victory (see map 23) remains possible, but decreasingly probable as Western support for Ukraine erodes, casualties on the front increase, and Russia continues new

troop conscriptions. Of course, victory is the most desirable outcome for NATO. A Ukrainian victory would raise the prospects of Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO and a broad reconstruction process for the whole country, including the Russian-occupied territories. A democratic Ukraine, fully integrated into both alliances, is in the interest of its neighbors. Moreover, Russia cannot begin the long process of expunging and healing from its neo-imperialist mentality unless it loses this war.

The stakes for Ukraine in 2024 are sufficiently high that President Zelenskyy could choose to throw many of his military re-

Map 23. Territory Kyiv Could Regain in a Ukrainian Victory Scenario



Source: Adapted from Institute for the Study of War map.

sources into another counteroffensive this summer, or at least combine defensive with offensive stealth actions at the tactical level to liberate new territories. These attacks, even if they do not produce spectacular results, will maintain morale and seek to demonstrate that Ukraine deserves support.

An exclusively defensive posture would leave the initiative entirely to Russia and could lead to an early freezing of the conflict along its current front lines. This is unacceptable to Ukrainian leadership. Kyiv, therefore, will continue to resist increasing Russian attacks while seeking ways to repel its adversary and liberate new territory. Ukraine needs to demon-

strate that it can take back territory and persuade its allies to continue weapons supplies.

The reluctance of the US Congress to maintain significant and steady military aid to Ukraine, the November US elections, and the possibility of a future administration more reluctant to support Kyiv, may lead Ukraine to conclude it has little alternative but to undertake another counteroffensive, perhaps the last it can afford. A Ukrainian victory in such a campaign would likely prompt Western allies to continue their assistance, increase international popular support, and bring Kyiv more favorable terms in the event of ceasefire negotiations.



A WORST-CASE SCENARIO

The Kremlin's war against Ukraine has drawn Washington's attention to the Black Sea region, an area it has never prioritized. Russia's efforts to overturn the post-1989 European security order have been a geopolitical cataclysm. Russia will not be a reliable partner for the United States or the global West until it leaves Ukraine, behaves like a status quo power, drops territorial demands on its neighbors and its neo-colonial, neo-imperial approach to neighboring countries, and treats its near abroad as a zone of peaceful engagement.

The steady erosion of the security environment in the Black Sea region since Russia's 2008 war against Georgia has seriously worsened conditions for all BSR littoral states, three of which are US treaty allies and three others its close partners. The United States has never had a clearer interest in

the Black Sea region remaining whole, free, open, and at peace. A free and open Black Sea is also critical to Ukraine's survival and to peace and prosperity in the littoral states and beyond.

The Negative Consequences of a Russian Victory

While Ukraine continues to fight, envisioning a Russian victory—clearly the worst-case outcome of the war—remains an exercise in speculation. It is up to Kyiv to define the conditions under which it decides to end the war.

Photo: A woman walks as smoke rises after an attack by Russian army in Odesa, Ukraine on April 3, 2022. (Photo by Bulent Kilic/AFP via Getty Images)

Many Western policymakers assert that Russia has “already lost the war,” because Ukraine has inflicted damage on the Russian army and humiliated Moscow on the battlefield.⁹⁸ The war has also clarified the relationship between Ukraine and Russia relationship and solidified Ukrainian national identity. Russia has become something of a client state to its patron, China. NATO is more united than at any time in the past, while Finland and Sweden have jettisoned neutrality. Vladimir Putin has become an international outcast and is wanted by the International Criminal Court. Europe has significantly decreased its energy dependence on Russia.

Putin and the Kremlin, however, do not view the world in these terms. If when the guns fall silent and Russia holds territory it did not occupy before 2014, Putin will declare victory. The view from Red Square is that Moscow controls 17 to 19 percent of Ukraine—significantly more than it did before 2014 or 2022. The Russian army remains on the offensive, and it can determine, if not dictate, the terms for ending the war. That those in Russia who hold power see the war in these terms carries geopolitical and other consequences for the United States.

It is highly possible that the Kremlin could choose to define victory in any number of ways:

- A ceasefire that involves Russia keeping any part of the land it currently occupies
- Continued illegal occupation of Crimea
- Continued illegal occupation of large parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts
- Occupation of the mainland Black Sea littoral and control over large parts of the former Ukrainian exclusive economic zone
- A continued inland military presence along the Black Sea coast
- An intact and operational Kerch Bridge and ground lines of communication (especially rail links to mainland Russia) to Crimea

- A decision by NATO or the EU against Ukrainian accession
- Vague security guarantees for Ukraine or Ukrainian neutrality

It is implausible that Russia would return territory it has occupied unless it first experiences major defeats on the battlefield. If the war ends without a Russian withdrawal from all occupied Ukrainian land, the Kremlin will be able to spin this outcome as a partial victory. The more Ukrainian territory Russia occupies or controls when the war ends—and the closer that territory is to the Black Sea—the less stable the region will be after the war.

The Impact on US Interests

A consolidation of Russian control over the Ukrainian littoral would have a major negative impact on NATO allies, partners, and friends, and on the broader US national interest. The region has historically abhorred a vacuum. Moscow’s attempt to fill the vacuum created by the breakdown of deterrence has seriously worsened the security situation in the region.

A war that ends with Russia controlling Ukraine’s Black Sea coast would leave Russia in possession of highly strategic territory that it can be expected to weaponize in order to threaten, intimidate, undermine, weaken, and exert leverage over regional and other powers. Such an outcome would enable Russia to exercise inordinate influence over much, if not most, of the BSR, and would allow Moscow to limit littoral states’ access to the sea. This would keep the region militarized and increase the likelihood of future conflict.

Any outcome that leaves Russia in control of Crimea or the Donbas would result in yet another frozen conflict in the former Soviet space and give Moscow leverage over Ukraine and the broader region for years to come. Given Vladimir Putin’s maximalist goals, further conflict could not be ruled out. If the Kremlin senses that the West does not have the political will to stop its attempts to redraw the borders of Europe, it will see its expansionist worldview vindicated. NATO member states and US interests in Europe would suffer.

NATO

While NATO for many years considered Russia a greater threat in the Baltic Sea than in the Black Sea, Moscow has in fact been more aggressive in the BSR, where it faces an environment more conducive to its advances. A Russian victory would likely exacerbate this trend, directly affecting the three NATO littoral states and the larger alliance, which would have a new de facto border with Russia. Romania has much at stake, as it is already a frontline state and has indirectly experienced the effect of Russian drone attacks on Danube ports in Ukraine. It is not inconceivable that a future Russian attack on these ports could affect Romania, leading Bucharest to invoke the collective defense articles of the NATO treaty. A Russian victory would simplify Moscow's ability to interfere in Romania and Bulgaria through hybrid or other means.

Because of geographical proximity, historical invasion routes, and the vulnerability of the Suwalki Corridor, Western Europe has often viewed the northeast front of NATO as the most exposed area of the alliance. But the Black Sea region is where Russia most regularly bumps up against NATO interests.

Crimea as a Power Projection Platform: Moscow fought early in the war to take the entirety of Ukraine's Black Sea coast, but that effort failed. If Russia holds onto Crimea, however, it would continue to use it as a platform for projecting power. This would enable Russia to more easily limit littoral states' access to the sea and expand its tentacles further in southeastern Europe and the western Balkans. Vladimir Putin has signaled to the world that Moscow wishes to call the shots in the Black Sea region. If Russia succeeds in reversing Ukraine's recent success in the maritime domain, the balance of power could swing further in Russia's favor. Moscow would likely continue pressing to see how far it can advance before the West pushes back.

Energy

Energy resources in the Black Sea region have the potential to enhance European energy security. The BSR is an energy crossroads connecting Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the

Middle East, and Russia. If Moscow prevails against Ukraine, resources in the region are less likely to be developed, to the detriment of Europe's energy future.

Turkey possesses estimated gas reserves of over 540 billion cubic meters (BCM). Ukraine's pre-2014 exclusive economic zone held more than 2 trillion BCM in gas reserves,⁹⁹ while Georgia and Romania possess 200 BCM each and Bulgaria controls enough gas to supply its needs for 30 years. Romania's offshore areas possess 100 gigawatts of wind potential, and Ukraine has 10 times as much as that.¹⁰⁰ Romania will become the largest gas producer in the EU after developing the Neptun Deep perimeter in the Black Sea offshore area, with a potential estimated at a minimum of 100 BCM.

According to Mark Beacom, the chief executive officer of the American company Black Sea Oil and Gas, "We are not in a war zone, but we are close enough and it clearly has an impact. We've had mines detected close to the platform, warships that go close to our platform, and we have airplanes circling our platform." The Black Sea, meanwhile, contains massive resources that need to reach the European market to increase Europe's energy security.¹⁰¹

China, Iran, and North Korea: A Russian victory in Ukraine would also embolden the Chinese Communist Party. CCP leaders are watching the United States and its allies closely for signs of resolve, resilience, social cohesion, and military and financial strength. CCP leaders are unlikely to be deterred by the Biden administration's commitments to Taiwan if the United States is unable to stand up for its interests elsewhere. Iran and its proxies also will be emboldened to sow chaos across, and further destabilize, the Middle East. Pyongyang will feel freer to act on the Korean peninsula. Dictators, autocrats, and fence-sitters around the world would benefit from a Russian triumph in Ukraine.

Principles Also Matter

The United States has a major interest in the preservation of the post-Cold War security order in Europe, which has led to

unprecedented peace and prosperity for the transatlantic community, has benefitted hundreds of millions of Americans, and has bolstered the stability and security of Europe. Russia has shattered the principles that underlie this status quo.

As the main pillar of the post-Cold War order, the United States cannot look the other way. Internationally recognized borders are inviolable, state territory is sovereign, and independent countries cannot be extinguished. Accepting the idea that Russia can redraw borders at will could prompt leaders elsewhere to pursue similar courses of action.

International Law: The preservation of international law also matters to the United States. Russia cannot be permitted to trample on international legal norms. Peace and stability worldwide would be greatly weakened if Russia's blatant violations of international agreements, treaties, and humanitarian laws in Ukraine were to stand.

By invading Ukraine, Russia violated the 1945 UN Charter, the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the 1991 Belovezha Accords, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the 1997 Black Sea Fleet Treaty, the 1998 Russia-Ukraine Friendship Treaty, and the 2010 Kharkiv Pact, not to mention the laws of war and international humanitarian law. These violations have been well documented, but Moscow has been careful not to appear to violate international law concerning the Black Sea itself.

Former US Naval Forces Europe and Africa (NAVEUR-NAF) Commander Admiral James Foggo views the Sea of Azov as an inland, semi-enclosed body of water, which is therefore governed by Article 123 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁰² This requires bordering states to cooperate

with each other in the exercise of their rights and duties in the area. Foggo has also stated that Article 19 of UNCLOS allows the innocent passage of foreign ships, even military vessels, through the territorial waters of another state as long as that passage is "not prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal state." These interpretations suggest that Russia is violating international law in the Black Sea, but opinions are divided.¹⁰³

Russia has also violated or disrespected other international rulings, treaties, and agreements relating to Ukraine and the Black Sea region. Moscow violated the December 2003 Russian-Ukrainian Treaty on the Legal Status of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, which specifies that both bodies of water are historically internal territorial waters shared by the two nations. Both nations' parliaments ratified the treaty in April 2004. Russia's seizure of Snake Island suggests it does not recognize the 2009 International Court of Justice ruling over the southern exclusive economic zone of Snake Island that favored Romania.

Russian naval exercises in the exclusive economic zones of NATO member states are not, strictly speaking, intrusions into NATO territory, as Article 5 of the Washington Treaty does not cover EEZs. However, Russian encroachments are clearly designed to provoke BSR littoral states and infringe on their territorial waters. By declaring exclusion zones for military exercises not recognized by international law, Moscow has sought to extend its influence into other countries' economic areas. Russia has also been careful not to officially declare war on Ukraine, instead dubbing its incursion a special military operation, to avoid having the law of war and international humanitarian law apply to its actions.



A PLAN OF ACTION

A more stable security environment in the Black Sea region requires strengthening Ukraine's deterrent and destroying, damaging, or neutralizing Russia's military infrastructure and GLOCs to Crimea. If the Kremlin can supply and use Crimea as a platform to prosecute its war, threaten attacks, and disrupt the region, the BSR will not resemble its pre-2014 state. Ukraine's allies should do more to ensure Russia does not win this war. The Biden administration, for one, should speed the flow of long-range weapons systems to Kyiv so that Ukraine can end the war on terms as favorable to its interests as possible.

Moscow will likely continue to occupy Crimea until it is forced out, until its long-term presence there is untenable, or until it can no longer use the peninsula effectively to dominate the region. Ukraine needs to degrade Russia's military assets in Crimea and those connecting Crimea to the Russian mainland so that the peninsula is no longer a major strategic asset from which Mos-

cow can export instability. The fewer capable military assets Russia has in Crimea, the more stable the Black Sea region will be.

Until then, any thoughts Kyiv may have about reoccupying its territory are unrealistic. A demilitarized Black Sea is a desirable, but distant, goal. Re-establishing Ukrainian deterrence so that Moscow no longer threatens its sovereignty, or the interests of NATO, should also be viewed as a long-term goal.

To support achieving these goals, the United States' Black Sea Strategy, reportedly due out in June 2024, should accomplish the following:

Photo: A Ukrainian serviceman holds a Stinger anti-aircraft weapon on-board a Maritime Guard of the State Border Service of Ukraine boat as it patrols in the northwestern Black Sea on December 18, 2023. (Anatolii Stepanov via Getty Images)

Conceptual, Political, and Diplomatic

- Establish a holistic conception of the Black Sea region. US government agencies tend to divide it bureaucratically into five or more regions, complicating efforts to treat it comprehensively. The recognition of NATO regional plans approved at the 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit is a step in the right direction.
- Urge the US National Security Council to present to Congress a comprehensive and robust interagency Black Sea Strategy, as required by the 2023 NDAA. Congress showed leadership by pressing for a strategy, and its encouragement of greater executive branch action has been critical.
- Urge mention of the Black Sea in the next administration's National Security Strategy; the current and previous NSS failed to pay adequate attention to the region.
- Visibly demonstrate US implementation of the Black Sea Strategy unveiled in October 2023 to enhance deterrence and increase confidence among BSR littoral states. Public actions prove the United States is serious.
- Urge Congress to appropriate funds for Black Sea-related policy. A whole-of-government strategy without funding for implementation is doomed to fail.
- Ramp up US engagement with the three NATO BSR littoral states to support consensus-building and improved coordination.
- Engage the EU to build support for non-military measures to improve resilience against Russian and Chinese malign influence, as well as in EU candidate countries Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey. The EU has not been a major player in the Black Sea region but can add value.

Military

- Ramp up support for Kyiv's sea denial strategy. Encourage allies to assist Ukrainian efforts to destroy or neutralize Russia's Black Sea Fleet and assets supporting it.
- Provide Kyiv with more, and longer range, missiles, drones, and other advanced weaponry so that Ukraine can put all Russian military assets in Crimea at risk.

- Continue support to Kyiv so that it can disrupt Russian land transport traffic and ground lines of communication to Crimea.
- Urge NATO allies to do more in the Black Sea region, sustaining and improving capabilities of its Multinational Corps Southeast.
- At NATO, press for implementation of the excellent conclusions of the 2023 report *Troubled Waters*, for example: the adoption of a NATO Black Sea strategy and the deployment of increased coastal defense systems, long-range precision strike capabilities, and ISR assets.¹⁰⁴
- Support activation of the NATO Mine Measures Group as soon as possible. Increase the number of mine countermeasure vessels as soon as Turkey opens the Bosphorus Strait.
- Improve "unblinking eye" assets such as the Varna Black Sea Regional Naval Coordination Center. Advocate a better division of labor between Varna and the NATO Maritime Command at Northwood, United Kingdom.
- Develop a better common operating picture of the Black Sea region to improve policy responses.
- Reinforce deterrence for littoral states by expanding new technologies like air defense, drones, mine sweepers, USVs, ISR, mobility, and long-range anti-ship missiles to hold the Black Sea Fleet at risk.
- Establish comprehensive NATO A2/AD bubbles over member states on the Black Sea to better protect coastlines, commercial assets, and infrastructure arteries.
- Support littoral states in building anti-submarine warfare infrastructure.
- Support Ukraine in ensuring it retains Snake Island and the four drilling platforms in the Black Sea, especially considering the island's proximity to the mouth of the Danube and the potential for developing new investment projects in the Black Sea.
- Consider conveying smaller ships to Romania and Bulgaria that can traverse the Danube and can bolster those nations' naval forces. Enhance the role of the Danube for supplying

ammunition, fuel, and NATO military equipment from Germany to Romania and Bulgaria.

- Consider permanent military basing in Romania and Bulgaria to send a clear signal of Washington's long-term commitment to regional security.
- Commit to sending more FONOPs to the region after the war ends.
- Ensure that the Department of Defense's annual report to Congress on freedom of navigation includes language on Russia, which restricts freedom of navigation in the Black Sea.
- Implement measures to discourage Russia's aggressive posture in the EEZs of NATO countries.

Economic

- Implement the economic and energy measures set forth in the Black Sea Strategy.
- Assist Romania in expanding the Danube River as a transport corridor, for example via the Three Seas Initiative infrastructure program.
- Explore the potential for the Middle Corridor to Central Asia to diversify Europe-Asia trade routes further from Russia.
- Explore ways to apply the Three Seas Initiative to the Black Sea region more persuasively.



CONCLUSION: THE BIG PICTURE

Most experts consider 2024 a year of recovery and preparation for Ukraine and Russia, as neither nation is likely to quickly alter the situation on the ground. Both sides face similar situations and are working to change the correlation of forces to their advantage. The outcome of the war will be decided by two key factors: the political, military, and economic support Ukraine receives from the West and the limits of Russia's socio-economic resilience.

Over the next six months, the Kremlin will likely undertake a number of actions designed to improve its position in Ukraine.

First, Moscow will maintain military pressure in search of a breakthrough on the ground. It currently lacks the combined arms and massed forces to accomplish this. Nor does it have the forces to dominate large swaths of Ukrainian territory, even if it were to break through Ukrainian lines. As Moscow presses across the front in the months ahead, it likely will experience setbacks along with lo-

calized gains. Russia therefore will seek to convince others that its forces are unstoppable, however debatable this narrative is.

Second, Russia will likely continue to buy ammunition and materiel from Iran and North Korea to allow it to sustain at least its current level of conflict. Despite its mobilization of a war economy, Russia is ill prepared for a prolonged war. Moscow will likely have to rely more on its allies for ammunition and materials and on China as a facilitator. Russia may continue to get by with armor, but this is largely because it has deployed vintage stocks to replace its massive losses; these are also not unlimited and are being degraded at a continuous rate.

Photo: A small boat transfers a Romanian boarding team from Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) ship ROS *Regele Ferdinand* to SNMG2 flagship HMS *Duncan* on February 7, 2018. (NATO photo by GBRN LPhot Paul Hall)

Third, Russia will likely continue its information and psychological warfare operations, which are having some success in discouraging the West, particularly in parts of the United States but also in Europe, from continuing to support Ukraine. Moscow is achieving this via direct operations against target nations as well as by creating instability worldwide that diverts attention and resources from Eastern Europe. The Kremlin excels at this: its strengths since the Soviet era have included mustering information operations and creating diversions to sap adversaries' political will.

If external support for Kyiv dwindles pronouncedly, Russia will have opportunities to strike a significant military blow against Ukraine, which will reinforce its hybrid warfare messages. The scope and ramifications of such a development will remain debatable. But Moscow will not stop in Ukraine if it triumphs there.

Ukraine continues to plumb its asymmetric options. Lacking Russia's industrial mobilization capacity, Kyiv relies on external aid, including political support, and continues to compensate for its relatively weaker capabilities by innovating militarily.

One of the most important components of this war is how both sides have deployed attack drones. Each side has deployed these assets differently. Russia has utilized drones primarily to strike fixed civilian sites, while Ukraine has mostly targeted platforms like vehicles and ships with long-range munitions. Ukraine's priority targets are more challenging to neutralize because Russia's targets are stationary, whereas platforms move. However, Ukraine can manufacture or assemble significant numbers of drones, has grown less reliant on foreign suppliers, and may be able to overcome shortages. Meanwhile, Kyiv has become an exceptional military partner because of the real experience in modern warfare its drone forces have acquired and demonstrated.

Perhaps the most important factor for Ukraine is time. It needs to show results quickly on multiple fronts, especially in sus-

taining its combat capabilities. In addition, as Russia advances, Ukraine should deepen its defensive lines, accomplishing something akin to what Russia established in the Donbas using mines, fortifications, and reserves.

Even if Russia achieves its major objectives on the ground, it will likely face negative consequences from the war, and will be damaged from a diplomatic, economic, and strategic point of view. It also will face neighboring countries that view Moscow with heretofore unprecedented suspicion. Russia will likely press its neighbors not to partner with or join NATO. This is another reason why Russia prioritizes breaking NATO solidarity, even if it can end the war on its terms.

Should the Kremlin see itself cornered or emerge victorious in Ukraine, it may find it strategically advantageous to test NATO by staging a small-scale attack on alliance interests designed to test the group's unity. Deterrence derives from the core principle, enshrined in Article 5 of the alliance's founding treaty, that an attack on one member is an attack on all. Moscow could attempt to reset the global strategic balance by calling Article 5's bluff. This is another reason why the United States needs to view the Black Sea region as a key alliance frontier.

To maintain its global advantage, the United States should prioritize three strategic considerations.

First, the United States needs a robust, whole-of-government Black Sea strategy that considers the region's long-term strategic importance as well as the likelihood of greater regional conflict in the short run. Such a strategy should begin with an understanding of the critical significance of the maritime space to the Eurasian balance of power. It should explicitly encourage NATO allies to maintain strategic primacy in the Black Sea. The goals of such a policy should be to box out Russia, directly challenge the Kremlin in its maritime near-abroad, and bar it from the Levantine Basin. This will limit Russia's influence in Turkey, restrict Iran's access to southeastern Europe, and establish a

security infrastructure robust enough to prevent Chinese economic and strategic infiltration.

Second, the United States should rely on its NATO partners in the region. The most important ally in this context is Romania, whose geographical position and regional posture resemble those of West Germany in the Cold War, when that nation bordered the Iron Curtain separating NATO from the Warsaw Pact. The United States and its allies, especially Romania, need a more robust presence in the Black Sea area due to its significance to global competition, European security, and strategy.

Operationally, the Black Sea, with its limited maritime space and air, land, and naval connections, could benefit from a fleet of two or three dozen fast-attack vessels. These craft—armed with anti-ship missiles, supported by land-based strike elements, and boosted by minelayers—could disrupt Russian surface combatant deployments and place Russian bases at risk. Western allies should also establish a network of sensors to detect and track all Russian submarines, as well as air, naval, and underwater drones and helicopters possessing anti-submarine

warfare capabilities. Augmenting defense capabilities where the Danube meets the Black Sea would also help NATO allies assume more responsibility for defending Europe.

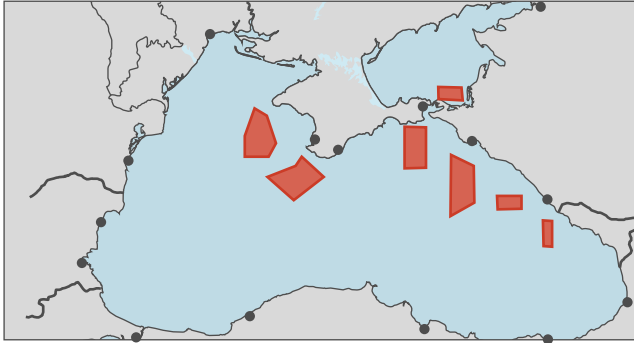
Third, US strategy for the Black Sea needs to value the region as critical to both American and European security in the long term. During the Cold War, Soviet naval forces expanded into the eastern Mediterranean, wielded power in North Africa, and pressed NATO's southern front. However, NATO possessed a strong European fleet, including US carriers and allied vessels, that could withstand active Soviet action.

This is no longer the case. If the Black Sea were to fall further under Russia's influence and Turkey were to weaken its ties with the West, European NATO littoral states would be difficult to defend. The Black Sea region is the first line of defense against Russia's drive to dominate the Eurasian landmass and, by extension—together with communist China, theocratic Iran, and others—the international system. This makes it even more important for the United States to pursue intelligent strategy and committed policymaking to ensure that the Black Sea region remains under Western influence.

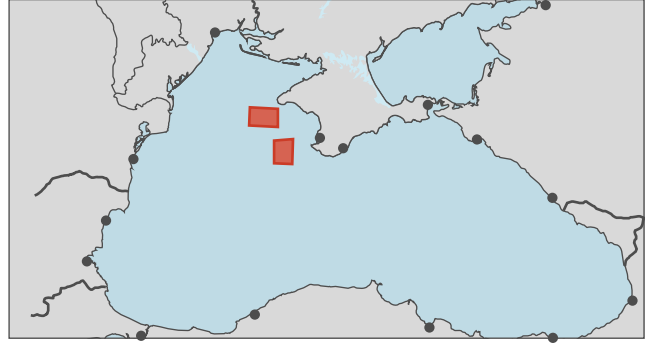
ANNEX

The following maps from the New Strategy Center show the evolution of the perimeters blocked by Russia from 2018 to 2023 in various areas of the Black Sea and in the Sea of Azov under the pretext of organizing military exercises.

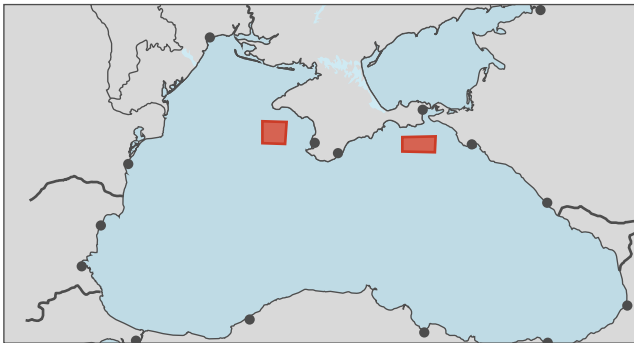
February 2018



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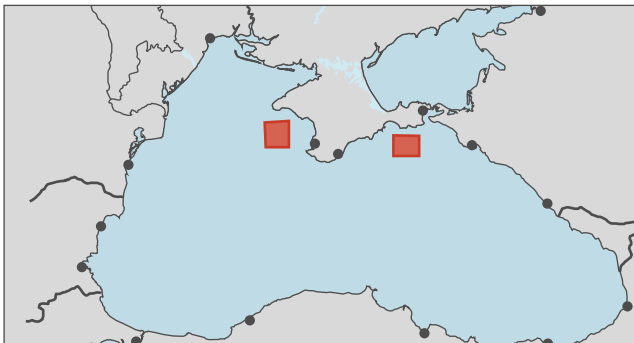
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January 2019



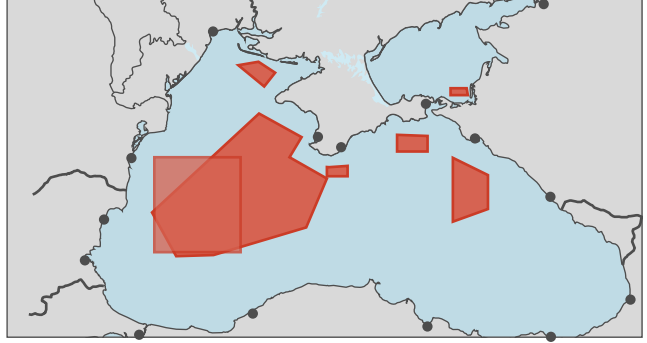
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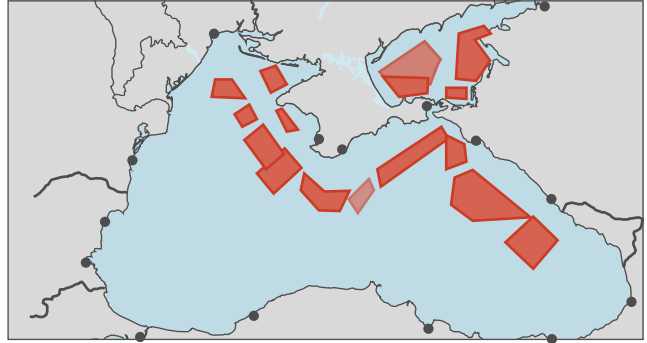
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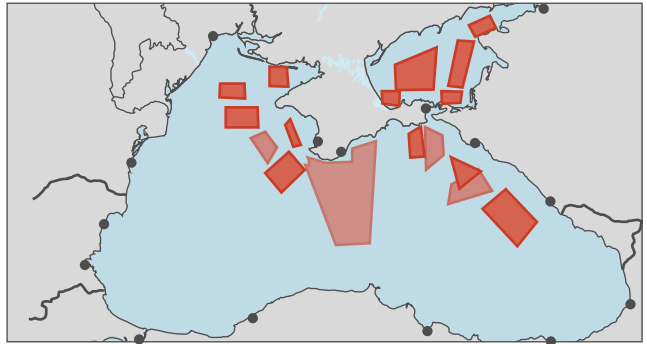
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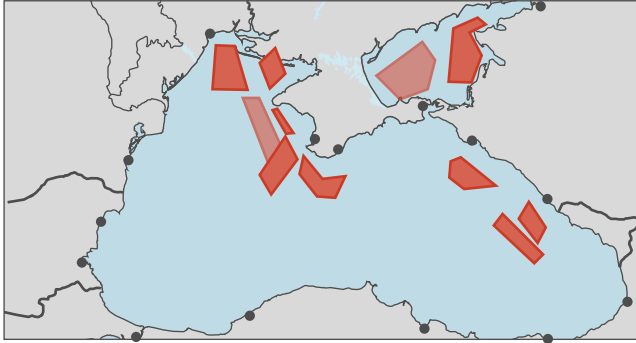
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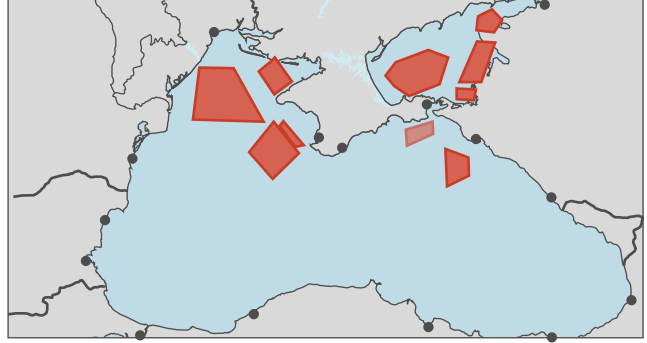
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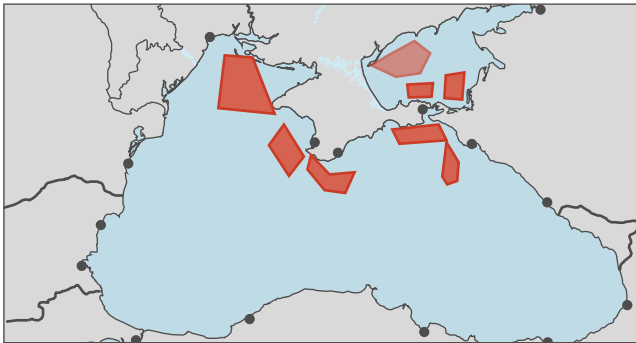
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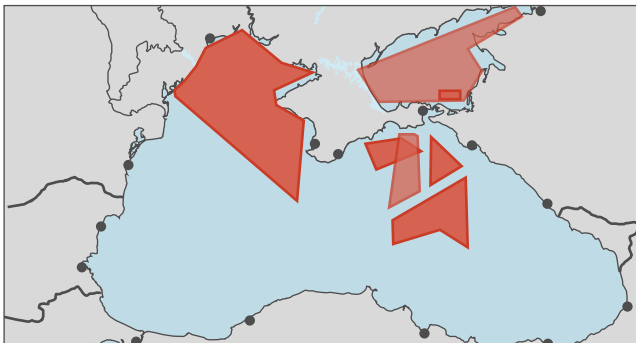
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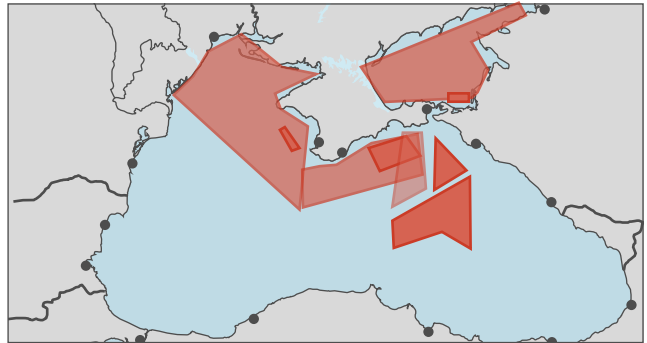
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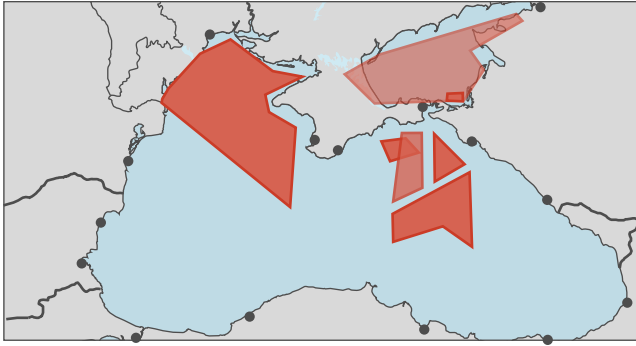
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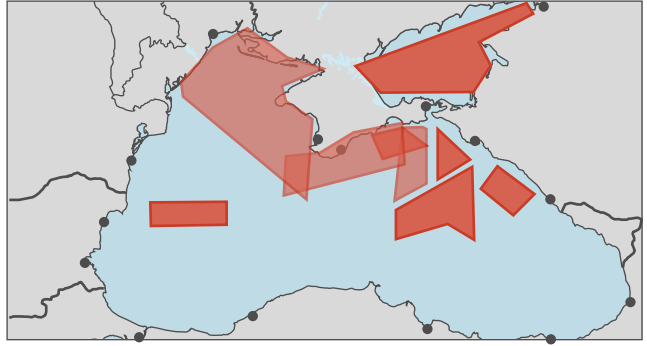
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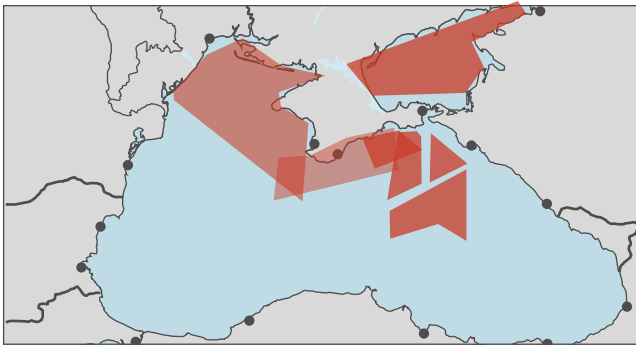
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