A New Security Reality
Strategic Approaches for the Wider Black Sea Region

Yevgeniya Gaber, PhD

Introduction

This report summarizes expert recommendations and discussions at the March 2024 two-day Romanian Parliamentary Black Sea Forum and the Black Sea Security Conference, held under the Chatham House Rule and organized by the George C. Marshall Center in partnership with the Romanian "Carol I" National Defense University in Bucharest. The paper begins with a broad overview of the strategic environment and key challenges and concludes with specific policy recommendations from the participants for the United States, the EU, and NATO.

Experts and policymakers from Bulgaria, Romania, Türkiye, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Germany, the United States, and NATO addressed a broad range of issues that have shaped security dynamics in the Black Sea region in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These issues include maritime, military, economic, and energy security, hybrid threats, protracted conflicts and strategic competition in the Black Sea. Participants discussed ways to enhance the security and prosperity of the Black Sea region, assessed the threat perceptions of regional countries, exchanged views on the possible role of NATO and the United States in the light of the new US Black Sea strategy, and provided policy recommendations.

Conference speakers included representatives of ministries and public institutions, academics, and security analysts, including from the George C. Marshall Center, "Carol I" National Defense University of Romania, Europe Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Hudson Institute, CEPA, Atlantic Council, European Center for International Political Economy, Center for Defense Strategies of Ukraine, Bosporus Observer, Sofia Security Forum, German Council on Foreign Relations, European Policy Center, and others.

Strategic Environment

A New Center of Gravity

Since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and its 2014 occupation of Crimea, the regional and European security center of gravity has shifted eastward to the Black Sea region (BSR). Russia has taken advantage of US and EU strategic ambiguity and has used this time to strengthen its position and increase its military buildup throughout the region. Yet, while the illegal annexation of Crimea resulted in the capture or destruction of much of Ukraine's naval assets by March 2024, Ukraine, a country with no significant conventional navy, had managed to sink or damage one-third of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in a multistage sea and air campaign.

The isolation of Crimea and the degradation of Russia's naval capabilities are extremely important not only as a way to reduce the number of attacks on the Ukrainian mainland, but also as the first step toward the liberation of Crimea. Without the de-occupation of the peninsula, Russia will continue to use the peninsula as a military foothold to maintain full control over the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Black Sea and further destabilize the region. Experts note that with no major breakthrough on land in sight, the battle for the Black Sea has become "a new center of gravity in the war," as Ukraine's successes in the maritime domain have allowed it to gradually weaken Russia's military potential and severely damage the Kremlin's propaganda highlighting symbolic "red lines" attached to the "special status" of Crimea and the Russian Black Sea Fleet in this war.

Experts shared a broad consensus that the next step in the Black Sea should be for the United States and its European Allies and partners to help Kyiv in its ongoing efforts to degrade Russia's naval capabilities, the Black Sea Fleet in particular. The US and other NATO allies should enable Ukraine to target Crimea in order to sever Russia's logistical lifeline to its forces operating in southern Ukraine.

Since the BSF supports Russian land operations, its steady degradation will have strategic implications for the course of the war. Although the two theaters of war - land and sea - are often considered separately, experts emphasize the significant indirect implications of Ukraine's successes in the maritime domain for the next land operations. Approached separately, although Kyiv's strikes on the Russian BSF may be a political embarrassment for the Kremlin, they bear more symbolic meaning rather than practical utility for the land battle. However, winning the "battle for the Black Sea" is essential for the restoration of freedom of navigation and, subsequently, the liberation of Crimea.

Black Sea Security: From the Caspian to the Mediterranean

One generally overlooked aspect of Russia's Black Sea military planning is its strategic connection to the Caspian Sea, which allows Moscow to advance its war aims in Ukraine and maintain the flow of Iranian weapons to the region.

The militarization of the Black Sea and Crimea is also critical to Russia's resumption of power projection in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's expanded

missile, naval, and air force capabilities, including nuclear capabilities, pose a security threat to both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Both of Russia's campaigns—Syria and Libya—would have been impossible or complicated without the seizure of the Crimean Peninsula, which significantly enhanced Russia's A2/AD bubbles and secured a lifeline for the so-called Syrian Express, a route for transferring weapons between occupied Crimea and Syria. Therefore, Moscow's actions in the Black Sea and adjacent areas are complementary elements of Russia's grand strategy, setting the stage for further regional expansion.

Shifting Balances and Great Power Competition

Russia

Russia has thus far failed to turn Ukraine into a landlocked country through military pressure. On several occasions, Russia has tested Türkiye's Montreux Convention Article 19 resolve to keep the Turkish Straits closed, but Ankara has not changed its policy and is highly unlikely to do so in the future. If Ankara were to capitulate to Kremlin demands, other nonlittoral states could send naval assets to the Black Sea, to the detriment of both nations. Turkish leadership and public opinion see the United States as a threat to Turkish national interests in the region, but they also view Russia as a strategic rival for Black Sea naval superiority. Therefore, Ankara's long-term regional strategy focuses on maintaining a delicate balancing act that would allow Ukraine to gradually destroy Russia's capabilities without inviting US warships into the Black Sea. Indeed, Türkiye is one of the main beneficiaries of Ukraine's maritime successes, as Ankara has gained the upper hand in the Black Sea while Russia's naval power declines.

For Russia, the balance of maritime power is changing rapidly and not in its favor, although it still possesses significant naval and A2AD capabilities. Indeed, Russia has quickly adapted to the changing character of the war and managed to establish illegal networks, financing its war machine with the proceeds of transnational organized crime at sea. Moscow has also freely used auxiliary, "civilian" ships to transfer weapons through the Bosporus, while Ankara turned a blind eye to these violations. Russia has also maintained key naval assets including rebuilding/restoration facilities, redeployment of small and medium-class warships, dry docks, and loading capabilities. Moreover, the larger reshuffling of Russian naval leadership reveals Moscow's struggle to find a new strategy to challenge Ukrainian successes in using unmanned surface vehicles to damage and destroy Russian warships both in port and at sea.

Ultimately, experts agree Russia's naval superiority is likely to continue to erode as the war continues and Ukraine develops its asymmetric tactics of unmanned autonomous vehicle attacks on the Russian Black Sea fleet and maintenance facilities.

Türkiye

As the gatekeeper of the Black Sea, Türkiye's strategic objectives include: (1) avoiding a wider NATO-Russia conflict; (2) strictly adhering to the Montreux Convention and the traditional "regional ownership" approach, which limits access to the Black Sea for all nonlittoral states; (3) deterring, without openly challenging, Russia's military and naval superiority; (4) ensuring Ukraine does not fail and that its southern regions are not fully occupied by Russia, thus turning

the Black Sea into a "Russian lake," while at the same time trying to prevent Russia's collapse or disintegration; and (5) strengthening Ankara's defense industry, naval capabilities, and diplomatic clout in the region.

Despite maintaining strong economic ties with Moscow, Türkiye attaches strategic importance to its relationship with Ukraine, which it sees as a counterbalance to Russia, a key element of Ankara's regional strategy, and an important partner in the defense industry. Since February 2022, Türkiye's policy has shifted several times, sometimes favoring Ukraine and the West, sometimes tilting toward Moscow. While the region remains sensitive to fluctuations in bilateral relations between Ankara and Washington, it also creates a window of opportunity for improving US- Türkiye relations, as the core interests of both parties—territorial integrity of Ukraine and deterrence of Russia—coincide.

China

As aptly stated by one participant, "If Russia is a storm, China is a climate change." While China has no end-game scenarios for the Black Sea, it has increased investments in critical infrastructure, transport routes, seaports, railways, grain terminals, and telecommunications in the wider Black Sea region, from the Western Balkans to the South Caucasus where China has a special interest in Georgia.

The PRC is learning from Russia's successes and mistakes in its war in Ukraine, closely monitoring international reactions, for example in regard to the efficacy of sanctions, and testing the West's resolve to defend the international rules-based order in a bold and coherent manner. China benefits, as well, from the demand for technology-driven exports and new patterns of well-coordinated dissemination of anti-Western narratives in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

China is also trying to promote its soft influence by playing the role of a neutral peacemaker. Although Ukraine stresses the importance of involving Beijing in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's "peace formula," especially in the areas of nuclear and food security, the PRC is not seen as a credible mediator in peace negotiations with Russia, and China's "peace plan" echoes most of Russia's demands.

Axes of Cooperation

The Russia-Iran-China nexus in the Black Sea has rapidly evolved from occasional deliveries of Iranian drones to support Russia's war effort in Ukraine to joint arms production and long-term comprehensive security arrangements, including but not limited to modernization of the region's military infrastructure, increased interoperability, and cooperation in space. As Iranian drones and loitering munitions continue to attack Ukrainian seaports and Danube River infrastructure, they also pose an increasing threat to NATO Allies in the Black Sea and Eastern Europe. The new great power competition in the region sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to the further consolidation of the Belarus-Russia-Iran-North Korea-China axis, bringing Russian-Iranian military cooperation to NATO's doorstep.

Key Challenges

Military Security: Deterring Russian Aggression

Russia poses multiple conventional and irregular warfare threats to the region. These include the ongoing Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia and plans to establish a naval base in Ochamchire (Abkhazia, Georgia); its military actions against Ukraine since 2014; Russian forces in Transnistria (Moldova) and the South Caucasus; the military buildup in the Black and Mediterranean seas; and the multiple hybrid threats to Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye.

Intensifying Russian attacks on critical infrastructure in Ukraine's border regions pose a growing threat to Romania and Poland, increasing the risk to NATO territory. At this point, there is no reason for Russia to stop in Ukraine unless it is stopped in Ukraine. Escalatory rhetoric of the Russian leadership toward Moldova, Kazakhstan, and the Baltic states points to the potential next targets of Russian invasion. Further, the growing evidence of the Kremlin's "active measures" in European countries leaves no doubt about Russia's real strategic plans. Further escalation is inevitable if NATO Allies continue to send mixed messages about their long-term strategy toward the Black Sea region, whether it is seen as an integral part of Euro-Atlantic security structures or as a gray zone in between NATO and Russia.

Economic Security: Countering Illegal Russian Activities at Sea

Russia derives a significant portion of its income from commercial activities—legal and illegal—that depend on uninterrupted access to and trade through the Black Sea. It is the main sea route used by Russia to sell goods looted from Ukraine. Furthermore, all Russian-produced grain is exported from the Azov and Black Sea ports, and the Black Sea is a major trade corridor through which dual-use goods and spare parts manufactured in Europe and China enter Russia.

Russia conducts myriad illegal activities and malign behavior in the Black Sea including piracy, looting of grain, coal, and other commodities from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine; violations of the oil price cap; transfer of weapons through the Straits in violation of the Montreux Convention; electronic warfare; blockade of the Sea of Azov and parts of the Black Sea basin; disruption of the SLOC and impeding the free transit of commercial and naval vessels. The Black Sea also allows Russia access to foreign-made products and components, thereby circumventing sanctions. Thus, Russia is allowed to conduct military and commercial operations, while interfering with the economic activities of other countries and obstructing freedom of navigation.

Maritime Security: Clearing Mines and Protecting Sea Lines of Communication

Floating mines in the Black Sea pose multiple hazards. These mines, including river mines and possibly antivehicle and antipersonnel mines, place at risk navigation, humanitarian corridors that enable the export of Ukrainian goods, sea and river port infrastructure, tourism, biodiversity in the marine environment, and critical and energy infrastructure.

Energy Security: Combating Weaponization of Energy Supplies and Seabed Warfare

For Russia, hydrocarbons are not simply a market commodity but a key element of the hybrid toolkit to advance its strategic interests. Thus, diversification of supply routes and development of national reserves are of utmost importance for security and resilience of regional countries.

Due to Russian aggression, Ukraine is currently unable to develop its offshore gas reserves. However, Romania, Türkiye, and Bulgaria have offshore fields that can soon be tapped, potentially making the Black Sea a hub for gas development in southern Europe. The largest gas fields include Türkiye's Sakarya, estimated at 405 billion cubic meters (bcm), with total Turkish offshore reserves in the Black Sea reaching 540 bcm that are expected to come on line in 2025; Romania's Neptun Deep, which has 100 bcm and is expected to be active by 2027; and Bulgaria's Khan Asparuh is estimated at 60 bcm.

Given that the successful development of these reserves in the Black Sea would effectively reduce the region's dependence on Russian fossil fuels and thus undermine Moscow's energy strategy in the region, the Kremlin is expected to employ a variety of hybrid tactics to prevent the implementation of these offshore energy projects in Romania's and Bulgaria's exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which, unlike territorial waters, are not covered by NATO's Article 5. Russian tactics may include false flag operations, provocations, laying mines to endanger offshore gas platforms, the so-called "war of drills"—closing large areas of the Black Sea to navigation under the pretext of military exercises, electronic warfare such as GPS jamming and spoofing, seabed warfare, aggressive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities, and other steps to challenge the ability to develop energy resources in the Black Sea. These actions would not only pose a significant threat to the critical infrastructure and safety of navigation in the Black Sea region, but would also result in construction delays, increased risks for operators, and increased insurance costs, for example.

Energy Security: Addressing the Nuclear Question

Like Gazprom, Rosatom has always served as a "continuation of Russian policy by other means." Its unchallenged presence and expanding projects in the region raise serious concerns.

Having turned Europe's largest nuclear power plant, Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP), into a military base with military personnel, weapons and explosives stored near the power units, Rosatom is now building the Akkuyu NPP in Türkiye. Strategically located on the NATO country's Mediterranean coast, the Akkuyu NPP can potentially be used for a variety of hybrid activities and to bolster Russia's ISR and A2AD capabilities in the region. In March 2024, Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Alparslan Bayraktar announced that following the established cooperation with Rosatom for the construction of the Akkuyu plant in Mersin, Ankara was now keen to extend this partnership for the construction of the second plant in Sinop in the Black Sea region.

Political Security: Mitigating Protracted Conflicts and Political Destabilization

Moldova

Since 2022, the perception of the Transnistria problem has changed significantly. Discussions have shifted from a "special status" for the so-called Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR)

to a clear recognition of the PMR as a Russian-occupied territory. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the general perception of the Russian threat in Chisinau has also changed dramatically. With the radicalization of Russian rhetoric—Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has referred to the Moldovan government as the "Chisinau regime," and former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev has claimed "there is no such state as Moldova"—there is a clear understanding that if Ukraine fails, it would not be long before Russia invades Moldova. As a result, Moldova has increased its defense budget from 0.3 percent to 0.6 percent of GDP, with a target of 1.5 percent in the next few years. The neutrality status enshrined in Moldova's constitution is now under discussion, and it is expected that Russia will do everything possible, including economic leverage, political warfare, and irregular warfare, to block the pro-European reforms and systemic changes that would bring the country closer to the EU and NATO.

The 100,000 Ukrainian refugees currently in Moldova increase social pressure and can also be used to incite protests. The success of reforms and the improvement of living standards in Moldova are crucial to solving the Transnistrian problem, as 400,000 of the 700,000 PMR citizens already hold Moldovan passports. However, political developments in Moldova depend largely on Russia's defeat or success in Ukraine.

South Caucasus

The security situation in the South Caucasus has improved with the restoration of Azerbaijan's control over its sovereign territories, although demarcation and delimitation processes will take time. The desecuritization of the regional agenda should also have a positive impact on domestic reforms in Armenia and its rapprochement with the EU. However, Russia's 102nd military base in Gyumri and other Russian military facilities in the region appear to be firmly rooted and will maintain their presence at least until November 2025.

Georgia is the main target of Russia's hybrid warfare in the region. Russia's tactics include pro-Russian government policies and Russian government-supported activities. Since it is often believed that whoever controls Georgia controls the South Caucasus, Russia has focused its active measures in the South Caucasus on Georgia in an attempt to control political developments, energy, and transportation routes in the region. Moscow retains the ability to conduct limited military actions from its 4th and 7th bases in the occupied territories of Georgia. The threat of Russian forces re-entering the country have given the Georgian government an excuse to justify its recent crackdown on civil rights.

Societal Security: Countering Hybrid Threats and Democratic Backsliding

Against the backdrop of multiple elections across the Black Sea region in 2024, the degree of penetration of Russian influence among regional political elites and the risks of Russian interference in elections has been extremely high. In most cases the positions of liberal and pro-European parties have been undermined by multiple security challenges, including implications of Russia's war in Ukraine, economic turbulence, dependence on Russian gas supplies, populist rhetoric from Russia-backed far-right/far-left parties, disinformation campaigns and Russian PSYOPs, the spread of anti-Western propaganda and "neutrality" narratives, and political corruption. In Georgia, Bulgaria, and Romania, the Russian Orthodox Church plays an important

role in cognitive warfare. (Pro-)Russian media outlets and Russian cultural associations make it difficult to counter Russian influence in the information sphere.

In some cases, a government's turn against democracy is necessary for the sake of personal political survival or the consolidation of the ruling regime; in others, it is the result of growing Russian influence, as in the case of Georgia's introduction of a foreign agent law and the crackdown on civil protests. The failure of the United States and the EU to support civil societies and defend liberal institutions in the BSR countries would undermine the credibility of the Western democratic model and favor authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China.

Policy Recommendations

Strategic Vision and Political Commitment

- **Provide clear foreign policy direction.** The United States should communicate the its strategy for the Black Sea region in a clear, concise, and consistent manner, including an end state for Russia's war in Ukraine, one that enables Russia's defeat and enhances NATO BSR deterrence and defense capabilities. The United States should make clear its long-term commitment to the region, and the role of the Black Sea in foreign and defense policy, and transatlantic security in particular.

- **Support NATO membership for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia**. Strategic ambiguity, gray zones, and buffer zones have never deterred an aggressor and will not do so in the future. The lack of political will to turn the Black Sea into a so-called NATO lake will enable new acts of Russian aggression and irregular warfare in the region, embolden Iran to increase military cooperation with Moscow, and encourage China to expand its presence in the Black Sea and take a more aggressive stance in the Indo-Pacific. Anchoring the Black Sea region in the Euro-Atlantic area will significantly strengthen NATO's eastern flank. Furthermore, inviting Ukraine to join the Alliance would strengthen NATO's naval power to deter Russia's BSF—the only viable option for increasing NATO's presence in the Black Sea as long as the Montreux Convention is in place.

- **Expand cooperation with Türkiye**. Türkiye's Black Sea policy is rooted in historical experience, economic drivers, political considerations, and geopolitical imperatives. The Montreux Convention, at the core of Ankara's regional policy since the founding of the Republic, is seen as a central pillar of Turkish sovereignty. Any attempt to challenge Türkiye's role as "guardian of the Straits" would create additional friction. Moreover, the benefits of keeping the Russian fleet out of the region currently outweigh the benefits of sending NATO warships to the Black Sea. Currently, the only realistic way to benefit from Türkiye's strategic position in the region is to support the trilateral Bulgarian-Romanian-Turkish initiative and/or create space for Ankara-led NATO operations in the Black Sea, thus avoiding revisiting the Montreux Convention.

Türkiye can play a constructive role in deterring Russia, even without openly confronting it. Ankara could realize its potential as a broadly supported regional power by working to secure freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. NATO Allies should send a clear message that Türkiye will not be left alone to confront an aggressive Russia should tensions escalate in the Black Sea.

This would not only help secure the Black Sea; it would also help address one of Türkiye's long-standing grievances with its transatlantic partners: a lack of trust and coordinated action.

Defense Cooperation and Maritime Security

- **Enable Ukraine to liberate Crimea by military means**. The US should increase its security assistance and military aid to improve Ukraine's antisurface, antiship and antisubmarine warfare capabilities, and to promote the development and use of highly effective unmanned naval platforms.
- **Back Kyiv's successful maritime counteroffensive**. Focus on antiship missiles, uncrewed autonomous vehicles, robotic warfare capabilities, and innovative technologies that can make a difference without violating the Montreux Convention. Improve intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance capabilities.
- **Enhance Romania's and Bulgaria's air defense and ISR capabilities**. Support national defense industries and deploy additional coastal defense, antiship, and antisubmarine warfare systems to NATO's eastern flank. Strengthen sea-control and sea-denial capabilities to secure littoral port infrastructure and SLOCs. Deny Russia the ability to blockade territorial waters, EEZs, or target deployed assets in the northwestern part of the Black Sea. Establish a regional A2/AD hub in Romania with additional air and missile defense systems, radars, surveillance capabilities, and antidrone and electronic warfare systems.
- **Enhance NATO's defense and deterrence capabilities in the region**. Rapidly increase NATO's forward presence with boots on the ground.
- **Support shipbuilding industries in the littoral states.** The growth of shipbuilding, especially in Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, will help overcome Montreux Convention limitations. Consider supporting joint production in Ukraine and other neighboring countries under the existing bilateral agreements.
- **Enhance security cooperation with Türkiye and support Türkiye-Ukraine defense ties**. Growing Turkish-Ukrainian strategic cooperation and joint projects in the defense industry could become a backbone of the postwar regional security architecture, effectively deterring Russia and strengthening the European pillar of transatlantic security and defense.
- **Strengthen regional security cooperation and coordination among NATO littoral states --Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye--and partners--Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia.** Since the Montreux Convention and [Türkiye's policy of "regional ownership"](#) will not change in the foreseeable future, US policy in the region should focus on supporting [Turkish-Bulgarian-Romanian cooperation](#) and the Turkish-Ukrainian defense partnership as counterweights to Russia and Iran in the Black Sea.
- **Support and expand the Black Sea Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Task Force**. This trilateral Bulgarian-Romanian-Turkish initiative should be further expanded both geographically, to include Ukrainian territorial waters in coordination with the Ukrainian Navy, and functionally, to become permanent and evolve into a full-fledged patrol mission to ensure freedom of navigation and security of SLOCs in the northwestern part of the Black Sea.
- **Provide air support for the MCM Task Force**. The United States, the UK, and Türkiye could consider deploying their air policing assets in support of the MCM Task Force to

ensure the uninterrupted functioning of the humanitarian (export) corridors and freedom of navigation.

- **Strengthen NATO air policing efforts and bolster air defense over the Black Sea**. With Türkiye joining to the European Sky Shield initiative and deploying four F-16 fighter jets at Fetesti Air Base in Romania to support NATO's air policing efforts to secure the airspace on NATO's eastern flank and in the Black Sea region, the Alliance should benefit from the allied air and missile defense capabilities to protect the skies over the Black Sea from Russian and Iranian missile and drone attacks on seaports and critical infrastructure. Air defense systems on NATO's eastern flank could be used for forward defense of NATO members, such as Romania and Poland, by intercepting Russian targets in Ukrainian airspace.
- **Enhance interoperability and resume, when possible, joint training, naval exercises, port calls, and NATO's rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea basin.**
- **Consider establishing a situational awareness center to monitor and register Russia's malign activities in the Black Sea**.
- **Consider alternative routes to the Black Sea such as the Caspian Sea, Volga-Don and Rhine-Main-Danube canals**. In the context of regional security, military planners in the United States and NATO should see the most extreme point of the alliance's Black Sea frontier as the southern shoreline of the Caspian Sea. Closely monitor the Volga-Don Canal, which is part of the unified deep-water system of European Russia and provides the shortest shipping route between the Caspian and the Black Sea basins.
- **Support the territorial integrity and sovereignty, of** Ukraine, **Georgia and Moldova**. Russia's military presence in the occupied territories across the Black Sea region threatens not only NATO's east, but also its south, which should be considered in the process of regional defense planning.
- **Support the EU and NATO aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova, and the people of Georgia.** NATO membership is key to security of these countries, while EU integration is crucial for good governance and democratic reforms. The lack of a clear US strategy for the region and the ambiguity of European partners regarding the end state for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia embolden Russia for new acts of aggression in the region. As one participant put it, "2024 is a now-or-never moment for Russia in the South Caucasus. We don't need a second Bucharest Declaration; we don't need buffer zones with Russia. We need a bold and clear approach of NATO in the region." In a way, the West needs to learn from Russia - first "assert your claim to the territory" and then back it up with political decisions. It is important to anchor the Black Sea countries in the West. The security assurances given to Sweden and Finland to deter Russia in the period after they applied and before they joined NATO could be a way forward for these Black Sea states.
- **Assess security dynamics in the Black Sea region in the broader context of strategic power competition**. Policies, actions, and inactions in the Black Sea will shape the future of maritime warfare from the Red Sea to the Indo-Pacific to the High North.

Economic Cooperation

- **Counter Russia's illegal commercial activities in the Black Sea and deprive Moscow of resources for its war effort**. A joint multilateral mechanism could be established by

Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria, with the support of the United States and other like-minded partners as well as representatives of the International Maritime Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization, to enable the fight against Russia's transnational organized crime at sea.

- **Enforce EU sanctions and close loopholes in the legislation**. EU sanctions and port bans targeting tankers engaged in ship-to-ship oil transfers and ships that turn off AIS should be fully implemented. Black Sea states should also be warned of the possible consequences of receiving and processing in their ports ships that facilitate Russia's illegal trade in looted Ukrainian goods.
- **Consider establishing a compensation mechanism**. The secondary sanctions mechanism has proven its effectiveness and should be expanded. At the same time, the United States and the EU should consider a mechanism to compensate for the economic losses associated with full compliance with sanctions and export control measures to encourage non-EU countries, such as Türkiye, to comply with the sanctions regime.
- **Keep Black Sea shipping afloat and mitigate the increase in wartime insurance costs**. In February 2024, the [Unity Facility](), a grain transport insurance mechanism for the Ukrainian sea corridor, was extended to cover other types of cargo. A parallel mechanism, supported by European Bank for Reconstruction and Development funding for the Ukrainian government, is now being considered. Similar efforts are critical to global food security and should be supported by the United States and other Allies and partners.
- **Promote economic development and interconnectivity through the Three Seas Initiative**. Invest in the region's transit corridors and infrastructure for both economic reasons and military planning.
- **Encourage the development of competitive and transparent markets**. The United States must increase its cooperation with the EU to ensure private companies are allowed to enter markets that are designed to promote fair and transparent public-private competition.

Energy Security

- **Support energy diversification**. Russia is weaponizing interdependence and using energy supplies as a coercive tool in its hybrid warfare against the West. Diversification of the energy mix and supply routes is essential for the region's energy security. While some regional countries have minimized their dependence on Russian fossil fuels after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, others remain significantly dependent on, or interested in, Russian oil and gas imports and transportation, as well as nuclear energy cooperation—most notably Bulgaria, Türkiye, Georgia. Countering Russia's use of Gazprom and Rosatom as foreign policy tools in the region and promoting energy diversification should be absolute priorities in enhancing the region's energy security and resilience.
- **Invest in exploration**. Exploration of the vast gas reserves in Türkiye's Sakarya field, Romania's Neptun Deep, and Bulgaria's Khan Asparuh will not only secure domestic gas consumption in these countries, but also potentially enable exports to neighboring countries, reducing the region's dependence on Russian gas. US and European companies

could contribute to the region's energy security by investing in these offshore gas exploration projects.

- **Protect critical infrastructure, including pipelines and offshore energy facilities**. Strengthening Bulgarian-Romanian-Turkish naval cooperation and initiating joint patrols between the Neptun Deep field in Romania's EEZ and the Sakarya field in Türkiye's EEZ could become an important tool to deter hostile Russian actions in the western part of the Black Sea. Expanding the mandate of the MCM Task Force to include the protection of critical infrastructure would be a significant contribution to regional security.

- **Promote clean energy and sustainable development**: Promoting green energy alternatives and the decarbonization agenda helps diversify away from Russian fossil fuels and strengthens energy sovereignty; achieves sustainable development and climate goals; creates new opportunities for EU cooperation; and integrates Moldovan and Ukrainian energy systems into the EU.

- **Seek new cooperation opportunities with Türkiye and the South Caucasus**. Involving the regional countries in new energy projects, either as energy suppliers or transit countries, would provide an alternative to Russian hydrocarbons and weaken Russia's position in the region in the long run. Recent talks with ExxonMobil on a multibillion-dollar LNG deal would not only reduce Türkiye's dependence on Russian gas and challenge the feasibility of Putin's proposed "Russian gas hub" in Türkiye, but would also help improve US-Türkiye bilateral relations.

- **Challenge Rosatom's position in the region**. Projects, such as Bulgaria's conversion to Westinghouse fuel rods at the Soviet-era Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant, Romania's construction, with US assistance, of two new nuclear reactors at the Cernavoda Nuclear Power Plant, and US-Türkiye cooperation on conventional and modular reactors and under the US-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism, should be supported and further developed as they support energy independence from Russia. In the long term, a proactive and comprehensive policy should be developed by the US and EU to counter Russia's nuclear grip on the region, including the introduction of sanctions against Rosatom and the provision of viable alternatives in civil nuclear energy.

- **Pursue more competitive energy sectors and promote energy market transparency**. Energy sectors in the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans are often dominated by state-owned enterprises that hinder competition, enable Russian and Chinese interference, and slow investment in energy transition. Ensuring equal access to the energy market for private companies and fair competition for all stakeholders would promote economic development, strengthen democratic resilience, and make it more difficult for Russia and China to exploit the structural weaknesses of regional countries for geopolitical gain.

- **Raise awareness that Russian and Chinese energy and infrastructure projects for the region always come with strings attached**. These strings include geopolitical risks, political corruption, bad governance, environmental threats, disinformation campaigns, and other malign influences.

Democratic Resilience

- **Promote critical thinking and media literacy**.
- **Increase efforts to counter information disorder and promote freedom of expression**.

- **Promote a whole-of-society approach to countering hybrid threats and building resilience.**
- **Support civil society, people-to-people contacts and horizontal networking throughout the region.**
- **Work with regional governments to identify and counter Russian agents of influence, including but not limited to the Russian Orthodox Church, "Rossotrudnichestvo," Russian cultural and diaspora associations, journalists, and opinion leaders.**

About the Author

Dr. Yevgeniya Gaber is professor of national security studies at the George C. Marshall Center's Regional Security Studies Department. Her research interests include Black Sea security, Ukrainian and Turkish foreign policy, and Russia's irregular warfare.

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