

MILITARIZATION IN THE BLACK SEA REGION: CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY AND BEYOND

The lack of a shared regional vision, combined with the interplay of regional and global forces, continue to dominate the security situation in the Black Sea region. Thus, one of the most critical issues in the region appears to be the increasing perception of insecurity through unchecked militarization of the Black Sea basin.

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The Black Sea is a region where the east-west and the south-north corridors coincide.¹ This characteristic alone makes it hard to define the boundaries of the region, let alone the numerous regional and sub-regional structures associated with it. Even before the region had recently become a topic of strategic interest for the international community, it was already a frontier between the East and the West, where a large number of actors and clashing interests collide. However, the fragile balance that aimed to pacify the region so that it would be kept as a buffer zone and not become a hotspot seems to have prevented the littoral states and regional powers from developing a comprehensive and inclusive security framework. The effects of the lack of such an arrangement are clearly visible in the current security posture of the regions' littoral states and powers. The lack of a shared regional vision, combined with the interplay of regional and global forces, continue to dominate the security situation in the Black Sea region. Thus, one of the most critical issues in the region appears to be the increasing perception of insecurity through unchecked militarization of the Black Sea basin. This article will focus; first, on the main discourses and perceptions that trigger and enforce the current security posture in the Black Sea region; second, on the resulting militarization process in the region; and third, on the repercussions for the future of political and military issues in the region.

Russian vs. Transatlantic Interests in the Black Sea Region

Due to its geopolitical importance, the Black Sea region has always been crucial for international security. It

was one of several critical regions where the Soviet Union and the West faced each other. Importantly, any attempts to blur the boundaries, such as when after the Second World War Joseph Stalin made demands from Turkey, resulted in the consolidation of those boundaries and paved the way for Turkey joining the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea was left with a security vacuum, and a fragile status quo that was later filled with an expanding NATO and the European Union (EU). Therefore, defining how one or more actors became more assertive in international politics and particularly Black Sea must take into consideration the changes in the structure of the international system. One might even argue that it was primarily due to this structural change that led the regional and international actors to pursue aggressive security policies that initially transformed the Black Sea basin into one of the most fragile hotspots in international politics. This structural transformation has several elements: one might argue that the failure of the disarmament treaties together with increasing transnational threats have enhanced militarization efforts. Another element in this context might be the blurring of old boundaries between the West and the Russian blocs. Thus, militarization that occur in the Black Sea region and elsewhere have more than one and quite significant sources. Black Sea region is where these structural changes are more visible and impactful than any other region in the world.

Black Sea region was not a primary topic of concern after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was only in the late 1990s and at the beginning of 2000s, when Vladimir Putin assumed the leadership of the Russian Federation -

and redefined the political, economic, and social objectives of the country- that Russian foreign policy began to assume a more assertive role in the international arena. Although most of the literature on the Black Sea defines this particular development as the beginning of a new era of enmity, this period simultaneously saw a rise in Western influence in Central Asia, Middle East, and Eastern Europe. In that context, Russia saw the installation of elements of NATO missile defense in Eastern Europe, i.e. European Phased Adaptive Approach, as a serious threat to its revival and increasing international role. With the coming of new members to the EU and NATO, and the increase in Russian power, discussions on the emergence of a new Cold War between the West and Russia, but more importantly a change in the security perceptions of these two blocks gradually began to dominate the security discourse.

Russian interests included the protection of the Russian sphere of influence to attain and secure Russia's place as a primary international actor. Thus, Russia aims to retain its position as one of the key actors in the region neighboring the 'near abroad', prevent the emergence of energy-related actors or projects outside Russian control, and prevent the emergence of anti-Russian military coalitions and countries from moving towards these coalitions and alliances such as NATO.² Russia also aims to expand its area of influence in a wider context and intends to be a more dominant actor globally. Not only Black Sea region, but also Eurasia and the Middle East are forming the backbones of Russia's new aspirations.

On the other hand, the Transatlantic community's interest is rather transregional, as security, stability and economic development issues are increasingly becoming integral to Western security and foreign policy. One major area of concern is the uninterrupted flow of energy resources from beyond the region, i.e. the Caucasus, Caspian and Central Asian basin. This basically requires a secure and stable Transcaucasus region, through which the resources can be transferred without interference from Russia or any other actor so as to increase the diversity of energy supply for the Western countries. Thus, Russia's 'Near Abroad' policy was not welcome in the West, as one of the aims of the Russian foreign policy is to project its role as the major energy supplier by controlling alternative routes and sources for energy production and transportation. The Transatlantic community therefore promoted the independence and integration of those countries situated in the South Caucasus to prevent these newly independent countries from succumbing to Russian influence or pressure.³ Still, both Russia's and the West's interests and policies are everchanging with the transformations that are taking place in the Black Sea region and beyond, as a multilayered and multilevel understanding of security is becoming more and more dominant in international relations.

The 2008 Russian-Georgian war has been one of the

critical turning points after which the Western and Russian interests were redefined. Russia has long feared that it is being encircled by the West, and before the war, these concerns reached to a new high; Ukraine and Georgia began to pursue NATO membership as they were given positive signs to that end. For the Transatlantic Community, Russia's meddling in the affairs of these two countries was hindering efforts towards the enlargement of Western security posture in the East, therefore threatening the stability and security of east-west trade and energy routes, democratization, and integration of those countries with Western institutions. In the end, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and Russian victory damaged NATO and the United States' credibility, as the two failed to counteract against Russian military and political gains. Consequently, and surprisingly, Western support diminished, although not vanished, for the Western-oriented regimes in the Black Sea region.

One interesting consequence of the 2008 war has been that it had no major effect towards increased militarization in the Black Sea region countries, except those countries that have already been in a fragile security situation such as Azerbaijan-Armenia, Georgia (against Russia), and Ukraine. Turkey has maintained its position as the major military power in the Black Sea region, while other littoral states Bulgaria and Romania kept their military spending at a constant rate.⁴ One of the reasons of such a challenging outcome was that the Black Sea countries, except Russia, had clearly failed to define interests in a Black Sea context, while Russia successfully could determine policy and define interests in that same context and beyond.

Annexation of Crimea and the Militarization in the Black Sea

Without going into further details regarding Russian foreign policy towards the Black Sea, it is safe to assume that Russia's actions in the Black Sea region were all aimed at changing the status quo and disrupt the sense of encirclement, now focused on the Black Sea region. The critical turning point for the Russian aims in the Black Sea region and beyond was in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. As far as Russia was concerned, Black Sea region is a bridge that would either carry Russian influence beyond the region, or lead to the seizure and control over Russian expansion.

For the other countries in the region, most of which are either fully integrated or leaning towards closer cooperation and eventually alliance with the Transatlantic community, Russian expansion is seen as a direct threat to their security. Thus, the annexation of Crimea prompted a relative increase in the militarization trends in the region. The increase came after a period of relative calm⁵ in the Black Sea following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. This is seemingly related with the hesitance



on the part of Western powers to directly give support to the countries in the region with a view to not provoke another Russian response. Thus, Crimea's annexation was indeed a signal that this policy of caution, as well as the policy of irresolute encirclement had failed. While the latter policy confirmed Russia's concerns and threat perceptions, the cautious policy of limited engagement also encouraged Russia.

A very general look at the militarization trends in the Black Sea region clearly paints a confusing picture in the face of the perception of a rising Russia. According to a report published by the Russian International Affairs Council, between the years 2000-2015, "military expenditures in the Black Sea region increased from an average of 2,5% of GDP to 2,6% of the GDP, with a peak at 3,1% reached in 2007,"⁶ which is a very modest change considering the discourse on the emergent Russian "threat". Again, after the war in 2008 until the annexation of Crimea, militarization trends returned to average levels. Black Sea littoral countries which increased their military spending (in terms of their share in GDP) are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia respectively, which confirms our earlier assumption that militarization trends apply to those countries which already have constant bilateral military conflict expectations. Although Romania and Bulgaria have been active in the debates on

the increased militarization and Western military presence in the Black Sea, their military spending levels have been relatively low in comparison to above mentioned countries. Among these statistics though, Russian military spending is the most significant with an increase of up to %5.3 in 2016, from %3.3 in 2008, which is higher than all the other littoral states in terms of share in GDP and in total.⁷

In the light of the information provided above, many scholars argue that Russian militarization trends, especially in the Black Sea region itself, constitute the major security threat that the region is facing today. The annex-

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ation of Crimea confirmed this perception of increased Russian assertiveness. One of the reasons the threat perception is justified stems from the fact that following the annexation of Crimea, Russia gained direct and unregulated access in the Black Sea that allows it to improve its military capabilities and therefore the ability to project military power in and beyond the region. The Russian Black Sea Fleet had been the most neglected navy unit among Russia's four fleets until the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008. After the war in 2008, the fleet became even more important following the annexation of Crimea in 2014⁸. The Black Sea Fleet forms a part of the Russian Mediterranean task force⁹, which covers Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In June 2017, Black Sea Fleet spokesman Capt. 1st Rank Vyacheslav Trukhachev stated that *"In the Mediterranean Sea, about 15 warships and support vessels of the Black Sea Fleet perform tasks as part of the permanent division of the Navy."*¹⁰ Therefore, the Black Sea Fleet now covers the major navy force through which the Russian military reaches out to the Mediterranean, allowing Russia the ability to intervene in the war in Syria.¹¹

Despite the Russian assertiveness, the militarization trends are far from proving enough to counter such a threat from Russia. As stated earlier, the only countries that spent more for militarization were those which have persistent conflicts or the possibility for further escalation. This might be due to our earlier assumption that the littoral states and regional powers failed to develop a comprehensive and inclusive security framework in the Black Sea context. Turkey is the only regional power which have insistently sought to form the basis for Black Sea integration. But the failure of the littoral states to engage other states with a view to develop a common political, security and economic vision is arguably the most important reason behind the inability to respond to the rising Russian power militarily or otherwise.

Russian military power in the Black Sea region: Current Trends

In that context another important factor that shows how the international community and countries in the region failed to respond can be seen in the failure of most

of the significant disarmament treaties. The Conventional Forces of Europe agreement became nullified as Russia withdrew as a party in response to NATO installations in Eastern Europe. The new START treaty of 2013, although remains in place, seems very fragile to maintain.¹² Although being a bilateral contingent on Ukraine's part, it must be remembered that Russia's ability to increase and upgrade its military presence in the Black Sea region and in Crimea was limited by the agreements signed between Ukraine and Russia in 1997 and 2010.¹³ However, following the annexation of Crimea, Russia no longer saw it necessary to be a party to those agreements, and as a result, Sevastopol became one of the most important naval bases of Russia harboring 80 percent of the total tonnage of the Black Sea Fleet.¹⁴ Today, within the framework of State Armaments Procurement Program for 2011-2020 (SAP-2020), Russia is aiming to improve and modernize its current Soviet-era military capabilities that were neglected after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Thus, in the near future, the total amount of resources that will be dedicated to the Black Sea Fleet in the framework of SAP 2020 is expected to be around 2.4 billion US Dollars¹⁶. For Russia, the overall importance of its navy is increasing; according to the data of 2014, Russia is planning to dedicate 500 billion Euros for the modernization of its army and 20% of it will be spent for the modernization of the navy.¹⁷ According to Deputy Defense Minister Yuri Borisov's statement in July 2017, the Russian Armed Forces has grown over the last six months by nearly % 60.¹⁸ Currently, there are 28,000 weapons and soldiers in Crimea, and this number is expected to reach 43,000 within the framework of SAP 2020-2025.¹⁹ Russian presence is not limited to conventional forces, as new warships and submarines are planned to be stationed in the Black Sea²⁰ and there are reports stating that new military airports have been opened in Crimea.²¹ Thus as major contingent treaties and measures that maintained Russian and western nonproliferation begin to fail, Russia gradually takes advantage of the situation as a resolute regional power.

Russian military aims clearly display these current trends. It is expected that Russia will soon publish its SAP-2025 in 2018,²² which will be a blueprint of the Russian militarization goals for the next ten years.²³ Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that "This program (SAP-2025) will become the most important instrument in implementing Russia's military and technical policy in the sphere of defense and security through 2025 and for a further perspective" at a meeting on the drafting the program of arming the Russian Armed Forces through 2025.²⁴

Iskandar missiles are currently seen as the most powerful part of the Russian arsenal. Russia, until very recently, considered the missile system as its most strategic weapon. Thus, these systems were not sold to any other country (with the exception of Armenia, until last year). Russia deployed these missiles in Kaliningrad, Syria, Ar-

menia, and Crimea after the annexation. With the deployment of Iskandar missiles and Kalibr-type cruise missiles, Russia seems to have strengthened its anti-access area denial (A2AD), and therefore its ability to control developments in the Black Sea region.

As examples of the projection of this hard power, Russian military drills in and around the region deserves attention. In this context, ZAPAD 2017 drills are believed to be the largest one since 2013, conducted by Russia and Belarus, and was followed very closely by the security institutions of the Transatlantic Community. Lieutenant Colonel Michelle Baldanza, a Pentagon spokesperson, expressed concern when she stated that “We urge Russia to share information regarding its exercises and operations in NATO’s vicinity to clearly convey its intentions and minimize any misunderstandings,”²⁵ calling Russia to be more transparent. But Russia refused the call and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov replied to the U.S. by stating “It is a normal practice for any country to hold such exercises. Everything is being held in line with international law”.²⁶

Another exercise conducted by Russia, but which did not get that much attention as ZAPAD 2017, was “Caucasus 2016” that took place in September 2016 in the Southern Military District of Russia. According to the statement released by Defense Ministry of Russia, the exercise “...aims to check the level of readiness of the military command bodies to control interservice groupings of forces; commanders and staffs will gain experience in planning, preparation and conducting of combat operations.”²⁷ 12,500 servicemen, as well as aviation, military

hardware and warships participated in the exercise and both Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian flotilla were used²⁸ during the drills. Therefore, in terms of the capability and the area it covers (Caucasus, Black Sea and Caspian Basin), the “Caucasus 2016” gave a strong message from the Russian side.

Last but not least, the Slavic Brotherhood exercises conducted by Russia, Serbia, and Belarus near the border with Poland with the participation of more than 300 Russian, 400 Belarusian, and 50 Serbian troops in June 2017²⁹ raised concerns particularly in Europe. The first Slavic Brotherhood exercise was initiated in 2015, after the annexation of Crimea, in Russia’s territories bordering both Crimea and Georgia. After the Russia-Georgia War in 2008, Georgia adopted pro-Western policies and preferred to closely cooperate with NATO and the EU. Georgia has been hosting annual events called “NATO Weeks” and a NATO Liaison Office since 2010.

Russia's Militarization in the Black Sea

Russian efforts at militarization are not limited to the occupied Crimea and Russian territories. Russia has also increased its buildup in the Caucasus where regional security issues pave the way for Russia to move rather unchecked. Thus, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh turned out to be not so frozen of a conflict in 2016 when the sides engaged in a 4-day war, which also made the already high militarization efforts in the Caucasus region a hot topic again. Russia exploits the situation surrounding the





Nagorno-Karabakh war, as Armenians need military support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Russia is beginning to be increasingly perceived as being vital to its survival in case a full-fledged war erupts with Azerbaijan. Armenia, as a member of the Russian-led CSTO since 2002, sees Russia as the major security guarantor in the region. Russia was able to broker the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1994, following Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding seven districts. Today, Russia is one of the Co-Chairs of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group. As result, Armenia is the only country in the Caucasus region hosting a Russian military located in Gyumri until 2045.³⁰ In 2013, Armenian news agencies reported that Russia deployed Iskandar-M (Ballistic Missile Systems, SRBMS – also known as SS-26 Stone) in Armenia,³¹ namely leasing them for Armenia's defense against a military threat, making Armenia the only foreign country to possess the Russian-made Iskandar missile system, which, as stated earlier, is one of the most powerful weaponry in the Russian arsenal. The deployment of such

an advanced military capability in a country very close to NATO borders was and still is a challenging issue for the security and stability in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus.

Russian military buildup also occurs in Abkhazia, the de-facto independent breakaway region of Georgia. Only 10 months after the annexation of Crimea, Russia and Abkhazia signed an agreement that gave a Russian commander the authority to “lead a new joint force of Russian and Abkhaz troops” as the Abkhazian leader ensured Putin that Abkhazia will “harmonize its foreign and defense policies with Moscow’s.”³² The agreement will be in force until 2024 with an automatic extension clause for another 10 years with a view for further financial support from Moscow.³³ Russia already installed an airbase in Ochamchira district of Abkhazia, allowing the Russian jets to avoid detection. Therefore, in addition to the naval base in Sevastopol, Russia now facilitates air force capabilities in the Black Sea and the Caucasus that enables Russian military to display unchecked, multilayered hard power in the region.



Transatlantic Community's Response to Russian Militarization in the Black Sea and Beyond

The Warsaw Summit in 2016 aimed to decide on the NATO's response to Russia's aggression in the Black Sea region and to take further steps to deter Russia. Although the Baltic Sea is currently more on the focus, the security environment in the Black Sea region was among NATO's agenda items during the summit. Spokesperson Oana Lungescu told *The Independent* that: "Since 2014, Russian military activity in the Black Sea region has increased significantly. Russia's wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea poses a challenge to regional stability and international security... In response to Russia's military build-up, NATO has increased its military presence in region... This is being done in a defensive and proportionate way and is fully in line with our international obligations."³⁴ The US launched financial supports for "Black Sea Engagements" and allocated 4 million US Dollars to Romania and Bulgaria for their participation in Flying Training Exercises with US Air Forces Europe.³⁵ Ultimately, following the Summit, NATO deployed military forces in Romania and Bulgaria.

Turkey's traditional stance to protect the status quo did not necessarily mean a passive posture. Turkey has been pioneering regional political, economic and military initiatives in the Black Sea region since the 90s.

As a rapid response to Russia's actions in the NATO's South-Eastern Flank, NATO initiated the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) which consists of three domains; air, land, and sea bases in Romania and Bulgaria, and establishment of a Multinational Framework Brigade in Romania. Main motivation behind NATO's decision is to deter Russia and other actors and avoid hot conflicts. NATO felt the responsibility to ensure its members that NATO is capable of protecting their territorial integrity and still has a lot to offer to its partners.

Romania is cooperating with other NATO members, particularly the US, to counterbalance Russia's activities. Furthermore, Romania has begun to host new NATO bases. There are some significant examples signaling that a challenging era in the Black Sea region has begun. In 2016, the US launched "a new ground-based missile defense system" in Romania³⁶ that is a component of a further enlarged defense system. The launching of this system has caused serious concerns in Russia. The works in Romania had begun in 2013³⁷, one year before the annexation of Crimea. At the ceremony launching the system, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that "Missile defense is for defense... It does not undermine or weaken Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent."³⁸ As a reply to missile defence system launched in Romania, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryakov told Russia's Public Chamber that: "NATO is going ahead with the buildup of its anti-missile potential in Europe within the framework of the so-called phased adaptive approach." "We've repeatedly expressed concern over the deployment of strategic infrastructure elements near our borders, which directly affect our security interests," and he claimed that with such an act, the U.S. is violating the INF treaty.³⁹ The missile system is worth 800 million US Dollars and despite the fact that US officials and the US Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work openly pointed fingers at Iran by saying "As long as Iran continues to develop and deploy ballistic missiles, the United States will work with its allies to defend NATO," a senior Russian Foreign Ministry official Andrey Kelin, to underscore Russia's concerns, stated that it [what NATO is doing] is part of the military and political containment of Russia."⁴⁰

However, the establishment of a multinational brigade of up to "4,000 soldiers, supported by troops from nine other NATO countries, and complementing a separate deployment of 900 U.S. troops" in the South-Eastern

Flank of NATO following the decisions taken at the NATO Warsaw Summit to secure NATO's Baltic and Black Sea borders, is a clear message to Russia. The Black Sea leg of the overall initiative is now based in Romania under the name "Tailored forward presence"⁴¹. In 2017, at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis said that "We are not a threat for Russia. But we need dialogue from a strong position of defense and discouragement." Iohannis' statement thus focused on deterrence rather than provocative action.⁴²

These NATO initiatives came to a new high during NATO's Black Sea exercise, Sea Shield 2017, which took place between 1-11th February 2017 (with the participation of the US, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Canada, Spain, and Ukraine)⁴³ which was closely monitored by Russia. Defense Minister of Russia, Sergey Shoigu stated that; "Currently, we're watching and keeping check over everything that is happening there" and expressed hope that the exercise will not cause any troubles or challenges.⁴⁴ This was followed by the Sea Breeze 2017 navy drills in June 2017 based in Odessa with the participation of US and Ukraine navy. Russian response was combat readiness drills. The tensions amounted to a very critical encounter when on February 1st 2018 an EP-3 Aries US surveillance aircraft was intercepted by a Russian Su-27 Flanker jet over the Black Sea, as the Russian aircraft came within 5ft of the spy plane. Both sides blamed one another: the US Navy called the incident unsafe and unprovoked, while the Russian Ministry of Defense vowed to "continue to provide robust defense of the borders of Russian airspace."⁴⁵ NATO also deployed a trio of P-8 planes near the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad soon after this encounter, as Russian army stated that preparations to deploy Iskandar missiles permanently in the enclave were completed.⁴⁶ The most recent incident was when the USS Ross and USS Carney, two US destroyers sailed through the Bosphorus strait to begin "security operations". In response Russian Black Sea Fleet deployed The Admiral Essen, the newest frigate in Russia's Black Sea Fleet, for a drill in the region, as the destroyer fired at moving air targets and launched missiles as part of the drill. The destroyer also deployed Kalibr cruise missiles that can travel at supersonic speeds over 768mph and launched electronically.⁴⁷

Turkey's Policy on the Militarization in the Black Sea Region

As a NATO member, Turkey has always carried utmost importance for Western security. Thus, as a member of NATO, Turkey is the most important western military power in the region. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey's multilayered policy built upon basically three pillars: first, Turkey, as a NATO member, supported more NATO involvement in the region, but abstained from a position that would directly counter Russia in the Black Sea region. Secondly, Turkey rejected any proposal to

modify Montreux Convention so as to increase non-littoral military involvement in the Black Sea. This objection came to a high when in 2006 NATO suggested that the Operation Active Endeavor activities be expanded to the Black Sea, as Turkey raised high concern to preserve the current legal regime of the Turkish Straits.⁴⁸ And thirdly, Turkey places importance in regional understanding of security in which Turkey both as a NATO member and a Black Sea country operate in accordance with her regional interests and the interests of the transatlantic alliance. Thus Turkey, until recently, possessed the most powerful military force in the Black Sea region, with Russia being the second. This, however, changed after Crimea's annexation, when the Russia's military force have found the opportunity to exert its influence more freely. Nevertheless, Turkey has been the major actor that protected and defended the status quo, i.e. balance of power in the Black Sea region. Recent developments not only blurred this balance, but also the borderpoints of Russian and Western engagement.

Turkey's traditional stance to protect the status quo did not necessarily mean a passive posture. Turkey has been pioneering regional political, economic and military initiatives in the Black Sea region since the 90s. Turkey led regional military initiatives, the most important of which is the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), a naval cooperation program launched in 2001 among littoral states. The BLACKSEAFOR was basically aimed at increasing Turkey's role as a regional power and as a NATO country that can define and protect Turkey's and alliance's interests in the region. Another Turkey-led initiative has been Operation Black Sea Harmony, which was a Turkish national operation in 2004 that eventually expanded to include other littoral states. Both these and other regional cooperation initiatives were hampered by the two critical developments in the Black Sea region, namely the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Some commentators add the downing of a Russian plane by a Turkish warplane in 2015 to this list, which however did not seem to have permanent impact on bilateral relations.

As the regional and global balance of power changes, so should Turkey's policies towards the region. Turkey stands "at the intersection of regional and extra-regional powers with claims on [Black Sea's] future."⁴⁹ Recent encounters in the region between Russia and the West is of high concern for Turkey, which makes the policy of keeping the status quo more important than ever. But in the face of Russian aims to expand its influence beyond the region and over the Mediterranean and US and NATO's aims to contain such a move, Black Sea region increasingly transforms into an area of direct contact. However, the failure by the littoral states and non-regional actors to redefine a vision and a common policy towards the Black Sea region bears the danger of expanding the military face-off that would eventually threaten both the regional and non-regional actors.

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