Webinar Report I:

Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region: Conflict Lines, Spoilers, and Prospects for Cooperation

16 May 2025

Introduction

This webinar marked the inaugural session of a series organized under the *#SecureBlackSea* project. This initiative examines and proposes a future-oriented security architecture for the broader Black Sea region aligned with NATO's evolving strategic priorities. Bringing together leading experts from academic institutions, think tanks, and policy communities across Europe and the Caucasus, the session explored the role of external actors —primarily the European Union, NATO, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)— in shaping the region's strategic trajectory. Key issues discussed included the interplay between hard and soft security, the future of regional cooperation frameworks, the implications of the war in Ukraine, and emerging strategic outlooks. The session served as a platform to generate evidence-based insights into complex, multidimensional security risks, ranging from conventional military threats to hybrid warfare and economic vulnerabilities, while also identifying pathways for enhanced regional resilience, dialogue, and cooperation.

Contextualizing the Black Sea Region

The Black Sea region has long been a crossroads of strategic competition, shaped by historical rivalries and evolving power dynamics. In recent years, the region's geopolitical salience has surged, particularly in the wake of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These events have altered the regional balance of power and triggered a broader reconfiguration of European and transatlantic security priorities. One of the discussants noted during the webinar that the Black Sea can no longer be viewed as a peripheral concern for the EU. Still, it must be recognized as a central arena of geopolitical contestation. Russia's military buildup and assertive posture have transformed

the regional security landscape. At the same time, the Black Sea's geostrategic importance has grown due to its role in global energy transit, food security, and connectivity routes between Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. As a NATO member with strategic control over the Bosporus Strait under the Montreux Convention, Türkiye plays a crucial balancing role in the region. However, the shifting security environment calls for a reassessment of existing legal frameworks and strategic doctrines to address hybrid threats, naval presence, and great power competition.

The European Union: Between Strategic Drift and Awakening

The European Union's engagement in the Black Sea region has long been characterized by a fragmented, often technocratic approach that lacks the strategic coherence required to address the region's mounting geopolitical and security challenges. Flagship initiatives such as the Black Sea Synergy, launched in 2007, were intended to foster multilateral cooperation and strengthen regional ties. However, these efforts have largely failed to deliver a comprehensive or unified strategy due to institutional rivalries and the absence of a clear division of responsibilities among key EU bodies. Notably, competition and overlapping mandates between the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE), and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have created silos in policymaking and undermined coordination.

As one of the discussants emphasized, this institutional fragmentation severely hampers the EU's ability to assert itself as a strategic actor in the Black Sea. Rather than leveraging its collective resources and diplomatic influence, the EU often appears disjointed, with different bodies pursuing parallel, sometimes conflicting agendas. For instance, DG MARE's emphasis on maritime and fisheries cooperation does not always align with DG NEAR's broader political and financial instruments, while the EEAS, tasked with formulating strategic direction, often lacks the budgetary authority and inter-institutional leverage to ensure implementation.

Although the EEAS has recently taken steps toward drafting a dedicated EU Black Sea Strategy, addressing cross-cutting themes such as connectivity, energy security, maritime governance, and human security, the initiative remains in its infancy. Progress has been slowed by limited political momentum, insufficient funding commitments, and the lack of consensus among member states on prioritizing the region within the EU's external action agenda. Moreover, the EU's internal challenges—ranging from enlargement fatigue to divergent foreign policy preferences—have further complicated efforts to formulate a robust

and forward-looking strategic framework. All in all, the EU's engagement in the Black Sea remains reactive and piecemeal, falling short of the strategic clarity and institutional coordination needed to respond effectively to the region's rapidly evolving security dynamics.

Compounding the challenges of internal fragmentation is the EU's evolving relationship with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which introduces a new set of variables into the regional strategic equation. As the previous paragraph illustrated, the lack of institutional coherence has constrained the EU's ability to respond effectively to the Black Sea's security dilemmas. Yet, the shifting geopolitical landscape, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's war on Ukraine, pushes the EU toward a more assertive role, whether by choice or necessity.

As another participant of the webinar pointed out during the discussion, a fundamental question now facing EU policymakers is whether the Black Sea will be treated as an internal strategic space, akin to the Baltic or Mediterranean, or continue to be approached as a peripheral zone of external engagement. This distinction is not merely rhetorical; it will determine the depth, scope, and urgency of the EU's policies in the region. The recent granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova marks a significant geopolitical shift. It extends the EU's political and normative frontier deeper into the Black Sea basin, reinforcing the need for a more integrated, cross-sectoral approach to regional and maritime security. This enlargement momentum also comes with increased responsibilities. Ukraine and Moldova face significant internal governance, economic, and security challenges, many exacerbated by regional instability. Therefore, a coherent EU Black Sea strategy must address maritime and connectivity concerns and consider its candidate partners' broader state-building and resilience needs. Without such a comprehensive framework, the EU risks fostering expectations it cannot meet and leaving critical gaps in the region's security architecture.

Meanwhile, Georgia's stalled European trajectory underscores the fragility and unevenness of the EU's neighbourhood engagement. While Georgia has long been seen as a frontrunner in aligning with EU norms, recent political developments have cast doubt on its reform path and commitment to democratic standards. The ambiguity of Georgia's status —caught between pro-European aspirations and creeping authoritarian trends— highlights the risks of an incoherent or inconsistent EU posture in the region. The diverging trajectories of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia illustrate the complex political terrain the EU must navigate. Suppose the Union is to play a meaningful role in shaping the future of the Black Sea. In that case, it must develop a strategic vision that transcends ad hoc projects and institutional competition, and instead reflects the region's new political geography, expanded EU commitments, and emerging security imperatives.

NATO's Evolving Role and Enduring Constraints

NATO has notably increased its engagement in the Black Sea in response to Russia's ongoing militarization and the broader destabilizing effects of the war in Ukraine. The region has become a critical arena for NATO's deterrence posture and collective defence agenda, particularly given the strategic vulnerability of the alliance's eastern flank. Since 2014, and more intensively after 2022, NATO has expanded its military footprint in member states bordering the Black Sea, deploying multinational battlegroups to Romania and Bulgaria, increasing air policing missions, and enhancing naval patrols. These steps underscore NATO's recognition of the Black Sea as a frontline of strategic competition.

However, our second discussants noted that the alliance lacks a dedicated and coherent Black Sea strategy. Instead of a region-specific doctrine, NATO's current approach remains embedded in broader Eastern Flank reinforcement policies, which, while significant, fail to fully address the Black Sea's unique operational, legal, and geopolitical challenges. Initiatives such as the trilateral demining and maritime surveillance cooperation between Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye represent meaningful progress in sub-regional coordination. Still, these efforts are ad hoc and fragmented, rather than components of a broader strategic framework. NATO's posture in the Black Sea is still largely reactive rather than proactive, shaped more by crisis response than long-term planning. While the alliance emphasizes deterrence and readiness, it has yet to articulate a forward-looking vision for regional maritime security, hybrid threat management, or resilience-building. This gap is especially problematic given Russia's continued use of asymmetric tactics, including cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and energy coercion —all of which fall below the Article 5 threshold but significantly impact regional stability.

Moreover, US retrenchment in the region further complicates NATO's strategic coherence. As another participant highlighted during the discussion, the US has reduced its security deployments and diplomatic engagement in the Black Sea area, focusing instead on global force redistribution and domestic political recalibration. The scaling back of key programs run by the US State Department and Department of Defence has left a vacuum in governance support, military education, and local capacity-building. These evolving dynamic places are increasing the responsibility on European NATO members to take a leading role in regional stabilization and capacity development. Maritime domain awareness, cyber defence coordination, infrastructure protection, and democratic governance require more robust European ownership. However, internal divergences within NATO and Türkiye's ambiguous strategic posture —balancing alliance commitments with bilateral ties to Russia— limit deeper coordination and long-term planning.

To move beyond short-term deterrence and fragmented initiatives, NATO must consider adopting a dedicated Black Sea Security Strategy that integrates hard security with resilience, connectivity, and political engagement. Without such a framework, the alliance risks falling behind in a region that remains critical not only for its southeastern flank but for the stability of the broader Euro-Atlantic security order.

Russia's Role and the Persistence of Strategic Fragmentation

Despite increasing discussions about its relative decline, particularly considering its protracted war in Ukraine and internal economic pressures, Russia continues to occupy a dominant and deeply entrenched position in the security architecture of the broader Black Sea region. While some analysts point to Russia's overstretch and perceived loss of influence in parts of the South Caucasus, especially following setbacks in managing post-war dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan, some speakers urged caution. They stressed that Moscow's ability to exert hard and soft power remains formidable and should not be underestimated in any future regional strategic calculus. Russia's enduring presence is anchored in several interlocking domains.

First, its military footprint —including its occupation of Crimea, deployment of Black Sea Fleet assets, and continued stationing of troops in breakaway territories such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria— gives it direct leverage over security and access corridors throughout the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Second, Russia maintains an extensive energy network in the region, serving as a significant natural gas and oil supplier to countries like Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Serbia, while also operating critical infrastructure such as pipelines and nuclear projects that provide long-term influence over domestic decision-making. Third, Russia continues to manipulate regional political fault lines through hybrid means, including disinformation campaigns, election meddling, cyberattacks, and support for illiberal actors. This hybrid toolkit allows Moscow to exploit institutional weaknesses, stir internal polarization, and prevent the consolidation of Euro-Atlantic partnerships in neighbouring states. It also undermines the effectiveness of multilateral institutions and creates an environment of uncertainty that hinders long-term policy planning by the EU, NATO, or regional governments.

The depth of Russia's entrenchment in countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, and even in Türkiye, further complicates the development of any regional architecture that seeks to exclude or contain its influence. As another participant emphasized, these relationships are not merely transactional or temporary —they are embedded in long-standing economic interdependencies, political elites' networks, and historical narratives that Russia continues to exploit. Moscow's role as a mediator in the South Caucasus (albeit a contested one) and

as a partner in energy and defence cooperation, it ensures that it remains a stakeholder that regional actors cannot fully disengage from, even amidst growing tensions with the West.

Given this reality, any sustainable and inclusive regional security framework must grapple with how and to what extent Russia should be engaged. While current geopolitical conditions, particularly Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its estrangement from Euro-Atlantic institutions, severely limit avenues for constructive dialogue, total exclusion may prove counterproductive. In conflict resolution, border management, arms control, and economic connectivity, some degree of calibrated, conditional engagement may eventually be necessary —not to endorse Russia's actions, but as a pragmatic recognition of its embedded role in the region's security equation. Ultimately, Russia's complex and multifaceted presence in the Black Sea region means that any attempt to build a resilient, rules-based order must balance deterrence with selective engagement, containment with dialogue, and regional autonomy with geopolitical realism. Failure to acknowledge this reality risks strategic incoherence and the unintended reinforcement of Russian leverage.

Türkiye: Strategic Partner or Ambivalent Actor?

Türkiye occupies a singularly complex and strategic position within the broader Black Sea region, acting simultaneously as a NATO frontline state, a regional power, and a key interlocutor with Russia. As a member of NATO and the alliance's second-largest military power, Türkiye plays a vital role in anchoring the southern flank of Euro-Atlantic security. At the same time, its deep economic interdependencies and multifaceted bilateral relations with Russia, ranging from energy imports and tourism to defence cooperation and trade, have led Ankara to pursue a path of strategic autonomy. This policy orientation allows Türkiye to manoeuvre flexibly across geopolitical fault lines and introduces ambiguity into collective security planning and multilateral coordination.

As our second discussant noted, Türkiye frequently presents itself as a bridge between Western institutions and Eurasian actors, crafting a regional policy emphasizing national interests over bloc alignment. This balancing act is evident in Türkiye's strict interpretation of the Montreux Convention, which governs naval access to the Black Sea and its mediating role in regional conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute. Ankara's ability to maintain simultaneous communication channels with both Moscow and Kyiv, while providing Bayraktar drones to Ukraine and participating in NATO missions, illustrates the dual-track nature of its regional engagement.

However, Türkiye's internal political turbulence, marked by democratic backsliding, institutional erosion, and mounting economic instability, casts uncertainty over the durability

of its foreign policy consistency. The 2023 elections, currency volatility, and growing energy dependency have all contributed to a domestic environment that increasingly constrains Ankara's external leverage. Nevertheless, participants agreed that Türkiye remains indispensable to any viable and forward-looking security framework in the Black Sea region. Its geostrategic location, control over access to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits, and operational experience in regional diplomacy make it a central actor in shaping crisis response and long-term strategic alignment.

Several speakers emphasized the potential for enhanced EU–Türkiye cooperation, especially in domains where interests overlap, and strategic complementarity is possible. These include maritime safety, energy infrastructure development, disaster preparedness, climate-related resilience, and supply chain security. Joint efforts in these areas could improve regional stability and offer avenues for rebuilding trust and institutional ties between Ankara and Brussels, particularly after years of political estrangement. Yet, significant barriers to deeper alignment remain. Divergent positions on issues such as Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundaries, political and press freedoms concerns, and Türkiye's military actions in Syria and Iraq strained relations with key EU member states. Additionally, Ankara's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defence system raised alarm within NATO and continues to generate friction in defence coordination. These tensions have hindered the development of a sustained strategic dialogue between Türkiye and its Western partners, leaving cooperation largely issue-specific and transactional.

The EU and NATO must adopt a more nuanced and pragmatic approach to Türkiye, acknowledging its agency and indispensability while clearly defining the parameters for constructive engagement. A stable and secure Black Sea region cannot be envisioned without Türkiye's active participation, but neither can it be achieved without addressing the strategic misalignments that currently limit its full integration into collective planning. Bridging this gap will require political will, policy innovation, and acknowledging the multipolar and contested nature of today's regional security environment.

The Decline of Multilateral Institutions and the Search for New Models

The webinar highlighted a growing consensus around the diminishing effectiveness of traditional multilateral institutions in addressing the complex and fast-evolving challenges of the Black Sea region. Once seen as cornerstones of regional cooperation and dialogue, bodies such as the BSEC and the OSCE are now widely regarded as increasingly obsolete in form and function. Participants noted that while these institutions were initially designed to foster regional integration, manage conflicts, and promote economic collaboration, they

have failed to adapt to the changing geopolitical realities and security demands of the post-2014 environment.

The participants particularly highlighted that the OSCE, once pivotal in conflict prevention, early warning mechanisms, and facilitation of diplomatic dialogue, especially in contested areas like the South Caucasus and Moldova, has now weakened. Its lack of enforcement capacity, consensus-based decision-making procedures, and the presence of politically antagonistic member states -notably Russia- have effectively paralyzed its operational relevance in the Black Sea context. The inability of the OSCE to respond meaningfully to Russian aggression or to maintain sustained missions in sensitive conflict zones has exposed its institutional fragility and limited strategic utility.

Similarly, the BSEC, headquartered in Istanbul and initially envisioned as a platform for promoting regional economic integration, infrastructure development, and sectoral cooperation, has fallen short of expectations. Despite including all Black Sea littoral states, BSEC has been plagued by structural dysfunction, limited political ambition, and internal divisions. It has neither the institutional capacity nor the political traction to influence regional economic or security trajectories meaningfully. As a result, it remains largely symbolic, unable to mobilize or coordinate responses to emerging transnational threats such as energy insecurity, supply chain disruptions, or maritime safety challenges.

Considering these shortcomings, several participants emphasized the urgent need to rethink regional multilateralism by exploring more agile, functional, and adaptive frameworks. These could include issue-based coalitions, minilateral arrangements, and hybrid partnerships that bridge state and non-state actors and align more closely with the current threat landscape and political realities. Flexible mechanisms —such as trilateral formats, regional task forces, and multi-stakeholder platforms— may be better suited to address pressing challenges like cyber threats, demining, infrastructure protection, and climate resilience. Importantly, any new approach must also navigate the strategic asymmetries and trust deficits that hamper cooperation among Black Sea states. The decline of legacy institutions like BSEC and the OSCE reflects organizational shortcomings and a broader crisis of regional governance. To avoid strategic vacuum and policy drift, there is a clear need for innovative institutional design, functional cooperation, and tailored security mechanisms that are fit for purpose in a fragmented and contested regional order. Without such innovation, the Black Sea risks remaining a space defined more by strategic inertia than shared solutions.

Concluding Remarks

Towards a Strategic Framework: Scenarios and Policy Imperatives

The discussions underscored the urgent need —and significant challenge— of crafting a coherent, forward-looking strategic vision for the BSR. Long treated as a peripheral theatre, the Black Sea region has emerged as a central node in Europe's evolving security architecture, shaped by the intersecting forces of great power rivalry, democratic fragility, hybrid threats, and geopolitical fragmentation. Against this backdrop, participants stressed that reactive policies and fragmented initiatives can no longer address the region's complex and dynamic threats. Instead, what is needed is a multi-tiered strategic approach, one that aligns short-term crisis response with medium- and long-term structural transformation.

In the **short term**, attention must focus on investments in critical infrastructure —including ports, undersea data cables, and energy interconnectors— as well as the expansion of demining operations and the deepening of security dialogues with key regional actors, particularly Türkiye and EU candidate countries such as Ukraine and Moldova. These measures are essential to reduce immediate vulnerabilities and foster trust-based cooperation.

In the **medium term**, the EU must work toward developing a unified Black Sea strategy that outlines clear geographic and sectoral priorities. This should be accompanied by enhanced NATO-EU coordination, particularly in domains like maritime security, hybrid threat management, and regional resilience. Establishing effective civil-military cooperation, harmonizing situational awareness mechanisms, and supporting local capacity-building will be vital to any durable stabilization effort.

In the **long term**, the region's trajectory will hinge on the ability to address democratic backsliding and institutional fragility, which threaten to erode societal resilience and open the door to malign influence. As our second discussant emphasized, the most serious threats to the region are not external: internal democratic erosion, shrinking civic space, and rising authoritarianism are equally destabilizing. Any meaningful strategy must therefore integrate governance support, rule of law assistance, and civil society engagement —ideally linked to enlargement policies— to promote institutional convergence and strengthen regional ownership of reforms.

The webinar concluded that the Black Sea is not just a geopolitical fault line. It is a test case for the EU's and NATO's ability to act decisively, coherently, and collaboratively in safeguarding regional stability and upholding a rules-based order. The region's future will depend on the capacity of Euro-Atlantic actors to fuse hard and soft security tools, build adaptive and inclusive institutions, and sustain engagement beyond crisis moments. In this light, the project calls for continued dialogue, interdisciplinary research, and policy experimentation to develop a resilient, cooperative, and forward-leaning security architecture for the Black Sea.

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The Black Sea region has long been a focal point of geopolitical competition, shaped by historical rivalries, strategic interests, and evolving security dynamics. In recent years, the region has witnessed growing instability due to escalating tensions, hybrid threats, and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These developments have disrupted regional security and challenged the European and transatlantic security order. Given NATO's strategic interest in the region, a comprehensive reassessment of security frameworks is necessary to address emerging threats and enhance regional stability.

SecureBlackSea seeks to examine and propose a future security architecture for the wider Black Sea Region, aligning with NATO's evolving strategic priorities. In-depth analyses of existing security structures, regional conflicts, and cooperation mechanisms aim to provide evidence-based insights into key threats and potential policy responses. A particular focus will be placed on the intersection of conventional military threats, hybrid warfare, economic security, and geopolitical rivalries, recognizing the' complex and multi-dimensional nature of regional security challenges.

The project activities include: expert workshops, field research, and data-driven assessments of security risks. It will evaluate the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks and NATO's role in shaping stability in the BSR. Collaborating with policymakers, security experts, and academic institutions, the project team will facilitate policy dialogues and strategic foresight discussions to identify pathways for strengthening regional security cooperation. These efforts will result in developing comprehensive policy recommendations to enhance institutional resilience and foster a more cooperative security environment.

The expected outcomes of this initiative include a thorough assessment of regional security threats, a set of actionable policy recommendations, and strengthened dialogue between NATO and regional stakeholders. The project will contribute to an informed security discourse by producing analytical reports and policy briefs and providing practical solutions for mitigating regional risks. Additionally, fostering collaboration between academic and policy communities will support long-term strategic planning and resilience-building efforts.

The project aspires to provide a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving security landscape in the region. Addressing traditional and non-traditional security challenges will offer valuable insights that can guide NATO's strategic engagement in the region. Through rigorous analysis and stakeholder engagement, it aims to contribute to a more stable, secure, and cooperative Black Sea security environment in the face of emerging geopolitical complexities.

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The views expressed in this report represent only the opinions of the webinar participants. They should not be taken as an official view of, or endorsed by, the supporting and partner institutions or the project team.