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Research Article

Navigating the Trilemma of (In)security: Strategic Competition in the Black Sea Region

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Abstract: This article explores the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region within the complex dynamics of major-power competition, focusing primarily on the interests and strategies of the United States, China, Russia, and other regional players. It highlights the region’s major threats and challenges, ranging from military threats and hybrid operations to socio-economic and ecological concerns. These multifaceted challenges are leveraged by key stakeholders to advance their interests, further complicating the strategic landscape. This complex geopolitical environment, fraught with risks and competition, underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. The article introduces the concept of strategic trilemmas in the Black Sea region, involving the active participation of Türkiye, Ukraine, and pro-Western littoral states (Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia) on one side, with Russia on the opposing side. Addressing the region’s challenges requires a comprehensive approach to promote stability, security, and cooperation. While Russia’s influence remains a concern, the potential for reducing its dominance and increasing cooperation in the Black Sea region offers bilateral and multilateral collaboration opportunities in this crucial geopolitical theater.

Keywords: geopolitics, strategic competition, strategic trilemma, military threats, Black Sea region, European Union, United States, China, Russia, Türkiye.

Introduction

The Black Sea region (BSR) has consistently held a prominent position in global geopolitics, geoeconomics, and strategic considerations. Positioned at the crossroads of diverse civilizations—particularly the Christian and Muslim worlds—and between East and West, North and South, it is fraught with multifaceted risks across political, economic, and military dimensions.¹ Furthermore, the BSR serves as a focal point for intense geopolitical competition among key regional and global actors.

At the same time, this phenomenon arises from a fundamental geographical feature of the BSR. Specifically, the region offers strategic opportunities for maritime powers while serving as a launching point for continental powers seeking dominance in southeastern Europe. When under the control of hostile forces, the Black Sea has the potential to disrupt any hegemonic Eurasian power or coalition. Consequently, the two major Eurasian challengers—Russia and China—are more inclined to cooperate rather than compete within the BSR.

The strategic importance of this region cannot be overstated, as it serves as a theater for strategic competition among leading regional players and global powers. These diverse stakeholders harbor distinct, often conflicting interests, which, on the one hand, complicate the situation in the broader Black Sea area. On the other hand, this very competition lays the groundwork for regional coexistence and, in certain areas, cooperation and integration within the global sphere. Examples of such integration initiatives include the Euro-Asian transport corridor and Caspian energy projects, which involve the participation of China, Central Asia, and European countries.

Shifting U.S. strategic priorities have increasingly centered on major-power competition. However, there is no comprehensive framework for elucidating the nature of U.S. competition with China and Russia. In the BSR context, the lack of a comprehensive framework for understanding major-power competition among the United States, China, and Russia has significant implications. The region's intricate geopolitical landscape, characterized by multifaceted risks and diverse stakeholders, highlights the urgency of developing a nuanced analytical approach. Such a framework should not only encompass the interests and strategies of these global powers but also examine how they interact and compete within this vital theater of geopolitical rivalry.²

The BSR's unique position as a crossroads between various civilizations and a hub of intense competition demands a deeper understanding of the dynamics at

¹ Daniel Hamilton and Gerhard Mangott, eds., *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21st Century: Strategic, Economic and Energy Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2008), 2-11, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ctr/0016283/f_0016283_14081.pdf.

² Seth Cropsey, George Scutaru, Harry Halem, and Antonia Colibasanu, *Strategic Nexus: The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War* (Yorktown Institute, New Strategy Center, 2023), 12, https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/YI_NSC_Monograph.pdf.

play. Moreover, as strategic competition intensifies in this region, it becomes imperative for policymakers and analysts to develop comprehensive models that accurately capture and assess these interactions and their implications for regional stability and security.

The United States actively seeks to bolster its BSR presence through a series of measures, including military exercises, support for NATO allies like Romania and Bulgaria, and various initiatives aimed at counterbalancing Russia's influence. Meanwhile, despite its geographical remoteness, China is increasingly involved in the region's economic development. This involvement includes investments, infrastructural projects, and trade agreements aimed at securing access to vital energy resources and expanding its Belt and Road Initiative into Europe. As stakes in this strategic competition continue to rise, the BSR emerges as a pivotal arena where the interests and ambitions of these global actors converge, with profound implications for the region's security and stability.



Figure 1: Map of the Black Sea (Source: Hudson Institute, 2023).³

Therefore, achieving a sustainable equilibrium in managing the Russian threat over the long term requires establishing a mechanism that fulfills several key criteria. First, this mechanism must effectively empower Ukraine to defend itself by enhancing its defensive capabilities. Second, it should facilitate close co-

³ Luke Coffey and Can Kasapoğlu, "A New Black Sea Strategy for a New Black Sea Reality," Policy Memo (Hudson Institute, February 2023), <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/new-black-sea-strategy-new-black-sea-reality>.

ordination of defense efforts between Ukraine and its neighboring NATO partners, regardless of Ukraine's formal membership in the alliance. Third, it must provide a clear trajectory toward gradually reducing direct economic and military burdens on the United States.

The proposed solution to address these conditions involves implementing a triangular balancing mechanism (*strategic trilemma*) within the BSR. This mechanism would include the participation of Ukraine, Türkiye, and pro-Western littoral states such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia on one side, with Russia on the opposing side. Positioned as a pivotal player, Türkiye holds a unique role within this construct. It acts as a staunch defense partner to Ukraine, serves as a cornerstone of NATO's maritime presence in the Black Sea, and maintains a complex, multifaceted relationship with Russia characterized by elements of rivalry, trade, and diplomacy.

However, the strategic trilemma implies that achieving all three objectives simultaneously may prove challenging. It requires balancing and prioritizing these interests, with the understanding that optimizing one aspect may come at the expense of another. The implementation of a triangular balancing mechanism involving Türkiye, Ukraine, pro-Western littoral states, and Russia aims to navigate these complex trade-offs. Türkiye's pivotal role in this framework—given its relationship with Russia and staunch defense partnership with Ukraine—is crucial in managing this strategic trilemma. Ultimately, the strategic trilemma reflects the complex calculus faced by global and regional powers in managing their interests within the Black Sea region, where achieving a balanced approach among these three core objectives remains an ongoing challenge.

Major Threats and the State of Play in the Black Sea Region

When analyzing the implications of strategic competition and strategic trilemmas from the perspective of stakeholders in the BSR, it is crucial to emphasize the various threats and challenges that jeopardize regional security. In this context, threats refer to the capabilities immediately available to potential adversaries, which can be used to exploit existing vulnerabilities. As a result, the region's vulnerabilities, if not addressed, can undermine the region's capacity to respond effectively to current and emerging threats. Additionally, these threats can trigger a range of risks and challenges, including the direct consequences of the conflict in Ukraine and the indirect repercussions from conflicts such as the one in Gaza. Notably, threats and challenges are multifaceted, encompassing military, socio-economic, and environmental dimensions.

Given the current situation, the Black Sea region has experienced a range of military threats and activities, mainly driven by Russian aggression. These include the occupation of Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine, the militarization of the Crimean Peninsula and the occupied territories of Georgia and Moldova, as well as the establishment of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) network in the region. Notably, airstrikes are considered decisive in naval warfare due to the high

vulnerability of naval formations to missile attacks, underscoring the necessity for robust air and missile defense systems.

The deployment of Russian naval forces, particularly the Black Sea Fleet, presents a significant security challenge for the region's coastal states. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a clear pattern of continuous militarization of the Black Sea has emerged. Moreover, when examined from a strategic standpoint, the potential for high-intensity combat operations to be conducted simultaneously across the entire Black Sea is a critical consideration. Furthermore, given the capabilities of modern ships, the theater of military operations can extend into adjacent seas—such as the Mediterranean, Azov, or Caspian Seas—including through the involvement of coastal capabilities.⁴

In addition, it is evident that potential military threats exhibit a multifaceted nature, characterized by both horizontal and vertical dimensions of conflict escalation. This is accompanied by the intensification of hybrid operations and the use of new technologies as tools for gaining asymmetric advantages.

The BSR weaponization is closely linked to the potential escalation of conflicts, as previously mentioned, primarily due to the illegal military presence of the Russian Federation in the region. This includes its activities on the territories of independent states and the control exerted over occupied and separatist entities such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. It is important to note that the assessment of the “illegal” nature of Russia's military presence in these regions can vary depending on the perspective and interpretation of the geopolitical context. However, the international community and various organizations have expressed concerns and called for the withdrawal of Russian troops on multiple occasions. Despite these calls, the risk of re-escalation of so-called frozen conflicts remains significant. This situation suggests the possibility of the conflict spreading horizontally, potentially drawing in other countries with interests in the region and triggering a broader regional confrontation.

At the same time, in the context of the militarization of the BSR, Russia's intention to establish a maritime base in Abkhazia (a Georgian territory effectively controlled by Russia since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War) could threaten Georgia's status as a key hub for east-west global connectivity. The establishment of such a maritime base could further consolidate Russia's military presence in the region, indirectly entangling Georgia in potential conflicts or escalating tensions between Georgia and its allies. As a result, the risk of vertical escalation cannot be disregarded, referring to the possibility of an increase in conflict intensity or the involvement of higher-level actors, such as the European Union (EU) or NATO. This could lead to direct military confrontations between Russia and other

⁴ Florin Nistor and Lucian-Valeriu Scipanov, “The Influence and Characteristics of the Black Sea on Joint Operations,” *Impact Strategic* 80, no. 3 (2021): 24-35, 28, <https://doi.org/10.53477/1842-810X-21-11>. – in Romanian

global powers. Additionally, it is worth noting that the European Union has expressed significant concern regarding Russia's reported plans to establish a permanent naval base for its Black Sea Fleet in the breakaway region of Abkhazia.⁵

Indeed, Russia's approach to contemporary warfare is based on multi-domain operations aimed at undermining adversaries' ability and will to resist. Within this framework, the nuclear narrative employed by Putin's regime as part of its preemptive defense doctrine cannot be overlooked. There is no consensus regarding the use of nuclear weapons for intimidation; however, some experts argue that Russia has integrated these "conventional precision weapons and nuclear weapons into a single strategic weapon set," lending credence to the view that Russia may be prepared to employ, or threaten to employ, nuclear weapons in a regional or large-scale war.⁶ In practice, Russia has turned nuclear weapons into an offensive tool to influence international agendas and regional politics. At the same time, nuclear rhetoric is used to intimidate and instill fear in populations within the countries Russia refers to as its "near abroad." However, there are no guarantees that this tool will not be used as a weapon if Russia feels vulnerable or unable to achieve a victory in war.

In the realm of hybrid operations, it is evident that not only their intensity but also the array of tools employed can increase. Hybrid warfare encompasses a blend of conventional military strategies, irregular warfare, cyber warfare, and information warfare. The escalation of hybrid operations signifies a potential shift toward more diverse and nuanced forms of aggression by Russia, as demonstrated in its actions in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and possibly other countries.

Considering the complex nature of hybrid operations, the rapid advancements in technology, particularly the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI), could play a crucial role in military domains as a tool for achieving asymmetric advantages. Within the context of the evolving geopolitical landscape shaped by technological advancements and strategic competition, AI is emerging as a key instrument for dominance in both the economic and military arenas.

The growing cyber insecurity, often used as a tool for hybrid operations, is a notable trend in the realm of information and disruptive technologies. Cyber challenges, such as Russian cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, issues in digitization processes, increased disinformation campaigns, and the weaponization of information, are growing concerns. Both state and non-state actors utilize these tactics to destabilize political systems, influence public opinion, and disrupt democratic processes in the region. This trend is further demonstrated by

⁵ EEAS Press Team, "Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Intention of Russia to Establish a Naval Base on Georgia's Internationally Recognised Territory," *European Union External Action*, October 6, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-intention-russia-establish-naval-base-georgia%E2%80%99s-internationally_en.

⁶ Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization," CRS Report R45861 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, April 21, 2022), 40, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45861/16>.

continuous interference in elections across various countries in 2024, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Moldova, and Georgia.

Socio-economic challenges in the BSR are multifaceted, with the primary trend being the erosion of good governance. Issues such as corruption, fragile governance frameworks, and economic disparities have hindered the region's development. Additionally, dependence on remittances from migrant workers and vulnerability to economic sanctions exacerbate these challenges.

Ecological issues, such as pollution and overfishing, threaten the fragile ecosystem of the Black Sea. These concerns have implications not only for the environment but also for regional stability, as disputes over resource management could exacerbate existing tensions.

Given all these challenges, the principal stakeholders strategically exploit the region's vulnerabilities to advance their respective interests. The intricate interplay among competing actors significantly impacts the BSR's strategic landscape, regional security, and the broader geopolitical framework. As these influential entities actively engage in rivalry to assert their influence and dominance in the Black Sea, the region's significance within the larger context of international relations continues to grow.

Security Trilemmas and Global Players' Interests in the Black Sea Region

The BSR is a dynamic geopolitical arena where global and regional powers converge with distinct interests and strategies. Four overarching characteristics define this complex landscape. Firstly, it reflects the competing interests and strategic objectives of major global powers, each vying for influence and dominance within the region. Secondly, the BSR exhibits a unique coexistence of interests among various regional powers, whose alignments may shift or diverge depending on specific contextual factors and evolving circumstances. Thirdly, the region grapples with a persistent undercurrent of crises and conflicts stemming from the ongoing confrontation between major global powers and regional actors. This discord significantly contributes to an environment of inherent instability and uncertainty. Finally, amidst these challenges, instances of cooperation emerge in select policy domains and among specific actors, offering glimpses of hope and the potential for collaboration.

Within this intricate geopolitical setting, identifying the security trilemmas faced by players in the BSR represents an interesting turning point. It seeks to unravel the complex trade-offs and strategic dilemmas that shape the decision-making processes of both regional and global actors as they navigate this multifaceted landscape. In doing so, this article sheds light on the challenges and opportunities inherent to the BSR, offering insights into the dynamics that govern the interactions among major and regional powers in pursuit of their respective objectives.

The intricate interplay of interests among key regional and global actors is characterized by a set of mutually exclusive yet interrelated priorities. The trilemma revolves around the core interests of Ukraine, Türkiye, Russia, China, and the political West (comprising the United States, NATO, and the European Union), each pursuing distinct but overlapping goals within the Black Sea region.

For Ukraine, the trilemma consists of three central imperatives. First, it seeks to restore its 1991 statehood, including maritime sovereignty. Second, Ukraine aims to enhance its defensive capabilities to effectively deter potential future Russian aggression. Third, it aspires to achieve long-term economic viability. All three objectives are grounded in the resilience demonstrated by Ukrainian society.⁷ Balancing these priorities is essential for Ukraine's security and prosperity within the region.

Türkiye, another pivotal actor, faces its own trilemma. Its first objective is to keep Russia sufficiently weakened but not disintegrated, ensuring that Russia remains a manageable neighbor. Second, Türkiye seeks to exert control over the Black Sea, closing it off to extra-regional powers while establishing itself as the dominant regional player. However, this goal may come at the expense of maintaining close ties with the West, particularly NATO. These objectives underscore Türkiye's complex role in the strategic trilemma.

Russia, on the other hand, grapples with its own multifaceted trilemma. Its primary interest lies in securing a "victory," or at least a Ukrainian defeat, while avoiding the risks of collapse or political instability within Russia. Simultaneously, Russia seeks to undermine the unity of Western countries while forging stronger bonds with former Soviet republics. Navigating these priorities requires a delicate balance to safeguard Russia's strategic interests.

China's strategic trilemma in the Black Sea region revolves around three core objectives. First, it seeks to uphold the principle of a unitary sovereign state, emphasizing its "One China" mantra. Second, China aims to support Russia geopolitically as a strategic counterweight to the United States without escalating tensions to the point of direct confrontation. Third, China strives to maintain and expand its global economic presence, particularly through the "Middle Corridor" and Trans-Caspian routes, which provide alternative avenues for its economic expansion via the Black Sea region.

The political West confronts its own trilemma. Its primary objective is to support the statehood of BSR countries established in 1991. At the same time, it aims to prevent both Russian escalation and internal disintegration while providing non-NATO security assurances to the region.

⁷ Victoria Vdovychenko, "Shaping up Social Resistance: Zelenskyy's Approach to Rearranging Ukraine," in *Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Presidency and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*, ed. Adam Reichardt and Tomasz Stępniewski, IES Policy Papers 8/2022 (Lublin, Poland: Institute of Central Europe, 2022), 55-64, https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ies_policy_papers_no_2022-008.pdf.

In essence, the strategic trilemma highlights the intricate and dynamic nature of the BSR's geopolitical landscape, where key actors must navigate their conflicting priorities and objectives to achieve a balance. This ongoing challenge reflects the complex calculus regional and global powers face as they manage their interests within this strategically significant area.

In light of these trilemmas, the security dynamics within the BSR are likely to be significantly influenced by the emerging or reinvigorated strategic interests of global powers such as the United States and China. In the context of the BSR, the United States pursues a multifaceted set of strategic objectives. First, it aims to ensure the successful implementation of Caspian energy projects, thereby providing Europe with alternative energy sources, particularly oil and gas. These efforts are strategically designed to bypass Russian territory and exclude Iran from participating in such projects. Notable examples of U.S. support for these initiatives include backing infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, as well as the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) projects. The United States actively champions these energy initiatives and remains open to furthering similar endeavors.

Additionally, the United States puts a premium on maintaining a limited military presence in the Black Sea region. It currently operates military bases and facilities in countries such as Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania, and plans to continue providing military assistance to Ukraine as a deterrent against Russian aggression. Furthermore, the United States maintains a modest military contingent in Georgia as part of NATO's training mission, with the overarching goal of enhancing the capabilities of the Georgian Defence Forces. Complementing its energy and military interests, the United States takes measures to support socio-economic development, education, and the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law in countries within the Black Sea region. These efforts are designed to reinforce state institutions and safeguard the sovereignty of BSR states.

Conversely, China is actively working to expand its influence within the BSR. This effort is primarily evident through China's concerted actions to increase trade cooperation with regional states. China's formal free trade agreement with Georgia is a notable development in this context.⁸ Additionally, China is advancing integration processes as part of its One Belt-One Road initiative, initially proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013.⁹ This initiative aims to foster economic connectivity through extensive infrastructure development, thereby underlining

⁸ Nika Chitadze, "ENC Analysis – Geopolitical Interests of China in the South Caucasus: The Example of China-Georgia Relations," *European Neighbourhood Council*, August 31, 2021, <http://encouncil.org/2021/08/31/enc-analysis-geopolitical-interests-of-china-in-the-south-caucasus-the-example-of-china-georgia-relations/>.

⁹ "Belt and Road Initiative," World Bank, March 29, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

China's unwavering commitment to strengthening its role in the region. In parallel, China is deepening its trade collaboration with Russia, a move intended to mitigate the impact of sanctions imposed by the democratic community on the Kremlin regime. This economic engagement also helps sustain Russia's military operations in Ukraine.

In light of the aforementioned factors, it is crucial to emphasize that the United States' simultaneous provision of military and economic support to Ukraine, combined with sanctions imposed on Russia, contrasts sharply with China's proactive pursuit of economic and trade cooperation with Russia. This dynamic intensifies the competition between the United States and China within the BSR. Additionally, Chinese initiatives in transportation under the One Belt-One Road project—particularly the potential involvement of BSR countries—have raised significant concern in Washington. Of particular note is China's expressed interest in controlling strategic infrastructure in the region, such as the under-construction Anaklia port on Georgia's Black Sea coast.

Simultaneously, it is noteworthy that the nature of the transport and economic projects mentioned above—particularly those designed to bypass Russian territory, such as the China-Central Asia-Caucasus-Turkey-Europe railway—creates a potential for an alignment of interests between the United States and China in the strategically pivotal Black Sea region. This alignment could manifest as increased cooperation between Europe and China, fostering greater economic integration between China and Western nations.

In sum, the Black Sea region serves as a theater where both the United States and China actively pursue a diverse array of strategic objectives, including energy diplomacy, military presence, socio-economic development, and trade expansion. These strategic endeavors are central to the policies of both nations within the region, and their interactions and competitive dynamics have profound implications for the security, stability, and broader geopolitical landscape of the BSR and the global context.

Conclusion

The BSR remains a dynamic and complex geopolitical arena shaped by global powers' competing interests and strategies. This article has explored the key characteristics that define the region: the coexistence of interests among regional powers, ongoing crises and conflicts, and occasional instances of cooperation. These characteristics have given rise to positioning trilemmas for all actors involved in the region.

The BSR's complex geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape continues to evolve, shaped by the strategic interests of key players. This dynamic is defined by '4 Cs':

- Competing interests and strategies of major powers;
- Coexistence of interests among certain regional powers;

- Continuous crises and conflicts arising from confrontations between major and regional powers; and
- Cooperation in select policy areas, as well as between certain actors at both horizontal and vertical levels.

These dynamics contribute to the positioning trilemmas faced by all actors in the BSR.

In summary, the BSR remains a critical arena for both strategic competition and cooperation among major global powers. Navigating the challenges and opportunities within this complex geopolitical landscape requires a comprehensive approach to fostering stability, security, and collaboration among all stakeholders. As the region's significance continues to grow, a deep understanding of the dynamics at play is essential for policymakers and analysts alike. Consequently, the expansive Black Sea area will continue to be a subject of paramount importance in global politics. Given its position at the crossroads of civilizations, the developments within the strategically vital Black Sea region will have a significant impact on the global socio-economic and political landscape.

Disclaimer

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