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PLEDGING FOR A FREE AND OPEN BLACK SEA

*Coord.
Kaush Arha, George Scutaru*



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Pledging for a Free and Open Black Sea

Coord. Kaush Arha, George Scutaru

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>Kaush Arha, George Scutaru</i>	7
WHY DOES THE GREATER BLACK SEA REGION MATTER... AND WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT? <i>Lieutenant General (ret.) Ben Hodges</i>	9
CONNECTIVITY AND GEOPOLITICS SURROUNDING THE BLACK SEA <i>Antonia Colibășanu</i>	21
MOLDOVA – TOWARDS AN UPGRADED POSITION IN THE BLACK SEA REGION <i>Iulian Groza, Mihai Mogîldea</i>	33
THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIVITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION; A PERSPECTIVE FROM UKRAINE <i>Yulia Sirko</i>	45
PLEDGING FOR A FREE AND OPEN BLACK SEA <i>Yordan Bozhilov</i>	53
MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL REVISIONISM IN THE BLACK SEA REGION – STRATEGIC MOVEMENTS AND SECURITY CHALLENGES <i>Major General (ret.) Vakhtang Kapanadze</i>	63
GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE EURASIAN TRADE CORRIDORS: KAZAKHSTAN CONNECTIVITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR <i>Anuar Buranbayev</i>	79
THREE SEAS INITIATIVE: UNLOCKING THE BLACK SEA'S POTENTIAL FOR EUROPE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY <i>Ioannis Armakolas, Romain Le Quiniou</i>	93

BRITAIN'S INTERESTS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

James Rogers, Ben Coxon.....107ITALY'S STRATEGIC RENAISSANCE IN THE
MEDITERRANEAN: LINKING THE BLACK AND BALTIC
SEAS TO THE INDO-MEDITERRANEAN *Paolo Messa*.....119RETHINKING BLACK SEA POLICY: EU AND GERMAN
APPROACHES *Stefan Meister*.....129LOGISTICS AND MOBILITY: THE BACKBONE OF
MILITARY SUCCESS *Brigadier-general (ret.) Hans Damen,
Marit Damen*.....141THE BLACK SEA – DEMONSTRATING AND VALIDATING
NATO'S CONCEPT FOR DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE
General (ret.) Sir James Everard.....153SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI! OR NOT? *George Scutaru*.....165

Appendix.....175

FOREWORD

Kaush Arha, George Scutaru

This book presents a collection of essays by authors from diverse nationalities, professions, and fields of interest. Despite their differences, all contributors share a common focus: the enduring strategic importance of the Black Sea region, explored from a variety of perspectives.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Black Sea has re-emerged as a critical geopolitical battleground and has returned to the forefront of global attention.

This book advocates for a free and open Black Sea— one that fosters trade, connectivity, energy cooperation, and global food security. A vital bridge between Europe and Asia — connecting the Baltic Sea, Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and North Africa— the Black Sea continues to fascinate, to intrigue, and to stir new ambitions for domination. The Greeks, Romans, Venetians, Genoese, Ottomans, Russians, British, and Soviets have all sought to control this economically potent area and impose their interests. Today, this legacy of competition continues, with China's increasing involvement, ongoing Russian aggression, and renewed interest from Europe—both through the European Union and individual member states.

Türkiye, which controls the straits that provide access to the Black Sea, recognizes the strategic necessity of maintaining its dominant position. Romania, home to the Danube Delta—

another key gateway to the Black Sea—strives to keep the region open for trade and energy development, resisting the rise of any single hegemonic power. The United States also holds vital strategic interests in the area, with the ability to project influence toward the Middle East, Central Asia, Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean.

As a crossroad of religions, cultures, and states, the Black Sea holds tremendous potential, not only as a point of contention but also as a source of unity, prosperity, and development.

This project was launched at the initiative of the New Strategy Center, Romania's leading think tank in the field of foreign affairs and security, serving as a call to action for a free and open Black Sea. We hope this volume provides valuable insights for policymakers and experts concerned with the region, offering inspiration for their analyses and decisions. And for readers passionate about strategic topics, we hope to spark their interest in a region that will remain one of the world's key strategic hubs.

The New Strategy Center extends its gratitude to OMV Petrom for financing this initiative. The company is actively involved in Romania's largest energy project, Neptun Deep, a development that will make Romania the European Union's largest natural gas producer starting in 2027.

Kaush Arha is President of the Free & Open Indo-Pacific Forum and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and the Krach Institute for Tech Diplomacy at Purdue, USA

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WHY DOES THE GREATER BLACK SEA REGION MATTER... AND WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

*Lieutenant General (ret.) Ben Hodges**

The current war in Ukraine, which started with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, is the result of failed deterrence. The failure of the West to demonstrate its willingness to protect its strategic interests in the greater Black Sea region, in all domains, led to power vacuums and misunderstandings of interest which in turn led to escalation of tension and then to actual conflict.

Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, seizing and illegally annexing Crimea. It then jumped over the United States' redlines in Syria in 2015 and we did nothing. The Kremlin saw our unwillingness to actually do anything about its continued violations of Minsk I and II, and its violations of freedom of navigation on the Black Sea, and other violations of international law. The Kremlin saw that we were unwilling or unprepared to actually do anything about their unlawful aggression in the region and so they believed we would continue to do nothing meaningful which led them to believe they could go ahead and launch a large-scale invasion of the rest of Ukraine to "finish the job". And so here we are.

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Why does the Black Sea matter?

But why should we care about Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia? Indeed, why should we care about the greater Black Sea region. Why does the Black Sea region matter to NATO and to the US?

The Black Sea region is where Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Russia all come together. The region is at the center of four great forces: democracy on the western side of the region, Russian military aggression or support for aggression from Georgia to Serbia, Chinese investments and intrusions in the east, and instability in the Middle East to the south of the region.

It is the literal and philosophical frontier between liberal democracy and autocracy. It matters to both the West and to the Kremlin. But U.S. and Western strategy in the regions has been inconsistent, inadequate, and under-resourced wholly and has failed to prevent Russian aggression.

We have been unable or unwilling to think strategically about the region, focusing instead on individual countries as if they were islands. We also have consistently failed to challenge Russian aggression in all its forms, including violations of international air space, restricting freedom of navigation, disregarding sanctions, shipping stolen grain from Ukraine to Syria, interference in the domestic affairs and elections of other nations, and multiple other examples.

Challenging the Kremlin with military means only, in its self-perceived sphere of influence, reveals our lack of an effective long-term strategy, and has resulted in Russia's illegal 11-year war against Ukraine and a failure of democracy in Georgia.

Ukraine

Clearly, the immediate challenge in the greater Black Sea region is helping Ukraine defeat Russia, re-establishing its sovereignty back to the 1991 internationally-recognized borders. This is not charity for Ukraine. This is strategically important to the West for several reasons. First, Russia's war against Ukraine has severely disrupted food and energy supplies for Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, affecting prices globally. It has also continued Russia's weaponization of refugees by putting millions of Ukrainians on the road into Europe, adding enormous pressure to those social systems and creating friction between allies and partners. Second, should the West choose to allow Ukraine to fail, then Russia is likely to continue its aggression, pausing for a couple of years to rebuild and rearm and then following through on its threats to invade the Republic of Moldova and the Baltic States, leading to a war between NATO and Russia. Helping Ukraine defeat Russia in Ukraine is the best way to prevent a conflict involving NATO countries. Third, helping Ukraine defeat Russia will deter China from making the same terrible miscalculation that the Kremlin made. But if we choose to allow Ukraine to fail, then the Chinese will not be very impressed with what we say about Taiwan, the Philippines, or the South China Sea.

We don't know how the war will end... Our failure to have a strategy for the Black Sea region, to clearly define the end state we wanted for Ukraine as a part of that region, resulted in weak, inconsistent support and a series of bad policies that were intended to prevent escalation, but only served to prolong the conflict well beyond when Ukraine actually could have defeated Russia. Now, the Trump Administration, with Europe mostly watching, is pressing Russia and Ukraine to negotiate an end to the combat, though there is still no description of

what the desired end state should be other than “to stop the fighting”. This, of course, plays into the Kremlin’s hands, as they have no intention of respecting any sort of ceasefire or negotiated outcome unless they are forced to do so.

Conversations about a peacekeeping force or peace-enforcement force are premature until we know what sort of agreement is to be implemented. The size and composition of that force should not be determined until we have a clear understanding of their mission. Whatever it is, this force cannot be a few thousand blue-helmeted soldiers from developing countries who will be shoved aside by the Russians on Day One. Rather, it will have to be strong, consisting mostly of European, American, and Canadian troops, with the right rules of engagement, unity of command, and all the capabilities to deter Russia from violating any agreed ceasefire and settlement. It should also include an integrated air, drone, and missile defense already in place before troops actually arrive in Ukraine.

Strategy

But we can’t think of Ukraine as if it’s an island. Instead, we need to look at it as a part of the greater Black Sea region, a very large, important nation on the Black Sea. So what do we do? What should a strategy for the greater Black Sea region include, after the war in Ukraine has concluded?

It must start with clearly identifying the desired strategic end state for the region, making it clear that security and stability in the greater Black Sea region are strategic interests for NATO, the EU, and the United States. The desired strategic end state should be developed in cooperation with all of our allies and partners in the region. Elements of such an end state should include: ensuring the sovereignty of all littoral nations, ensuring freedom of navigation, building and protecting the

infrastructure for **development** of the economic potential of the region, preventing **unfair** or illegal activities by China and Russia, integrated air and missile defense of the region, and developing and **exercising** NATO’s regional plans for the defense of the greater Black Sea region. The end state should include a clear demonstration of our focus and vision for the region, and represent the united political will of the relevant nations. The ideological end state for this strategy for the greater Black Sea region should be that this is where NATO and the West hold the line against anti-democratic forces, take the initiative, establish our influence, and protect our strategic interests.

This strategy should clearly identify our priorities, and the ends, ways, and means to achieve the desired end state. We need to shape events through military alliances, diplomacy, private investment, and effective deterrence instead of reacting to, ignoring, or accepting Kremlin coercion, threats, and other interventions.

Part of a strategy for the greater Black Sea region would include developing policies, forces, and measures for preventing or punishing Russian illegal acts of aggression known generally as “Hybrid Warfare”. Getting rid of this name, “hybrid warfare,” would be a good start to preventing it. The activities general considered ‘hybrid’ should be considered acts of war, even if they don’t include kinetic means. The Russians will continue to press any signs of weakness to expand their influence and create friction between allies and partners. They did this extensively against Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova before the large scale invasion of Ukraine and continue to do so today. They won’t stop until we, the West, inflict some sort of pain to cause them to stop through economic measures, diplomatic means, seizure of assets, and strict enforcement of law. This, of course, requires full cooperation by the relevant states.

We should follow the lead of Baltic nations whose heads of government and state recently met in Helsinki to discuss how to stop the continued illegal activities by ships linked to Russia and China, which have been destroying underwater infrastructure. Their conclusions and proposed actions were described in their joint statement released 14 January 2025, and include the following specific measures and commitments: improved surveillance and tracking of suspicious vessels; increased cooperation with NATO's Maritime Command and all littoral nations; urgent enhancement of relevant defensive capabilities; stronger cooperation with private-sector infrastructure operators; and greater infrastructure resilience.

A comprehensive strategy for the greater Black Sea region might be developed using the familiar DIME construct. The DIME mnemonic is a useful framework for understanding the four major categories of national or alliance power — Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economy — that would form the foundation of such a strategy. A description of some specific actions that should be considered is listed in each of these four categories below.

Diplomacy

Shaping events through alliances, international organizations, and the enforcement of international law requires diplomatic clarity and cooperation. There are multiple relevant international organizations, in addition to NATO and the EU, that govern maritime activities, with commerce, and all the other aspects of life and activities affecting the greater Black Sea region. An effective strategy would seek to work in each of these agencies, organizations and institutions. This would be an important part of holding Russia accountable for its routine violations of international law.

We, the United States, need to think about a new, stronger, and more consistent relationship with our ally, Türkiye. There is a lack of trust between the two nations. It's time for Türkiye -USA 2.0. It should be a priority to find ways to work more closely, recognizing Türkiye's unique security concerns to its south, in Syria and Iran, as well as in the Caucasus and the Balkans, while encouraging them to do more to cooperate in the Black Sea, including with non-littoral states.

Recent developments in Syria offer opportunities in this regard. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has forced Russia to evacuate its air and naval bases in Syria. Russia is now looking for a new home for its Mediterranean naval forces - most likely in Libya. But it will be a long time before it can replicate the capabilities it had in Tartus and its other facilities in Syria.

The last Russian submarine has just departed the Mediterranean. The opportunity for the return of three million Syrian refugees back home would take an enormous burden off of Türkiye and help to rebuild Syrian society. It also offers an opportunity for countering Iran's threats against the West and its support for Russian aggression in Ukraine. Working closely in the full range of diplomacy with Türkiye is in the strategic interest of all of us.

Information

Clarity in communications from each of the nations of the greater Black Sea region as well as from NATO, the EU, and other nations having interests here such as the United States, Germany, United Kingdom and France, would be powerful. This would include supporting democracy and the rule of law in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The recent joint statement of 14 January 2025, by the heads of government and state who met in Helsinki to address

the destructive sabotage by vessels controlled by Russia, is a very good example of the clarity needed in our strategic communications. Importantly, this Joint Statement specifically calls out Russia's "shadow fleet":

"Russia's use of the so-called shadow Fleet poses a particular threat to the maritime and environmental security in the Baltic Sea region and globally. This reprehensible practice also threatens the Integrity of undersea infrastructure, increases risks connected to sea-dumped chemical munitions, and significantly supports funding of Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine. We are taking robust steps to address these threats. We reserve our rights, in accordance with international law, to take action against any suspected vessels that circumvent sanctions and threaten our security, infrastructure and the environment. In close coastal state co-operation, we are increasing surveillance of the vessels, including the inspections of vessel insurance certificates. Additionally, further measures, including the introduction of tracking tools and the extension of sanctions targeting the shadow fleet, will be put into practice. We encourage further EU-NATO cooperation in responding to the threats caused by the reckless activities of vessels serving Russian cargo flow."

This is the sort of clear, firm, unified language and action that NATO, the EU, and the nations of the greater Black Sea region should use to protect our strategic interests in the region.

Military

Türkiye is the largest NATO country in the greater Black Sea region but its strategic interests to the south and east - outside of NATO's official Area of Operations - presently occupy greater part of its attention. So, almost by default, Romania has become NATO's center of gravity on the Black

Sea. Its geography makes it the ideal place to focus air, land, and sea power for the region. A vital part of NATO's efforts to protect its allies in the region is the NATO base at Mihail Kogalniceanu International Airport and Airbase, known as Camp MK. The development of Camp MK as a logistics, training, and transportation hub for NATO air and land forces has been essential to improving the NATO Black Sea air policing mission as well as improving NATO's deterrence capabilities in the region. It gives NATO a solid foundation for deterring Russian aggression in the region and serves as a hub for contingency operations to protect allies in the greater Black Sea region and into the Balkans. The establishment of Camp MK was a means of seizing the strategic initiative as opposed to always reacting to whatever Russia was doing in the area. This is deterrence: demonstrating the will and capability to the Russians that we are prepared to bear any cost to defend our strategic interests. Romania is key to this.

Türkiye's enforcement of the Montreux convention was very helpful in preventing Russia from bringing in additional naval capabilities to replace what it was losing to Ukraine's asymmetric attacks. Our strategy should incorporate Montreux, not seek to change or work around it. We should follow the Ukrainian model which has changed the character of naval warfare, using air and maritime drones, shore-based anti-ship missiles, long-range precision strike capabilities, and special operations. Maintain a full-time NATO naval presence on the Black Sea, integrating littoral state navies from Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria with rotational presence of non-littoral state navies such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany in order to keep shipping lanes free of mines and to enforce freedom of navigation.