

## **NATO's Role in the Black Sea Region - Strategic Interests and Challenges**

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August 6, 2025

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The Black Sea has long held historical importance due to various political, economic, and trade factors. For centuries, the area was disputed by the Russian and Ottoman Empires. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region's geopolitical landscape has grown more complex, especially because three important countries in the region - Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania – are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, which culminated in the full-scale invasion of 2022, has further increased the fragility and complexity of the Black Sea region. In addition to military threats, the region also faces a multitude of other security hazards such as economic, environmental and migratory concerns. Interestingly, most of these issues have direct links to Russian aggression in the region.

It is no accident that Russia is at the centre of the majority of conflicts that have been fought in this region. In 2004, Russia did not have sufficient power to challenge Bulgaria and Romania's NATO accession. However, when Georgia and Ukraine moved towards joining NATO following the Bucharest Summit of 2008, Russia responded with military force. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and occupied parts of its territory; in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, and eight years later, launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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### **NATO's Main Challenges and Strategic Interests**

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Black Sea stability is fundamental to the overall prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. NATO's overall concern is its defence against Russian aggression while avoiding direct confrontation of nuclear conflict. The Black Sea, as a vital trade route linking Europe and the Caucasus, is fundamental to the overall stability of the NATO Alliance. Despite its importance, NATO has struggled to provide security coverage for the Black Sea region. The root of the problem lies in the particularly hostile military approach of Russia and NATO's inability to effectively match Russia's actions. NATO's initial response to Russian aggression against Georgia and Ukraine prior to 2022 was too frail, at least partly because these states are not under NATO's collective security guarantee. Because of NATO's inaction in the region, the Black Sea basin remains in a state of chronic insecurity.

Russia has been waging a full-scale war in Ukraine for more than three years, further expanding its military presence across the Black Sea region. Geopolitically and historically, the Black Sea has never been a top priority for NATO forces, despite Türkiye being a member of the Alliance since 1952. Here lies the significance of the [Montreux Convention](#), as it regulates the use of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits for military purposes and provides more independence for Türkiye to control these critical chokepoints. In times of war, Türkiye has the responsibility of blocking warships of adversarial nations. In the context of the current Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye takes on strategic importance for NATO, largely because it can restrict the movement and deployment of the Russian navy, potentially weaken Moscow's naval capabilities, and provide the West with an overall strategic advantage. However, there remain differences in how Türkiye understands the Montreux Convention and how Russia takes advantage of it, which makes its implementation challenging.

Article 19 of the Montreux Convention proves to be essential, stipulating that in a state of war, as long as Türkiye maintains its neutrality, military vessels still enjoy freedom of navigation, whereas warships from belligerent countries are prohibited - except to re-enter their home ports. In this case, Russia's occupied naval base in Sevastopol serves as a bargaining chip, maintaining its presence in the Black Sea. Furthermore, the situation is made more complex by the fact that exclusive economic zones (EEZ) are not covered by NATO's collective security guarantee. Moreover, the Montreux Convention does not permit ships of non-Black Sea countries to enter the area, which gives Russia another lever and dilutes NATO's presence in the Black Sea region.

Russia is attempting to expand its presence in the Black Sea region through military, economic, political, and hybrid means. Through military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has sought to prevent further NATO expansion and regain its claimed historic control over these countries. In addition, almost every Black Sea country [has faced hybrid attacks by Russia](#), including disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks.

A primary example of Russia's economic coercion in the region is its attempts to block Ukrainian grain from reaching global markets. Ukraine is one of the world's leading grain producers, and many African and Asian nations depend on Ukrainian grain exported via the Black Sea. Romania faces significant risk from Russia, as its [EEZ contains extensive natural gas reserves](#). If fully developed, these reserves could help the EU further decrease its dependence on Russian natural gas while also providing Romania with a significant economic boost. This is a prospect that Russia finds unsettling for its own economic standing and thus has been working to prevent this project from materializing. NATO must be prepared to vigorously defend Romania's maritime borders and energy infrastructure.

NATO members and most Black Sea states are heavily dependent on Russian energy exports — [approximately 40 percent of the hydrocarbon resources they use originate from Russia](#). This heavy dependence is detrimental to the region, as it provides Russia with significant leverage and allows it to strengthen and maintain its influence in the Black Sea region. NATO members and most Black Sea states are heavily dependent on Russian energy exports

## Strategic Outlook and Policy Recommendations

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NATO can take several steps to address the aforementioned challenges and defend its interests. First, from a military perspective, NATO must strengthen its deterrence capabilities in the Black Sea to prevent further Russian aggression. The top priority today is to protect Ukraine, first and foremost during the war, and then to provide solid guarantees for its future security. In this context, it is essential that NATO and its international partners continue to provide support to Ukraine in its defence against Russia.

Given the current geopolitical situation, NATO's eastward enlargement remains relevant. Ukraine and Georgia are EU candidate countries and have long cooperated with NATO. Because of their close association with the West, these countries are the most vulnerable to Russia's threats. It is therefore essential for transatlantic security that both Georgia and Ukraine are protected from further Russian aggression. NATO membership is the strongest security guarantee for these countries and should be prioritized in further discussions. In the short term, NATO, and especially the Black Sea basin countries, should increase their military, economic and diplomatic cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia.

To prevent future war and contain Russia, it is necessary to strengthen the military role of NATO member states in the Black Sea basin. Enhanced military cooperation between Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania within NATO's framework will strengthen deterrence and improve regional security. Against this backdrop, the stability of relations between Türkiye and Western institutions like NATO and the EU becomes vital. Türkiye is pivotal to Black Sea security, possessing a significantly stronger military than both Bulgaria and Romania. Diplomatically, NATO must prioritize [Türkiye's active participation in the Black Sea security architecture](#).

The Black Sea region provides an important transit route for oil and gas into Europe. A potential disruption to this supply chain could fundamentally undermine joint military capabilities, which in turn poses a threat to the West. To avoid this risk, it is essential for EU member states and NATO Allies to diversify their energy sources and develop their own infrastructure. For example, [Türkiye provides a successful example of a country that reduced its dependence on Russian energy](#). In addition, Türkiye is actively working to improve energy infrastructure, including methods like bolstering its nuclear energy production. In order to reduce Russia's influence in the Black Sea region, it is imperative that NATO and its partners develop a strategy that will help member and non-member states in the Black Sea region diversify their energy resources.

Beyond providing a security guarantee, NATO's main priority is to combat Russian disinformation and cyberattacks. A large part of Russian hybrid capabilities is aimed at destabilizing the Black Sea region. In 2015, [NATO presented a strategy to counter Russian hybrid forces](#), which was structured around three main components: preparedness, deterrence, and defence. However, Russia has also continued to increase the frequency and severity of its attacks since this strategy was published. Therefore, it is necessary for

NATO to develop a new strategy to more effectively counter Russia's current cyber and hybrid warfare tactics.

Besides Russia, the interests of China and Iran are also emerging in the Black Sea region. China is trying to gain a foothold through [investments in infrastructure](#) and various fields, which, given the intensive cooperation between Russia and China, poses a threat to NATO and its partners. Moreover, Iran also has certain interests in the region, [which are primarily manifested through its economic initiatives](#) aimed at strengthening its position in the Black Sea and challenging NATO. By developing a formal strategy and framework to engage with partners in the Black Sea region, NATO can significantly weaken these influences while projecting its own strength and security.

## Conclusion

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The Black Sea region is an area of vital economic, geopolitical, and strategic importance. Maintaining stability and security in the region is one of NATO's main interests. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, the Black Sea remains a hotspot, where NATO and its partner countries face increasing challenges. NATO's top priority in the face of growing Russian influence should be to develop a common strategy for maintaining long-term security in the region.

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