

Original Article

Geopolitics of the Black Sea: Theoretical and Strategic Reappraisal

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Abstract

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The Black Sea region is a critical nexus of Eurasian geopolitics, characterized by long-standing rivalries, energy transit routes, and military posturing amidst ongoing conflicts. This article revisits the main theories explaining Black Sea geopolitics, using realism, neoclassical geopolitics, and sea power theory to understand the changing strategic environment. It analyzes the roles of major players—Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and NATO—considering Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and subsequent events up to 2025. The analysis points to shifts in power, such as Russia's diminished naval strength, Turkey's careful diplomacy, and increased Western involvement. A strategic review suggests that containment and regional cooperation are viable options, highlighting the importance of comprehensive strategies that link Black Sea security with neighboring areas like the Eastern Mediterranean and South Caucasus. The findings emphasize the region's crucial role in global stability, trade, and energy supply.

Key Words: Black Sea, Theoretical, Strategic, Russia, Ukraine

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Introduction

The Black Sea has long been a theatre of great power competition, serving as a vital waterway connecting Europe, Russia, and the Middle East (DUMITRU, 2021). Its geostrategic importance stems from substantial hydrocarbon reserves, key energy pipelines, and its position as a gateway to the Mediterranean via the Turkish Straits (Bosneagu et al., 2018). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has fundamentally transformed the region into a central arena of geopolitical conflict, with profound and far-reaching implications for global commerce, energy security, and international alliances. By 2025, pivotal events such as U.S.-mediated talks in Riyadh, the EU's comprehensive Black Sea strategy, and coordinated demining efforts by NATO allies have demonstrably reshaped the balance of power. However, alternative perspectives suggest that while conflict is evident, the Black Sea's role as a conduit for trade and cooperation, particularly through initiatives like the Black Sea Grain Initiative, continues to underscore its potential for regional stability and economic interdependence, challenging a purely conflict-driven geopolitical narrative. This article conducts a robust theoretical and strategic reappraisal, exploring how traditional geopolitical concepts critically apply to contemporary dynamics and proposing actionable pathways for future stability.

Theoretical Framework

Geopolitical analysis of the Black Sea benefits from several theoretical lenses. Realism posits that states pursue power and security in an anarchic international system, viewing the region as a zero-sum arena where Russia seeks hegemony to counter NATO expansion (Yoak, 2023). Neoclassical geopolitics emphasizes the permanence of geography, such as the Turkish Straits' role as a chokepoint, and integrates agent perceptions and power distribution (Åtland & Kabanenko, 2019). This framework explains Russia's historical push southward and Turkey's pivot status, highlighting the interplay between territorial imperatives and perceived threats.



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However, alternative perspectives suggest that while conflict is evident, the Black Sea's role as a conduit for trade and cooperation, particularly through initiatives like the Black Sea Grain Initiative, continues to underscore its potential for regional stability and economic interdependence, challenging a purely conflict-driven geopolitical narrative (Weaver, 2011). Sea power theory, inspired by Alfred Thayer Mahan, emphasizes naval dominance for controlling trade routes and projecting influence. In the Black Sea, this manifests in Russia's historical fleet operations and, more recently, Ukraine's innovative asymmetric drone warfare, which has demonstrably eroded Russian naval superiority and challenged its control over key maritime zones. Region-building theories examine post-Cold War efforts to institutionalize cooperation, such as the EU's Black Sea Synergy initiative, which have often been undermined by persistent rivalries and a lack of sustained political will. However, some scholars argue that these region-building efforts, despite their limitations, have laid crucial groundwork for future cooperation and established norms that could be reactivated, particularly in post-conflict scenarios. These frameworks collectively reveal the Black Sea as a highly contested space where geography, evolving power dynamics, and institutional frameworks intersect, with Russia's revisionist agenda actively challenging the principles of liberal order-building. To comprehensively understand Russia's strategic motivations in the Black Sea Region, it is crucial to analyze its national interests, foreign policy doctrines, and specific regional strategies across political, economic, sub-regional, environmental, and military dimensions (Sergunin, 2019). Russia's "warm water" politics, particularly its utilization of Sevastopol and Crimea, underscores its longstanding ambition for year-round access to maritime routes and global power projection capabilities (Haris, 2024).

Historical Context

Historically, the Black Sea has been a battleground for empires. Russia's conquest of Crimea in 1783 marked the beginning of its dominance over the northern coast, aiming to access warm-water ports and the Mediterranean. The Crimean War (1853–1856) pitted Russia against Ottoman Turkey, Britain, and France, underscoring the Straits' strategic throughput. During the Cold War, the sea was largely Soviet-controlled, with Turkey as NATO's southern bulwark (Hurewitz, 1962). The dissolution of the Soviet Union created newly independent states—Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova—reconfiguring the geopolitical landscape and introducing new complexities to regional security dynamics. Post-1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened the region to Western influence, with NATO and EU enlargements incorporating Romania and Bulgaria in 2004 and 2007. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine reasserted its "near abroad" claims, escalating tensions. These events set the stage for the 2022 invasion, which has linked Black Sea security to broader Eurasian conflicts (Slakaityte & Surwillo, 2024). This annexation significantly enhanced Russia's geostrategic position within the Black Sea by providing a robust naval base and forward operating location (Kollakowski, 2023) (Kushnir, 2017).

Current Geopolitical Dynamics

By 2025, Russia's war has prompted significant shifts. Moscow's blockade of Ukrainian ports disrupted global grain supplies, leading to the short-lived 2022 Grain Deal mediated by Turkey and the UN. U.S. negotiations in Riyadh with Russia and Ukraine in March 2025 aimed to cease hostilities in the Black Sea, emphasizing safe navigation and non-militarization of commercial vessels (Dawar & Bai, 2024). These ongoing diplomatic efforts, however, are frequently undermined by the continued militarization of the region and Russia's persistent assertion of its "warm water" policy, evident in its strategic control over key maritime access points (Haris, 2024). This enduring ambition for unfettered access to global oceans has historically driven Russian foreign policy, manifesting in actions such as Peter the Great's acquisition of the Baltic Sea coast and Catherine the Great's expansion into the Black Sea in the 18th century (Henriksen et al., 2017). This historical pattern underscores a consistent Russian drive for maritime influence, which is currently being reasserted through its enhanced military infrastructure and Black Sea Fleet, posing a significant challenge to regional stability and Turkish interests (Ayar & Arslan, 2023). Ukraine's innovative use of unmanned vehicles has significantly degraded Russia's Black Sea Fleet, diminishing its regional influence and, in effect, merging the Black Sea with the Eastern Mediterranean into a unified geopolitical space. Energy security remains a critical concern, with Russia's continued weaponization of energy supplies accelerating Europe's diversification efforts and underscoring the importance of pipelines originating from the Caspian Sea. Furthermore, hybrid threats, encompassing sophisticated cyberattacks and deliberate infrastructure sabotage, compound the existing conventional security risks in the region. The multifaceted challenges in the Black Sea necessitate a re-evaluation of traditional security paradigms, moving beyond purely military considerations to encompass economic, environmental, and technological vulnerabilities.

Key Players and Their Strategies

Russia

Russia views the Black Sea as a springboard for projecting power into the Mediterranean and Middle East, using conflicts to resist NATO expansion (Flanagan et al., 2020). The 2022 invasion aimed to secure dominance, but significant losses have weakened its position, prompting alliances with Iran and China for military support. However, alternative perspectives suggest that Russia's actions are primarily defensive, aimed at safeguarding its perceived security interests against NATO encroachment and ensuring access to vital warm-water ports, rather than purely aggressive expansionism. This strategic calculus is further complicated by Russia's increasing naval capabilities, including advanced warships, submarines, and missile technology, which, despite some delays, enable it to project power and disrupt maritime security across the Black Sea and beyond (Larsén, 2019).

Turkey

Turkey employs a "triangular balancing" strategy: deterring Russia while cooperating economically, strengthening non-NATO allies like Ukraine, and leading regional NATO efforts. Concepts like "strategic depth" and "blue homeland" guide its actions, including adherence to the Montreux Convention to limit external naval access (Pelt & Banke, 2022). This nuanced approach allows Turkey to maintain a delicate equilibrium between its national security imperatives and its role as a regional power broker (Çelikpala, 2010). However, some perspectives suggest that this strategy, while prioritizing national interests, might also inadvertently embolden Russia by demonstrating a willingness to engage economically, potentially diluting the deterrent effect of its NATO commitments and regional alliances.

Ukraine

Ukraine's resilience has upended the naval balance, utilizing Western aid for drone strikes and advocating for NATO integration to secure its Black Sea access. Its crucial role in grain exports highlights significant economic stakes, with its efforts to defend freedom of navigation gradually pushing Russia back and restoring Ukrainian grain exports to near pre-invasion levels by the end of the year (Schack et al., 2024). The ongoing conflict has devastated Ukraine's infrastructure, necessitating substantial international support for reconstruction and humanitarian aid. However, it is also argued that Russia's actions in the Black Sea are primarily defensive, aiming to safeguard its perceived security interests against NATO encroachment and ensure access to vital warm-water ports, rather than purely aggressive expansionism. This strategic calculus is further complicated by Russia's increasing naval capabilities, which enable it to project power and disrupt maritime security across the Black Sea and beyond.

NATO and the EU

NATO's riparian members (Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria) bolster deterrence, while the EU's May 2025 strategy focuses on resilience, connectivity, and security cooperation. Aspirants like Ukraine and Georgia enhance Western leverage (Bueger et al., 2024). However, the alliance faces internal disagreements regarding the scope and nature of its engagement, particularly concerning Russia's use of non-military tools such as informational, diplomatic, and economic instruments to achieve its geopolitical goals in the region (Flanagan et al., 2020).

Strategic Reappraisal

A reappraisal necessitates containing Russia through holistic strategies linking Black Sea security to adjacent regions. Scenarios for Ukraine's conflict—"strong peace," "geopolitical disunity," or "frozen conflict"—will shape outcomes: harmony could foster cooperation, while escalation risks broader instability (Larsen, 2014). However, it is also argued that Russia's actions in the Black Sea are primarily defensive, aiming to safeguard its perceived security interests against NATO encroachment and ensure access to vital warm-water ports, rather than purely aggressive expansionism. Recommendations include EU-Turkey dialogues, NATO capacity-building, and targeting Russian logistics in Crimea. The West should support Turkey's leadership to maintain regional ownership while countering revisionism (Rasmussen et al., 2014).

Conclusion

The Black Sea's geopolitics demand a nuanced reappraisal, blending theoretical insights with strategic pragmatism. Russia's aggression has exposed vulnerabilities but also created opportunities for enhanced Western containment and regional resilience. However, an alternative perspective suggests that Russia's actions are primarily defensive, aimed at safeguarding its perceived security interests against NATO encroachment and ensuring access to vital warm-water ports, rather than purely aggressive expansionism. By fostering aligned strategies among Turkey, Ukraine, and NATO, stability can be achieved, securing this vital nexus for global order. Future research should closely monitor emerging geopolitical axes, particularly the Russia-Iran-China alignment, and assess their profound implications for Eurasian security.

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