

# THE BLACK SEA: REGIONAL DYNAMICS AND THE SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION

## Abstract

As a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the attention of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) towards the Black Sea region has increased significantly. The purpose of this article is to determine the geopolitical role of actors operating in the Black Sea region and what steps NATO can take to further increase the level of security in the region. The Article discusses the dynamics in the Black Sea region, emphasizes the importance of NATO partner states and the need to consider the Black Sea region in a broader perspective.

**Keywords:** Black Sea, region, security, geopolitics.

NATO's interests in the Black Sea came to the forefront after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This fact was reflected in the 485th resolution of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which calls on the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance to develop a coherent strategy regarding the Black Sea (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2023).

First of all, it should be noted that Turkey is a key country in NATO's Black Sea strategy due to its location and capabilities, which allows the alliance to access the Black Sea, Mediterranean and Middle East regions. In addition, according to the Montreux Convention of 1936, Turkey has been given the right and obligation to regulate the movement of warships in the Black Sea, which gives it great influence over the dynamics of regional security (Kochis, 2021). Specifically, the regional power balance in the Black Sea is largely determined by the dynamics of the relationship between the two largest states in the region, Turkey and Russia. Although, Turkey and Russia cooperate on a number of issues (for example, Turkey still buys Russian natural resources), in the long term their interests in the Black Sea region are opposed. The risk of a rapid increase in tension between these two countries was highlighted in 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian Su-25 military aircraft near the Syrian-Turkish border, which resulted in a sharp reaction from Russia. Turkey called on NATO countries to become active in order to prevent the Black Sea from becoming a "Russian lake" (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023). The Russian Black Sea Fleet and its annexation of Crimea are a problem not only for the Eastern part of NATO, but also for the South. The illegal invasion of Ukraine and the use of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Syrian port of Tartus underscore that Russia is ready to use its influence even more globally, often against Turkey's interests (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023). Although, it is in the interests of Russia and Turkey to prevent the growth of influence of foreign fleets in the Black Sea, Turkey cannot afford to face Russia without Western support. The activation of Romania's role adds significant dynamics to the Black Sea region, where the expansion project of the existing "Mihail Kogalniceanu" base near the Romanian coastal city of Constanta will be completed by 2030 (Necsutu, 2024). This air base will exceed even the Ramstein base in Germany and will be the largest NATO base in Europe, accommodating 10,000 soldiers. It will allow NATO air forces to

monitor the situation in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, as well as to have operational readiness for military operations in the Middle East (Ernst, 2024).

### ***Possible steps for NATO***

The question arises as to what other steps NATO can take to further increase the security level of the Black Sea region against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine and regional dynamics. The first initiative which looks quite promising concerns the creation of a naval mission in the Black Sea, similar to the Baltic air patrol mission (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023). The latter mission involves sending defensive air units to air bases in Lithuania and Estonia on a rotational basis by NATO member states, which ensures the security of the Baltic states (NATO, 2024). A similar maritime patrol mission can be implemented through the cooperation between the Black Sea states that are members of NATO and the involvement of non-Black Sea NATO members. As an outline of this project, we can consider the existing treaty between Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria on demining the waters of the Black Sea (Aljazeera, 2024). The “Mihail Kogalniceanu” air base in Romania, which will be renovated by 2030, will also be useful for the implementation of this mission, which will provide air defense to NATO’s naval patrol mission in the Black Sea if necessary. Involvement in this initiative will be a good opportunity for Georgia, allowing for participation in the future exercises planned in the Black Sea, further strengthening cooperation with NATO in matters of strategic importance. The difficulty of carrying out the Black Sea patrol mission is that according to the Montreux Convention, there cannot be more than 9 military ships in the Black Sea at the same time, which do not belong to a country with a Black Sea coast. The length of stay of such vessels is also limited to 21 days (Lancaster, 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct negotiations with Turkey regarding the exact format and content of the mission. However, if we recall the passage of ships with a US humanitarian mission in the Black Sea in 2008 after some hesitation by Turkey, there is a precedent for cooperation with Turkey in this direction (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023). Another way to avoid this last obstacle is the use of the Danube-Black Sea Canal by NATO. This canal connects the Danube to the Black Sea through Romania (Kochis, 2021). In order for this channel to be able to receive and handle military ships, its infrastructural renovation will be necessary, although this is a technically solvable problem. The Danube-Black Sea Canal will allow ships that do not belong to the Black Sea coastal states, to avoid both the quantitative and temporal restrictions of the Montreux Convention by being in the canal and having permanent access to the Black Sea (Coffey, 2020).

### ***Security architecture of the Black Sea region from NATO’s point of view***

If we look at NATO’s Black Sea strategy from a more global perspective, it should have two important pillars: support for closer military cooperation between NATO’s Black Sea countries and Ukraine, which will create a natural barrier against Russia in the Black Sea, and giving an important role to the Caspian Sea region in the consideration of the Black sea strategy. The basis of the first of them already exists to a large extent, first of all in the form of intensive military cooperation between Turkey and Ukraine, which has already dealt a number of significant blows to Russia (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023). If Turkey and Russia are natural rivals in the Black Sea region, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as Romania and Bulgaria, are natural allies in the region against Russian influence. This is also confirmed by the fact that Turkey always welcomes cooperation through multilateral platforms in the Black Sea region, and it has always supported Romania’s and Bulgaria’s adhesion to NATO

(Dalay and Sabanadze, 2024). As for the Caspian Sea, it cannot be considered separately from the Black Sea region, because Russia uses the Volga-Don Canal, through which it transports parts of the Caspian fleet from the Caspian Sea to the Azov Sea and then to the Black Sea in order to wage war in Ukraine. In addition, the Caspian Sea is an important link between Russia and Iran (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023). It is more difficult for NATO to develop a strategy in this direction due to geographical reasons, however, in cooperation with key countries such as Azerbaijan, it is possible to create a strategy in this region as well. Naturally, in both directions, great importance will be given to the role of Georgia due to its proximity to the Black and Caspian seas, which will lead to an increase in its strategic importance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that it is in NATO's interests to create a geopolitical architecture in the Black Sea region as quickly as possible, which will efficiently reduce Russia's influence and further strengthen regional security. The only way to achieve this goal is the involvement of NATO's Black Sea countries - Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria - and NATO's partner states, Georgia and Ukraine.

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