

GLOBAL
STRATEGIC
INSIGHT

No. 9
SEPTEMBER 2026



Maintaining Black Sea Security: The Montreux Convention amid Russia's War in Ukraine

Tacan İLDEM

This policy paper is produced for the "SecureBlackSea" project (ID: G7540), supported by the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the project team, their associated institutions, the Global Academy, or the NATO SPS Programme.

Maintaining Black Sea Security: The Montreux Convention amid Russia's War in Ukraine

Tacan İLDEM

Abstract

This paper explores how the Montreux Convention (1936) continues to shape Black Sea security 90 years after its signing, particularly in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It argues that the Convention remains a strong and flexible legal tool that enables Türkiye to preserve regional stability. Based on its legal structure, history, and use in conflicts, the paper demonstrates how Türkiye has managed complex pressures while maintaining open navigation and reducing the risk of escalation. It also shows that the Convention serves both as a legal system and as a means of managing competition between major powers in the Black Sea region. It concludes with recommendations to keep the Montreux Convention relevant in an evolving world, to continue providing stability in an uncertain region, and to underscore the enduring value of rules-based governance.

Introduction: The Strategic Salience of the Black Sea

The Black Sea has once again become a focal point in the global strategic competition. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Black Sea has turned into a region of military conflict, economic disruption, and strategic positioning for the countries in the region as well as the wider international community. Although its important function in the export of grain from both Ukraine and Russia and in the transport of energy from both Russia and the Caspian Basin—linking the region to global markets—is once more under stress, the belligerent sides have tried to show their influence by means of naval operations, blockades, and diplomacy. Because of the war in Ukraine, the region has become more unstable (Bechev, 2025; Sabanadze and Dalay, 2025; SETA, 2022). Russia's actions have transformed it into a militarized area that has an impact on international law, freedom of navigation, and regional security. Russia's naval activities—such as blockades, interference with commercial ships, and attacks on key infrastructure—have disturbed the global grain markets and put civilian maritime traffic at risk.

As a result of these developments, Türkiye's position as guardian of the Turkish Straits—the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus—has been confirmed once again. The Montreux Convention, which grants Türkiye the right to control sea traffic between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea both in peace and in war, subject to certain restrictions, has acted as a source of stability in the Black Sea region by striking a balance between the interests of the countries whose territories border the sea and those of the outside powers. To achieve this, the Convention includes specific rules for peacetime navigation and allows flexibility in times of crisis, giving Türkiye room to act in the diplomatic arena. For instance, during the recent war, the Convention's provisions, which limit the entry of warships from non-bordering countries into the Black Sea, including those of the United States and other NATO countries, have helped to reduce the risk of escalation in the area.

Just a few days after Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine, with its label 'special military operation', Türkiye invoked the relevant provisions of the Convention, stopped the passage of warships for both belligerent and non-Black Sea countries, while continuing to allow commercial vessels. This decision has been widely regarded as a legally sound and strategically prudent response, strengthening Türkiye's image as a responsible regional actor (SETA, 2022).

The conflict has increased pressure on Türkiye's foreign and security policies. While Türkiye supports NATO's efforts to deter Russia through measures for the eastern flank and the assistance package to Ukraine, it also maintains its economic and diplomatic ties with Moscow. This balancing act makes it difficult for Türkiye to fully align with Western sanctions, particularly given its longstanding principled stand against joining sanctions imposed outside the UN. Although this, at times, led to trust issues regarding Türkiye's place and commitment within NATO, it was important for her to maintain a degree of independence in the evolving security situation as a regional power with direct stakes. The Montreux Convention supports this independence by granting Türkiye legal authority and flexibility.

The emergence of new asymmetric means since 2022, demonstrated by air- and sea-based uncrewed vehicles, alongside traditional naval power, has created a new security dynamic in the Black Sea. One reality that emerged from the ongoing war in Ukraine and its fallout in the region is that technological advancements now enable smaller coastal states to challenge larger fleets through innovation. The introduction of innovations in warfare techniques reminds us of the need to ensure the functioning of legal frameworks, such as the Montreux Convention, to maintain order and predictability during uncertain times. Doubtless, Türkiye's ability to interpret and apply the Convention's provisions amid shifting geopolitical conditions determines its credibility. The following sections examine how the Montreux system has shaped Türkiye's responses to various pressures and how the war in Ukraine has influenced its application and relevance.

The Montreux Convention: Origins, Legal Foundations, and Strategic Logic

“The Montreux Convention on the Regime of the Straits,” which was signed on 20 July 1936, is still one of the oldest legal instruments in the field of international maritime law. Although it restored Türkiye's full sovereignty over the Turkish Straits, it also created a system of governance that has lasted for the last 90 years. The Convention achieved a careful balance among freedom of navigation, sovereign control, and collective security—principles that remain relevant in light of the rapidly changing strategic situation in the Black Sea (Scutaru, İldem, and Bozhilov, 2024).

The origins of the Convention lie in the complex geopolitical situation of the interwar period after World War I. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne had placed the Turkish Straits under an international commission to limit Turkish sovereignty and secure access to the world's seas. By the mid-1930s, the international order had begun to change due to the rise of militarism and the breakdown of multilateral security systems. Seeing the weaknesses of the demilitarized Straits Zone and the changing balance of power in Europe, Türkiye began diplomatic efforts to alter the Lausanne system (Hale, 2013). The Montreux Convention, which resulted from these efforts, was negotiated with the involvement of the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union, and other major powers of the time, and it affirmed Türkiye's right to remilitarize and take control of the Straits Zone. The new arrangement also gave Türkiye a special status as both guardian and regulator of maritime access between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. It took into account not only Türkiye's own security requirements but also the shared interest of the major powers in avoiding unilateral dominance in the Black Sea area (Armaoğlu, 2014). When drafting the Convention, the objective was to strike a balance between sovereignty and international interests, taking into account that the Straits are both a vital route for global trade and a potential site of great-power conflict.

Legal Design and Operational Provisions

The Montreux Convention has a special place in international maritime law. Unlike the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which sets general norms, the Montreux Convention reflects the specific circumstances of the Turkish Straits. Its ongoing validity rests on customary international law and Türkiye's continuous practice as the overseeing state. Article 35(c) of UNCLOS also reaffirms the validity of existing international conventions relating to straits.

The Montreux Convention (for the full text, see UN, 2022) comprises 29 articles and four annexes, establishing the legal framework for passage through the Turkish Straits. The main provisions cover three functional areas: commercial navigation, military transit, and wartime discretion.

The Convention guarantees commercial vessels freedom of passage through the Turkish Straits in both peacetime and wartime. Their transit is subject only to routine maritime requirements, such as pilotage and health inspections. In this respect, the Convention reflects the long-standing principle of freedom of navigation, which UNCLOS later reaffirmed. Beyond its utility as a legal framework, the Convention also plays a vital economic role for the Black Sea littoral states in their international trade, including grain exports, energy resources, and industrial goods.

The Convention imposes a series of restrictions on the passage of warships, especially those belonging to non-Black-Sea powers. These include limits on aggregate tonnage, the number of vessels permitted in the Black Sea at any one time, and the maximum duration of stay (21 days). Black Sea littoral states -Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, and Georgia- on the other hand, benefit from comparatively greater freedom to move their naval forces through the Straits.

Articles 19 to 21 of the Convention are consequential, empowering Türkiye to exercise discretion over passage through the Straits during war or imminent threat. Article 19 authorizes Ankara to prohibit or restrict the transit of warships belonging to belligerent countries when Türkiye is neutral or not a party to the conflict. Article 21, on the other hand, gives Türkiye the right to implement broader measures when it considers itself to be threatened by war. These provisions, in a way, turn the Montreux regime into a strategic instrument of foreign policy, enabling Ankara to regulate access through the Straits in a manner compatible with its security interests.

The result is a highly flexible legal architecture, rigid enough to prevent destabilizing interventions, yet adaptable enough to accommodate changing geopolitical realities (Scutaru, İldem, and Bozhilov, 2024). Thus, beyond its legal provisions, the Convention has gained strategic significance through its regulation of regional behavior and allocation of authority among maritime actors.

Strategic Logic of Custodianship: Balancing Sovereignty, Security, and Stability

The Montreux Convention regulates access to one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime routes. Its design embodies three interconnected principles that continue to ensure its applicability today. First, it operationalizes the principle of regional ownership. By differentiating between littoral and non-littoral states, Montreux makes certain that the Black Sea remains mainly a domain of the littoral states.

Second, it elevates Türkiye's role as a mediating/facilitating power. The Convention provides Ankara with a legal basis to mediate between competing interests. During the Cold War, for instance, Türkiye's enforcement of the Montreux Convention prevented the United States from deploying aircraft carriers or nuclear-armed vessels

into the Black Sea, thereby avoiding a confrontation with the Soviet Union (Armaoğlu, 2014). At the same time, it reassured Moscow that the Straits would not become a corridor for non-regional military expansion.

Third, it provides a legal framework that contributes as an instrument of crisis management. Procedures, such as advance notification requirements and tonnage declarations, have ensured transparency and clarity while reducing the risk of miscalculation.

For Türkiye, however, the Montreux Convention represents more than a legal obligation; it is a fundamental element of national sovereignty. By exerting control over the Straits, Türkiye engages in what could be described as “custodianship,” a form of stewardship that exercises sovereignty with responsibility. This role has elevated Türkiye’s diplomatic standing internationally, allowing it to act as a facilitator or mediator in efforts to resolve regional crises.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Montreux Convention can be interpreted as a paradigmatic example of a resilient international regime. Its longstanding legacy demonstrates that regimes endure not simply as a result of static power configurations, but also because they reduce transaction costs, provide information, and stabilize expectations among actors operating under conditions of uncertainty (Keohane, 1984). In the Black Sea context, the Montreux Convention establishes clear procedural rules and limits uncertainty regarding naval deployments. It provides a predictable framework within which both littoral and non-littoral states are induced to calibrate their behavior. Even in times of heightened geopolitical tension, such as the current war in Ukraine, the Convention continues to govern interactions by constraining unilateral action and reinforcing mutually recognized limits.

The War in Ukraine: Testing the Montreux Regime

The Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is considered a threat to Black Sea security. For Türkiye, the invasion raised an immediate legal and political question: how to apply the Montreux Convention’s wartime provisions in a conflict that directly affected the Black Sea basin. On 27 February 2022, within days of the invasion, Ankara characterized what Russia styled “special military operation” as a war and invoked Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, which authorizes the Turkish Government to restrict or prohibit the passage of belligerent warships through the Straits when Türkiye is neutral. This effectively barred the warships of belligerent states from transiting the Straits immediately. Subsequently, Türkiye declared a formal ban on the passage of warships from any country. This interpretation treated the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a regional war in the Black Sea, a reading that maximized the Convention’s preventive value (Sabanadze and Dalay, 2025).

From a legal standpoint, the Convention does not define the threshold for determining the circumstances that would justify classifying a situation as war, nor does it affect the provisions governing passage through the Straits. Türkiye's decision was a deliberate legal judgment aimed at preserving freedom of navigation while preventing escalatory naval deployments in the Black Sea (SETA 2022). This decision prevented the presence of the navies of non-Black Sea powers that could have been part of any undesired escalation. It also reinforced Ankara's capacity to act as a diplomatic intermediary (Bechev, 2025).

At the same time, Russian mining strikes against ports (notably Mariupol and Odesa) and the widespread use of sea drones and coastal missile strikes elevated the risk of inadvertent harm to commercial shipping. After promulgating the relevant provisions of the Convention, one of Türkiye's focuses became intensified maritime domain awareness (MDA) along the Straits and in adjacent Aegean and Black Sea approaches, expanded coast guard presence and patrol activities, and enhanced coordination with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and regional partners (IMO, 2023).

Ankara also leveraged its legal stewardship with active diplomacy. Thus, Türkiye became a principal convener and facilitator for the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), which was negotiated with the United Nations, Russia, and Ukraine in mid-2022 (UN, 2022–2023). Though fragile, the initiative demonstrated the strategic utility of Montreux as a framework for crisis governance: Türkiye could, by leveraging the Convention, strive to achieve arrangements for maritime deconfliction. The BSGI also had measurable global effects, temporarily alleviating pressure on food prices and supply chains destabilized by Russian maritime interdiction (FAO, n.d.).

The war also revealed how Montreux functions as a risk-mitigating mechanism for NATO's maritime policy. NATO allies, constrained by the Convention's restrictions, adopted a new approach by emphasizing capability transfers to littoral states and layered deterrence strategies. It relied less on surface presence and more on air-and land-based anti-ship strike systems and on intelligence sharing. This approach reduced the aspiration to deploy sizable extra-regional fleets as part of a rotational presence in the Black Sea, an outcome that would have been legally problematic under the Montreux Convention and operationally escalatory and would probably not have had the desired deterrent value given Russia's A2/AD posture from Crimea (Wilk and Zochowski, 2023). Türkiye's position thus allowed NATO to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine while preserving the legal discipline that reduces the risk of unintended escalation in the sea domain.

Ankara's strict commitment to the Montreux Convention caused hesitation among its allies, who had long supported a stronger maritime policy in the Black Sea. The United States, for example, wanted a larger Allied naval presence. Some Black Sea allies, especially Romania, pushed for more ambitious plans, including a dedicated

Black Sea flotilla. For Ankara, the main issue was not whether NATO should maintain a strong deterrence and defense posture in the region, but how to make it practical, affordable, and aligned with the Convention and the region's unique strategic and legal situation. Türkiye was not willing to accept proposals for a much larger or permanent Allied naval presence without first considering military changes after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Its objection stemmed from the fact that keeping such large-scale Allied naval forces in the Black Sea would expose them to Russia's advanced anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) systems, putting Allied assets at risk without offering strategic gains. Instead, Ankara favored a practical approach, combining the strengths of Black Sea coastal allies with rotating and adapted Allied support rather than trying to bypass the Montreux Convention with a permanent naval force. Submarines also play a key role in overcoming complex A2/AD systems, and Türkiye is especially important here, given its strong submarine capabilities. One can argue that Ankara's position reflects an effort to shape NATO's posture to fit the region's particular conditions and the Convention's legal framework.

It is also worth noting that Türkiye maintained high-level bilateral channels of communication with Moscow, while unequivocally condemning the Russian invasion. Türkiye's engagement with Russia was driven by the need to de-escalate military activity in various conflict zones, from Syria to Libya, where both were present and pursued opposing policies. These regular contacts enabled the two sides to hold consultations and maintain dialogue on maritime safety. This dual-track, assertive legal approach, coupled with active diplomacy, allowed Ankara to exercise its relative strategic autonomy without severing the ties needed to manage shared maritime risks (Tulun, 2025).

The extensive use of emerging and disruptive technologies has become a complicating factor for the maritime domain. The inclusion in the inventories of armed forces of uncrewed surface and subsurface vessels (USVs), long-range precision missile fires from shore, and maritime cyber threats meant that conventional measures of naval strength (e.g., carrier presence) were less decisive than networked ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance), resilient coastal defenses, and integrated mine-countermeasure capability. These new asymmetric tactics in contemporary warfare prompted Türkiye to invest in MDA and counter-USV capabilities, to provide drones and coastal defense systems to littoral partners, and to cooperate on mine-clearance operations (Ukraine War Analytics, 2026).

Türkiye's conduct during the conflict highlighted an important normative dimension rooted in legal theory: the effectiveness of maritime law derives from the principle of consistent state practice, a central tenet in both customary international law and regime theory. By faithfully and consistently implementing the Montreux Convention, which prioritized neutral navigation, fostered coordination with international organizations, and enabled mediation between the belligerents, Ankara put the theoretical framework into practice, thereby reinforcing the Convention's legitimacy and operational credibility.

Any arbitrary implementation of Montreux's wartime provisions would undermine its credibility. It would cause legal disputes, prompting various actors to take unilateral action to challenge the regime. Therefore, for years to come, the Montreux regime will rely on Türkiye's consistent and impartial application, clarity, and sustained transparency; consultations as needed; and persistent investment in multi-domain assets beyond naval capabilities to maintain the nexus between legal norms and effective maritime governance (Bechev, 2025).

Türkiye's Strategic Management of the Black Sea

Türkiye's policy during the Russo-Ukrainian war has crystallized around three interlinked strategic behaviors: *balancing* (managing relations with Russia while preserving NATO ties), *hedging* (maintaining commercial and energy relations with Russia that limit complete alignment with the positions of other Allies and EU partners), and maintenance of its *strategic agency* (using legal, operational, and diplomatic tools to shape outcomes in the Black Sea). These behaviors are demonstrated through a concrete operational toolkit comprising legal control with enhanced maritime domain awareness. In the Black Sea context, these priorities translate into an emphasis on Turkish stewardship of the Montreux Convention's application, participation in NATO's deterrence and defense arrangements, and the maintenance of bilateral channels of communication with Moscow (SETA, 2022).

Türkiye's measured approach to the war in Ukraine is shown by its decision not to enforce the sanctions on Russia imposed by the United States and the European Union. This is compatible with Ankara's long-standing principle of supporting only sanctions adopted by the United Nations, not those imposed by groups of countries. Türkiye's continued trade and economic relations with Russia, together with its 2019 purchase of the Russian S-400 air and missile defense system, have raised questions in Western capitals about whether they reflect Ankara's shift in axis. The S-400 deal, in particular, provoked controversy because the NATO Summits of 2016 and 2018 had urged the Allies to phase out Soviet-made or Russian weapons and to improve interoperability with NATO systems. Yet it would be incorrect to interpret Ankara's stand as evidence that Türkiye has fundamentally altered its strategic direction. Rather, Ankara's policy aimed to preserve its independence and flexibility in a complicated geopolitical environment. This is relevant when considering Türkiye's stance on Ukraine. Although Türkiye has kept up its engagement with Russia, it has not avoided its strong support for Ukraine, which it regards as its strategic partner. It has been clear in its firm and outspoken advocacy of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Therefore, rather than representing a shift in alliances, Türkiye's policy should be seen as an attempt to balance its various strategic interests while retaining its options open.

One may safely assume that the Montreux Convention provides Ankara with a legal lever that can be invoked to achieve multiple policy ends. By interpreting the Convention's wartime provisions narrowly to prohibit the passage of warships while preserving merchant transit, Türkiye has controlled the operational dynamics of the Black Sea without appearing partisan. This legal agency offers several operational dividends: it prevents an influx of extra-regional combatants that could widen the war; it strengthens Türkiye's capacity to act as a neutral mediator; and it underpins Ankara's claim to act legitimately when organizing maritime corridors, inspections, or security measures. As a demonstration of its strategic agency, Türkiye leveraged its custodianship of the Montreux Convention in July 2022 to facilitate the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which established safe corridors for Ukrainian agricultural exports through negotiations with the United Nations, Russia, and Ukraine.

To exercise legal authority, operational capacity must be credible. Montreux's preventive nature is meaningful only if Ankara can detect and, where necessary, interdict vessels attempting to transit unlawfully, or enforce quarantine measures to protect neutrals. While the Montreux Convention is a powerful legal lever, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the credibility of its enforcement. Legal authority can be instrumentalized by the operational capacity to monitor, verify, and, where necessary, restrict maritime movement through the Straits. In this respect, there is a correlation between legal instruments and material capabilities: the Convention's value-added can be sustained not only by its provisions but also by Ankara's ability to implement them: by exercising maritime domain awareness, enforcing notification requirements, and deterring potential violations. This interrelationship between legal frameworks and the availability of necessary capabilities strengthens the role of these instruments as stabilizing tools.

Türkiye's behavior in this context can also be interpreted through the lens of middle power theory, which emphasizes states' capacity to exercise influence through niche diplomacy, institutional and legal engagement, and facilitation/mediation efforts rather than sheer material capabilities (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993). Türkiye's leverage of the Montreux Convention somewhat reflects this dynamic: by acting as both a gatekeeper and a rule enforcer, Ankara converts legal authority into strategic room for maneuver. This is also in sync with Türkiye's efforts in recent years to achieve strategic autonomy, in which states seek to diversify their alignments and preserve decision-making flexibility in an increasingly multipolar and contested system. Thus, while simultaneously fulfilling its NATO commitments and maintaining functional relations and lines of communication with Russia, Türkiye exemplifies how middle powers navigate systemic pressures by leveraging institutional or legally defined roles rather than relying solely on alliance-based policies.

Operational Implementation and Regional Leadership

Boosting its maritime domain awareness (MDA) through a combination of national assets and cooperative arrangements has been a priority for Türkiye. These capabilities include coastal surveillance systems, over-the-horizon surveillance, satellite imagery and analysis, and an increased operational tempo for the Turkish Coast Guard and Navy in the Straits and in areas approaching the Black Sea. This approach is compatible with NATO's broader focus on maritime situational awareness, improving coordination between national and Allied surveillance capabilities, and establishing a recognized maritime picture to achieve better early warnings and indications (NATO MARCOM, 2023). Moreover, improved MDA enables the monitoring of vessel movements, the verification of the advance notifications required by the Montreux Convention, and the publication of navigational warnings, thus helping not only in the implementation of the Convention but also in ensuring the safety of neutral shipping.

In maintaining its longstanding posture in a balanced manner, Türkiye's objective has been to avoid projecting an excessive military presence while being cautious not to leave the area without sufficient means to deter and defend. For this, it has relied mainly on regular naval patrols, coast guard interdictions, and integrated air-sea surveillance to detect unlawful activities and deter violations. This approach has allowed Türkiye to safeguard its interests while ensuring its actions remain both effective in contributing to a secure and stable environment and legally defensible.

Seeing the increasing significance of asymmetric and distributed maritime capabilities as well as Ukraine's growing potential in this area (Ukraine War Analytics, 2026; Abdurasulov, 2024), Ankara has been placing greater emphasis on supporting its littoral partners, particularly Ukraine, as a way of boosting its own maritime defense without needing a major increase in the presence of non-littoral NATO naval forces. Türkiye's contributions have included uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), coastal surveillance capabilities, maritime systems, electronic warfare expertise, and training and advisory assistance, including mine countermeasures operations. Turkish expertise in the defense industry, particularly in UAVs and naval platforms, has thus become a key tool of strategic influence. A clear example of this strategy is the building in Türkiye of Ada-class corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy. The corvettes named *Ivan Mazepa* and *Hetman Ivan Vyhovskyi* are intended for anti-submarine warfare and open-sea patrol. They are part of Ukraine's effort to build a more capable indigenous naval force. By improving Ukraine's own coastal and naval capabilities, Türkiye helps to establish a more distributed form of Black Sea deterrence in which littoral states and Ukraine can take on a greater share of the responsibility for maritime security. NATO has itself recognized the effectiveness of Ukraine's maritime capabilities, stating that Ukrainian forces have caused substantial damage to the Russian Black Sea Fleet and have driven it away from the western part of the Black Sea, while at the same time underlining the complementary role of Türkiye, Romania,

and Bulgaria in securing the maritime area and in continuing to respect the Montreux Convention. It is therefore possible to strengthen deterrence without the need for continuous deployment of non-littoral NATO naval forces, thereby reducing pressure for arrangements that might complicate the application of the Montreux regime. Türkiye's support for Ukraine can therefore be seen as a contribution to distributed maritime deterrence, which strengthens the regional balance while maintaining the legal and strategic equilibrium set up by the Convention. (De Waal, 2026).

The double-edged nature of such cooperation is evident. While boosting deterrence and contributing to efforts to support Ukraine's urgently needed resilience, there is inevitably a risk of escalation, as Russia may perceive it as critical Turkish assistance to its adversary. Ankara, therefore, tries to calibrate its support, making it operationally significant yet limited in scope.

Türkiye's practice during the ongoing war in Ukraine has included operational measures aimed at preserving conditions for unhindered passage of commercial vessels that also helped mitigate humanitarian fallout. Ankara has worked with the IMO and UN agencies to coordinate Notices to Mariners, short-term safe-passage arrangements for merchant bulk carriers, and port-handling protocols to reduce the risk from mines and unexploded ordnance. Türkiye has also supported efforts to improve the infrastructure of Ukrainian ports, when feasible, thereby facilitating access to commercial endeavors and mitigating humanitarian suffering. These measures not only underpinned legal stewardship but also contributed to humanitarian imperatives and global economic stability (UN, 2022–2023).

Türkiye's diplomatic toolkit complements its operational posture. By convening talks (as it did for the Black Sea Grain Initiative), offering mediation channels (including by facilitating direct talks between the warring parties to bring an end to the ongoing war and reaching an arrangement for the exchange of prisoners), and maintaining continuous communication with both Kyiv and Moscow, Ankara reduces information asymmetries and the risk that tactical incidents will escalate into strategic confrontation.

Acting according to the requirements of strategic autonomy and maintaining a balance in the context of the Montreux Convention's impartial application may at times be interpreted by allies as insufficiently robust support for Ukraine; conversely, a more overtly assertive posture could provoke economic reprisals or harden Russia's regional posture, with spillover consequences for Turkish security. Since the credibility of Montreux as a stabilizing regime depends on Ankara's consistent, transparent, and persistent application of its provisions, deviating from this pattern could encourage legal contestation and opportunistic deployments by third parties (Sabanadze and Dalay, 2025).

Finally, technological change and the diffusion of sea-denial capabilities mean Ankara must continually invest to maintain its legal authority in line with operational realities. This requires investments in ISR, counter-USV systems, mine countermeasures, and maritime cyber resilience—areas where capability shortfalls would weaken Türkiye's capacity to project force in line with Montreux's legal basis. Türkiye's wartime practice under the Montreux Convention demonstrates a deliberate effort to translate legal authority into stabilizing action without direct involvement in the conflict.

Strategic Outlook for the Black Sea and Policy Recommendations

The Black Sea will remain a pivotal region for systemic strategic competition and managed coexistence in the future, given the growing prominence of connectivity. The coming decade is likely to feature 1) an intensified technological race in maritime surveillance and denial systems; 2) greater NATO attention to the Black Sea as a part of Euro-Atlantic defense; 3) expanded roles for the EU and G7 in financing resilience and connectivity; and 4) the necessity for Türkiye to remain the legal and diplomatic hinge that prevents regional escalation while preserving freedom of navigation and trade. With these limitations, three broad trajectories could be imagined shaping the Black Sea order in the coming decade;

- *Managed Stability (Optimistic Scenario)*: Türkiye maintains and consolidates its custodian and leading role; littoral states cooperate in different formats, such as the trilateral MCM Task Force among Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye (Güvenç, 2024), and through renewed confidence-building frameworks when the ongoing war comes to an end, Russia changes its pattern of behavior, and Montreux-based governance is respected and reinforced.
- *Regime's Sustainability in a Fractured Equilibrium (Baseline Scenario)*: The Montreux regime is sustained yet strained by the fallout from unresolved protracted conflicts; Türkiye implements the Convention impartially, maintains its balanced posture, and ad hoc crisis-management initiatives replace institutional coordination and engagement.
- *Erosion and Escalation (Pessimistic Scenario)*: Legal ambiguities are exploited, external powers contest Montreux's constraints, and the Black Sea becomes a region for proxy naval competition.

Undoubtedly, many factors will play a role in the outcome. Nevertheless, sustained diplomatic engagement, technological adaptation, and the willingness of regional actors to view the Montreux Convention not as a constraint but as a strategic asset for regional stability will be among those that one may qualify as determinants. The trajectory of the Black Sea order will be shaped by how effectively regional actors leverage the Montreux framework to facilitate sustained cooperation and adaptation across these possible futures (International Crisis Group, 2018).

As Jervis (1978) argues, security challenges arise when others perceive measures taken by one state to enhance its security as threatening, thereby creating conditions for escalation. The Montreux regime, in essence, is designed to mitigate this dynamic by imposing limits on naval access, thereby reducing the scope for misperception and rapid force accumulation. In an era of intensifying geopolitical rivalry, such hybrid mechanisms combining material constraints with normative expectations are likely to play an increasingly important role in managing regional security complexes. Thus, Türkiye's stewardship of the Montreux regime, coupled with proactive diplomacy, technological investment, and strategic consistency, can continue to serve as both a stabilizing instrument and a platform for regional leadership underpinned by cooperation with other stakeholders.

The following are some policy recommendations intended to guide this transition, framed around four interconnected domains: (a) maintaining the integrity of the Montreux regime; (b) enhancing maritime security and resilience; (c) strengthening regional and transatlantic coordination; and (d) ensuring long-term strategic stability and economic security in the Black Sea.

Maintaining the Integrity of the Montreux Regime

The Montreux Convention is still the essential basis for regional stability in the Black Sea, but its credibility is based on the consistent, impartial, and transparent way in which it is implemented; in this light, Türkiye should;

- Set out the best practices for carrying out operations during wartime. Türkiye could draw up and release an updated 'Montreux Operational Guidance Note' which would compile the various practices that have been put into effect since February 2022. Doing so would also increase clarity, transparency, and predictability, and help avoid criticism of arbitrariness, thereby supporting future crisis management initiatives.
- Use international law to gain legitimacy. Türkiye's decisions concerning the Montreux Convention should still be in accordance with the general principles of international law, especially those of the UN Charter relating to sovereignty, the right to self-defense, freedom of navigation, and maritime security, to show that it is legitimate in the eyes of its allies and other global actors.
- Update the tools used for domestic enforcement. If the Turkish Coast Guard and Navy regularly revise their rules of engagement in line with advances in emerging and disruptive technologies—which are key to the spread of autonomous vessels and asymmetric threats—then legal control will remain enforceable in practice (OSCE, 2023).

Enhancing Maritime Security and Resilience

As sea-denial technologies—such as unmanned systems, mines, and electronic warfare equipment—become more widespread, an integrated maritime security framework is needed. In this regard, Türkiye should;

- Set up a “Black Sea Maritime Situational Awareness Network.” Türkiye could take the initiative to link the maritime operations centers of the coastal states, possibly within a NATO framework, so they can share their radar, AIS, and satellite data to monitor risks and violations in real time.
- Contemplate ways to expand trilateral cooperation in mine countermeasures (MCM): collaboration among Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria in mine clearance and maritime safety would help secure vital shipping lanes and ports, while also implementing the Montreux Convention's rules on extra-regional naval deployments.
- Promote maritime cyber resilience. Since there is an ever-greater dependence on digital navigation and systems in port logistics, Türkiye should collaborate with NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE) to develop a tailored cyber defense training and incident response framework for the Black Sea.
- Strengthen humanitarian maritime security by building on the experience gained from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and by having Türkiye lead the way in setting up a "Humanitarian Maritime Corridor Protocol" under the aegis of the United Nations to guarantee the safe passage of essential goods in the event of future crises.

Strengthening Regional and Transatlantic Coordination

For a sustainable order in the Black Sea region, the most important thing is for the countries along the sea and other external actors to act in coordination. In this regard, countries interested in the matter should;

- Encourage regional confidence-building measures (CBMs): Türkiye could, in the future, take the initiative when a peace agreement is reached to end the war in Ukraine and set up the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) in a new, non-combat capacity – with a focus on disaster response, environmental protection, and maritime safety – to rebuild trust among the coastal states gradually.
- Get more involved with the littoral partners. The cooperation that Ankara has with other littoral Allied states on the various multilateral platforms they take part in (for example, the UN, the OSCE, and the G20) should be made use of to secure financial and technical assistance for regional resilience projects, especially in the areas of environmental protection and infrastructure security.

Ensuring Long-Term Strategic Stability and Economic Security

How the Black Sea will develop strategically depends on integrating its security, economic, and technological dimensions into a coherent framework; in this regard, the following measures need to be implemented.

- Set up a "Black Sea Resilience Fund", with financing coming jointly from stakeholders who would benefit from improved regional security and stability—such as the NATO members, the EU member states, and the international financial institutions—and which could be used to assist with infrastructure repair, port modernization, and digitalization in the littoral countries. In this connection, the EU will hopefully adopt a realistic policy by recognizing Türkiye as an important stakeholder in the Black Sea region and engaging with it appropriately, rather than maintaining the distant stance it adopted as it developed its approach to the region (European External Action Service, 2025).
- Promote green, sustainable development in maritime transport. Türkiye could play a role in initiatives to reduce carbon emissions from shipping in the Black Sea by establishing green ports, encouraging the use of alternative fuels, and supporting the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) decarbonization program.
- Promote innovation with dual use. It would help to encourage partnerships between Turkish defense companies and the civil technology sector, as this would lead to advances in surveillance, unmanned systems, and data analytics—fields that support both national security and commercial competitiveness.
- Integrate the Montreux Convention into future diplomatic efforts. Türkiye might take the initiative in incorporating the Montreux regime's value-added into future discussions as an example of a regional balance that reconciles legal restraint with escalation management.

Conclusion

The Black Sea is once again at the center of European security. Because of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the sea has changed from a local maritime area into one of the main fronts of strategic competition with far-reaching consequences. Türkiye's use of the Montreux Convention's provisions, its well-balanced diplomatic strategy, and its carefully controlled operational actions have helped reduce the risk of confrontation, both between the conflicting parties and between NATO and Russia. Türkiye's role is uniquely determined by its capacity to function as both a gatekeeper and a mediator.

The Black Sea offers us important lessons. Rules are important, but only if they are observed, put into practice, and backed by responsible statecraft. Moreover, conflict is changing as cyberattacks, hybrid methods, and the widespread use of unmanned systems are giving rise to new problems that traditional security arrangements were never designed to address. In this kind of situation, the fact that a legal instrument

drawn up in 1936 is still in force is remarkable. It shows not only the continued value of the Montreux Convention and Türkiye's careful implementation of its provisions, but also encourages us to consider whether well-designed legal frameworks can meet the demands of an ever more complex security environment.

The Black Sea is a region where Türkiye exercises its sovereignty through its military presence and deterrent stance, and, at the same time, a border area where NATO's credibility is put to the test. The extent to which Türkiye succeeds in this situation will depend on its maintaining legal impartiality, applying the Convention consistently, and ensuring that its decisions concerning the passage of warships and its application of the Convention's provisions are transparent.

It will be essential to hold timely consultations and coordinate with NATO allies and partner states along the shores to build resilience against cyberattacks, energy coercion, and maritime security threats—all of which are forms of hybrid activity. The credibility of Türkiye's position as guardian of the Convention will depend on its ability to continue demonstrating that sovereign control and alliance solidarity are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. The Montreux Convention has endured for over nine decades because of the balance of concept and structure it has achieved: it acknowledges Türkiye's rights, with sovereignty at its heart, ensures freedom of navigation, and limits the militarization of the Black Sea by non-riparian states.

To sum up, the Black Sea has become a region where geopolitical rivalry, legal frameworks, military posturing, and the impact of technological advances on warfare capabilities converge. Türkiye's long-standing policy shows how legal frameworks and sound statesmanship can help address the complexities of a multipolar world. Final stability in the Black Sea will rely on maintaining a working balance that combines deterrence and diplomacy within a regional security arrangement defined by a legal framework and effective cooperation among the coastal states and their partners.

References

- Abdurasulov, A. (2024, March). Ukraine War: The sea drones keeping Russia's warships at bay. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68528761>.
- Armaoğlu, F. (2014). *20. yüzyıl siyasi tarihi*. Timaş Yayınları.
- Bechev, D. (2025). The Black Sea Has Become the Fulcrum of Europe's Security. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/06/the-black-sea-has-become-the-fulcrum-of-europes-security>.
- Cooper, A., R. A. Higgott, and K. R. Nossal. (1993). *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*. UBC Press.
- De Waal, T. (2026, July). *Managing Montreux: Turkey and the Russia-Ukraine War in the Black Sea*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/07/managing-montreux-turkey-and-the-russia-ukraine-war-in-the-black-sea?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- European External Action Service. (2025). *EU strategic approach to the Black Sea region*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-strategic-approach-black-sea-region_en.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (n.d.). *FAO Food Price Index*. Retrieved September 20, 2026, from <https://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/>.
- Güvenç, S. (2024). *Part 2. Maritime security: Redefining regional order in a new security environment*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/part-2-maritime-security-redefining-regional-order-in-a-new-security-environment/>.
- Hale, W. (2013). *Turkish foreign policy since 1774*. Routledge.
- International Crisis Group. (2018, June). *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/turkiye/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-south-caucasus>.
- International Maritime Organization (IMO). (2023). *Maritime Security and Safety in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov*. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/maritimesecurityandsafetyintheblackseaandseaofazov.aspx>.
- Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation under the security dilemma. *World Politics*, 30, 2: 167–214.
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.
- NATO Allied Maritime Command. (2023, 30 October). MARCOM steps up Allied coordination for maritime situational awareness, <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2023/marcom-steps-up-allied-coordination-for-maritime-situational-awareness>.

OSCE. (2023). *FSC security dialogue outlines key role of wider Black Sea region as integral part of European security*. <https://www.osce.org/forum-for-security-cooperation/542823>.

Sabanadze, N., and G. Dalay. (2025). *Understanding Russia's Black Sea Strategy*. Chatham House. July, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/understanding-russias-black-sea-strategy/08-russias-advantages-and-constraints-black-sea>.

Scutaru, G., T. İldem, Y. Bozhilov. (2024). *The strategic importance of the Black Sea: Regional cooperation for energy and defense*. New Strategy Center, EDAM, and Sofia Forum. https://edam.org.tr//Uploads/Yukleme_Resim/-19-12-2024-11-53-01.pdf.

SETA. (2022). *Web panel: The War in Ukraine/Consequences for the security of the Black Sea Region*. <https://www.setav.org/en/web-panel-the-war-in-ukraine-consequences-for-the-security-of-the-black-sea-region>.

Tulun, T. E. (2025). *Türkiye's Constructive Vision, EU's Divisive Diplomacy in Black Sea and Central Asia*. AVİM. <https://www.avimbulten.org/public/en/Analiz/TURKIYE-S-CONSTRUCTIVE-VISION-EU-S-DIVISIVE-DIPLOMACY-IN-BLACK-SEA-AND-CENTRAL-ASIA>.

Ukraine War Analytics. (2026). *March 2026 Analysis*. <https://ukraine-war-analytics.com/drones/sea-drone-tactics-evolution.html>.

United Nations. (2022–2023). *Black Sea Grain Initiative: Agreements and implementation arrangements*. <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative>.

United Nations. (2022). *Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits. League of Nations Treaty Series*. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/ion/volume%20173/v173.pdf>.

Wilk, A. and P. Zochowski. (2023). *Ukraine attacks the Black Sea Fleet, Day 568 of the war*. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-09-15/ukraine-attacks-black-sea-fleet-day-568-war>.



Tacan İLDEM

Throughout his diplomatic career, Ambassador Tacan İlDEM held several high-level bilateral and multilateral positions, including NATO Assistant Secretary-General from 2016 to 2020. He was member of the Independent Experts Group of NATO 2030 reflection process that prepared the report titled “NATO 2030: United for a New Era”. He served as the Turkish Ambassador to the Netherlands and Permanent Representative to NATO and the OSCE. His earlier postings were Director-General for International Security Affairs at the MFA, Chief of Cabinet and Principal Foreign Policy Advisor of the President of the Republic. His postings abroad also included Brussels (NATO), New Delhi, Washington DC, and Athens. He is a recipient of the Decoration of Grand Officer of the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity and the Medal of Gratitude of Albania. He is currently the Chairman of EDAM, a Turkish think-tank on foreign and security policy.



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 not only disrupted regional security but have also posed broader challenges to 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. Through an in-depth analysis of existing security structures, regional conflicts, and cooperation mechanisms, it aims 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. It will evaluate the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks and NATO's role in shaping stability in the region. In collaboration 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 the development of comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional resilience and fostering 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. By producing analytical reports and policy briefs, the project will contribute to an informed security discourse and provide practical solutions for mitigating risks in the region. By fostering collaboration between academic and policy communities, it will support long-term strategic planning and resilience-building efforts.

SecureBlackSea aspires to provide a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving security landscape in the Black Sea region. It will offer insights that can guide NATO's strategic engagement in the region. Thus, it aims to contribute to a more stable, secure, and cooperative Black Sea security environment in the face of emerging geopolitical complexities.

