

BLACK SEA: Maritime Security in Contested Waters

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Summary

The Black Sea has become one of the world's most contested geopolitical regions — a crossroads of Euro-Atlantic, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern interests. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, energy vulnerabilities, competition over maritime routes, and regional tensions have transformed this area from a peripheral zone into a central element of Europe's security architecture. Today, stability in the Black Sea serves as a key indicator of the global balance of power.

In response, the European Union launched the "Strategic Approach to the Black Sea" in May 2025, aimed at strengthening resilience, security, and regional prosperity. The strategy rests on three pillars¹ (nota - link la strategie):

1. Security and stability, through the creation of a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub;
2. Connectivity and sustainable development, focused on energy and digital infrastructure; and
3. Environmental protection and climate adaptation.

At the moment, the document may lack a detailed operational plan or dedicated funding, but it marks a crucial step in recognizing the Black Sea as a major strategic priority for the EU.

For Romania, this initiative represents an opportunity to enhance its strategic profile. Hosting the Black Sea Maritime Security Hub in Constanța would reinforce the country's role as a pivotal actor on NATO's eastern flank and possibly a key facilitator between the EU, NATO, and other partner states, actively contributing to the region's security and development.

A central element of the regional equation is Türkiye² — a NATO member with a unique geostrategic position and control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles under the 1936 Montreux Convention. Türkiye remains indispensable to Black Sea security, yet its relations with both the EU and Russia are defined by strategic ambiguity. Enhancing EU–Türkiye cooperation in the Black Sea requires a stable and predictable institutional framework: a permanent dialogue mechanism on maritime security, infrastructure, and energy; and modernization of the EU–Türkiye Customs Union to provide Ankara with tangible economic incentives. Economic and cultural diplomacy should become more important tools for rebalancing the EU–Türkiye relationship — through incentives, investments in infrastructure, energy, and digitalization, as well as mechanisms to reinforce the rule of law. Türkiye's 2028 presidential elections will be a turning point: either consolidating Ankara's strategic autonomy between the West and Russia, or signaling a potential pro-Western realignment.

Also, Black Sea stability depends on the ability of the EU and NATO to combine firmness toward Russia with pragmatic cooperation with Türkiye and sustained support for Eastern partner states.

At the same time, Georgia stands at a critical moment, torn between the population's pro-Western aspirations and the government's authoritarian drift. The direction Tbilisi takes will profoundly affect its relationship with the EU and NATO — and by extension, the security of the entire region.

1 New EU strategy for secure, prosperous and resilient Black Sea region

https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-strategy-secure-prosperous-and-resilient-black-sea-region-2025-05-28_en

2 Türkiye – official UN new country name / old name: Turkey

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With a balanced approach, the Black Sea can evolve from a security frontier into a strategic corridor connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East — a space of sustainable cooperation and shared prosperity.

Personal note

I was in high school when I first walked on water — on the waters of the Black Sea, during a harsh winter in the early 2000s, in my hometown of Constanța. In that city, everything — the economy, society, even people's moods — seems to move with the sea, as in any true port city.

That winter, the sea froze over. Not just a thin layer of ice, but solid sheets stretching hundreds of meters from the shore. My classmates and I ventured out onto the ice, uncertain how far we could go — but eager to take the risk. It felt like escaping the city, walking over the frozen Black Sea, knowing how rare that sight was. News outlets reported constantly on the crisis: blocked port traffic, supply disruptions, and other emergencies caused by the extreme cold.

That was probably the first time I ever thought of the Black Sea in terms of risk.

In the next two or three years from now, meteorologists are again predicting cold winters. Whether the Black Sea will freeze once more is uncertain — but politically and strategically, the region will undoubtedly remain one of the hottest spots on the planet.

Regional Context

From a geographic and geopolitical standpoint, the Black Sea has become one of the most contested regions in the world. It brings together the highest concentration of NATO members, EU states, non-NATO countries, and even openly anti-NATO actors. Developments over the past decade reveal just how unpredictable regional stability can be — with far-reaching consequences for global security.

We are no longer talking about a simple regional theater, but about a global hub where Euro-Atlantic, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern interests intersect. Any public policy proposal for this area must therefore balance military deterrence, regional cooperation, and modern diplomacy, while also identifying both state and non-state actors that can play a pivotal role in maintaining maritime security.

Before going deeper, it's worth looking at the current regional landscape: to the west, Romania and Bulgaria — EU and NATO members with different capacities and resources. To the east, Georgia, whose democracy is under heavy pressure from Russia. Pro-democracy and anti-Russian protests are unfolding even now, while the country's access to the Black Sea has been effectively halved by the situation in Abkhazia. To the north, Ukraine — enduring a brutal war for over three years, holding the frontline near the key region of Odessa. And to the south, Türkiye — the state with the longest Black Sea coastline, a NATO member with deep historical ties to the region and, under the Montreux Convention, the legal authority over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. Türkiye's upcoming 2028 presidential elections will once again place it at the center of regional attention. Finally, Russia, the aggressor state with imperial ambitions, which annexed Crimea in 2014 and continues to wage a war of occupation and destruction in Ukraine — including operations aimed at controlling more of the Black Sea coast.

This complex landscape exposes the multiple risks facing the region today. The kinetic and hybrid wars have crippled civilian maritime traffic; energy security has been undermined both in terms of resource exploitation and connectivity; and overall connectivity — commercial, military, and infrastructural — has been disrupted across all domains.

Historically, Türkiye and Russia have been the dominant actors in the Black Sea basin. For centuries, both former empires treated the region as a Turkish–Russian affair, often disregarding the interests or potential cooperation of European states. The 20th century, however, brought profound changes — with

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the creation of NATO and Türkiye's early integration into the Alliance. Indeed, Türkiye's NATO story is almost as old as the Alliance itself.

The Montreux Convention of 1936 granted Türkiye control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and full authority over the passage of military vessels — a privilege that continues to define the region's security dynamics today.

Where does the European Union stand in this picture?

A good starting point is the EU's long-awaited Strategic Approach to the Black Sea, requested repeatedly by several member states and finally launched in 2025. This framework consolidates and coordinates EU instruments to enhance resilience, security, and prosperity across the region.

EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea

The European Union's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea reflects the region's growing geopolitical importance — especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Amid security tensions, port blockades, and hybrid threats, the EU decided to reaffirm its strategic interest in the area by launching a new framework in May 2025.

Although it is not an entirely new strategy, but rather a consolidation and coordination of existing EU instruments, its purpose is to enhance resilience, security, and prosperity in the region, in cooperation with both coastal and partner states — Ukraine, Georgia, Türkiye, but also Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The EU's approach is built around three main pillars³:

1. Security and Stability – including the creation of a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub.
2. Sustainable Prosperity and Connectivity – focusing on the development of transport, energy, and digital infrastructure.
3. Environmental Protection and Climate Adaptation – promoting sustainable economic development and scientific cooperation.

This approach might be ambitious, but it is still under construction. It currently lacks a detailed action plan or dedicated funding, and its implementation will depend largely on how effectively the EU can use its existing instruments and financial mechanisms. Even so, the new framework marks a significant shift: it positions the Black Sea as a core area of strategic interest for the European Union, merging security, economic, and environmental dimensions into a single, integrated vision.

For Romania, this strategy holds direct relevance. As both a coastal and EU member state, Romania stands to gain from stronger maritime security, better protection of critical infrastructure, and expanded transport and energy corridors. Romania has a clear interest in ensuring the implementation and funding of this strategy, given its exposure to both conventional and hybrid threats from the Russian Federation. As professor Marius Ghincea notes, “the primacy of armed security in the face of direct Russian aggression must remain central and unequivocal — not just one objective among many.”⁴

Bucharest has already expressed its readiness to host the Black Sea Maritime Security Hub in Constanța. The Romanian president and other senior officials have endorsed this proposal publicly. Locating the hub in Constanța would bring multiple national and regional benefits: improved coordination among ports; enhanced management of critical maritime infrastructure; stronger protection of commercial routes; and deeper cooperation on maritime safety and environmental protection.

³ New EU strategy for secure, prosperous and resilient Black Sea region - https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-strategy-secure-prosperous-and-resilient-black-sea-region-2025-05-28_en

⁴ Marius Ghincea – « Making Waves » <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/making-waves-8094/>

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Thus, the emerging strategic equation in the Black Sea can be summarized as a triangle of influence: European Union – Türkiye – Russian Federation

Türkiye's Role and the EU–Türkiye Equation

Türkiye occupies a privileged position in the Black Sea region thanks to its unique geostrategic location and control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, as established by the Montreux Convention of 1936. This convention grants Ankara the authority to regulate the passage of both military and commercial vessels between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean — a power that makes Türkiye an indispensable actor in maintaining the regional balance of power. As both a NATO member and a Black Sea littoral state with the longest coastline, Türkiye combines Western security interests with its own regional ambitions, maintaining strict control over maritime access and directly shaping the region's political and military stability.

To reconcile Türkiye's privileged status with the EU's strategic vision for the Black Sea — and to avoid alienating Ankara — Brussels must recognize Türkiye's unique geopolitical role and build a relationship grounded in mutual respect and converging interests. Rather than viewing Türkiye's control of the straits as a limitation, the EU should treat it as an opportunity for partnership. Regional stability depends on active Turkish involvement and on maintaining a balanced relationship among NATO, EU member states, and Ankara.

A first step could be the creation of a permanent EU–Türkiye consultation mechanism for the Black Sea, covering maritime security, energy, infrastructure, and environmental issues. Such a framework would enable policy coordination without undermining Türkiye's sovereign authority over the straits, while fostering transparency and mutual trust. Expanding cooperation in the field of defense and security would be equally valuable — through joint maritime surveillance programs, multinational exercises, and technological collaboration projects. On the economic front, by offering economic and investment incentives — including modernization of the EU–Türkiye Customs Union or joint maritime innovation programs — Brussels can provide tangible benefits that balance out political sensitivities. A pragmatic, mutually beneficial approach would demonstrate that partnership with the EU is not a threat to Türkiye's autonomy, but rather a guarantee of shared prosperity and regional stability.

A coherent European strategy for the Black Sea cannot be complete without Türkiye. By combining respect for the Montreux Convention with a balanced strategic partnership, the EU could transform Türkiye from an unpredictable actor into a pillar of regional stability.

Still, all of these dynamics are closely tied to developments in Ukraine, as analyst Antonia-Laura Pup observes⁵, “security in the Black Sea is inseparable from Ukraine's security.” She also emphasizes that “Romania should invite Ukraine to join the EU's Black Sea Security Hub.” As Russia maintains its aggressive military posture in the region and as Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria seek stronger Western support, closer cooperation with Türkiye becomes crucial. In exchange for greater openness to Western military, logistical, and monitoring presence in the Black Sea, the EU could offer Türkiye economic benefits and deeper integration into the single market.

Such an arrangement would also serve Romania's interests, as Turkish and Romanian strategic goals often align — a point highlighted by Zoltán Lechner in “Anchoring NATO's Eastern Flank”.⁶

Türkiye's 2028 Elections and Regional Implications

2028 will be a pivotal year, as Türkiye holds presidential elections. During his most recent visit to the White House, President Erdoğan appeared noticeably different from his usual dynamic. The election

⁵ Antonia-Laura Pup, <https://www.contributors.ro/romania-ar-trebui-sa-invite-ucraina-in-hubul-ue-pentru-securitate-la-marea-neagra/>

⁶ Zoltán Lechner in “Anchoring NATO's Eastern Flank: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Romania's Black Sea Policy and Its Strategic Interaction with Türkiye.”

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outcome will shape not only Türkiye's domestic politics but also the geopolitical balance among NATO, Russia, and the European Union.

If President Erdoğan consolidates power, or if a successor from the same political camp takes office, Türkiye will likely continue its policy of strategic autonomy — maintaining a careful balance between the West and Russia. On the other hand, a victory by a pro-Western opposition candidate could trigger a geopolitical rebalancing. A new government might seek to reset relations with the EU, restart negotiations on modernizing the Customs Union, and pursue closer cooperation within NATO.

An indirectly related but symbolically important event deserves mention: the visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to the White House. While not directly altering the security balance in the Black Sea, the visit carries strategic significance. It reinforces Western narratives — of religious freedom and solidarity with Ukraine — sends a subtle message to Türkiye, and indirectly supports NATO/EU efforts to stability in the region. In a region where symbolism and legitimacy matter deeply, such high-level gestures can strengthen resilience and cohesion, both of which are essential elements of long-term security.

Looking eastward, toward Georgia, the country's internal developments may prove equally consequential. The current wave of protests in Georgia goes far beyond domestic politics — it is a test of the nation's geopolitical orientation, between the Western democratic model and Russia's authoritarian influence. Recent authoritarian backsliding by the Georgian government — including the arrest of opposition leaders — has driven citizens into the streets in what may become a point of no return. The outcome of this internal crisis will shape Georgia's relationship with both the EU and the United States, and by extension, affect the broader security architecture of the Black Sea.

Conclusion

The Black Sea stands today at the intersection of geopolitical competition and the need for strategic cooperation. In a context marked by Russian aggression, energy vulnerabilities, and regional tensions, the area has become a barometer of Euro-Atlantic stability. The role of the European Union and NATO must be to transform the region from a zone of confrontation into a corridor of security, development, and resilience — through integrated policies that unite military, economic, and environmental dimensions.

For Romania, a coastal state and member of both the EU and NATO, this moment presents an opportunity to strengthen its strategic profile and to become a pivot actor in reinforcing maritime security and regional connectivity.

The region's future will depend on the ability of the main players — the European Union, Türkiye, and the Eastern partner states — to build a pragmatic and predictable architecture of cooperation.

The outcomes of Türkiye's elections, Georgia's domestic trajectory, and Ukraine's resilience will collectively define the balance of power in the Black Sea for the next decade.

If the EU's strategic approach succeeds in combining firmness against threats with openness to constructive partnerships, particularly with Türkiye, the Black Sea could evolve from a contested frontier into a strategic bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East — a space of balance, stability, and sustainable cooperation.