

Major power rivalry in the Black Sea



The struggle for trade, energy and security dominance in the region has profound implications for the Middle East



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black Sea sits at an important junction between Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The region is home to important energy and transit routes. Oil and gas pipelines, as well as fiber-optic cables, run along the bottom of the sea, while on the surface hundreds of ships crisscross it daily, moving people and goods. The Black Sea region also serves as one of the geopolitical fault-lines in the competition between great powers such as Russia, the US and the Europeans. Each has competing economic and security interests at stake.

For the US, the Black Sea's strategic importance is derived primarily from the fact that Washington has treaty obligations under NATO with Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania. Meanwhile, Russia depends on the region for energy, trade, security and economic reasons. For Russia, its domination of the region has always been considered a matter of national survival.

For Europe, the Black Sea is an important region for a variety of reasons, from economics and security to energy and transportation. Hundreds of kilometers of pipelines and fiber-optic cables crisscross the bed of the Black Sea. Major European ports are an important source of economic activity

in the region. The largest port in the Black Sea, Constanta, is in the EU member state Romania.

Even for a region like the Middle East, hundreds of kilometers away, the Black Sea is important. For example, Russia uses its military presence in the Black Sea to project power in places like Syria. The US and Europeans plan to invest billions of dollars in new infrastructure projects to improve connectivity in the region through an investment fund that offers investment opportunities for government and private investors. Finally, the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous Sunni inhabitants of Crimea, face daily persecution by Russian authorities.

The Black Sea will remain an important region for the great power competition for the foreseeable future. As the incoming Biden administration seeks to craft its European, Russia and NATO policies, the Black Sea will play a central role. Due to its importance to the US and Europe, it is likely that in the near term Russia will keep the region simmering. Policymakers in the Middle East must not ignore the Black Sea either. Ultimately, if the Black Sea is safe, secure and prosperous, the broader region will be, too.



Today's geopolitical environment has replaced the bipolarity of the Cold War with a multi-polar world

THE PAST decade has seen a re-emergence of a great power competition that the world has not experienced since before the turn of the last century. This marks a change from the Cold War era when two major powers, the US and the Soviet Union, through a system of alliances and proxies, enjoyed a monopoly over global power.

However, today's geopolitical environment has replaced the bipolarity of the Cold War with a multi-polar world, with different centers of power competing around the globe for influence and national interest similar to how international affairs were arranged in the 19th century. One of these geopolitical fault-lines in the tug of war between great powers can be found in the Black Sea.

The Black Sea sits at an important junction between Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Oil and gas pipelines, as well as fiber-optic cables, run along the bottom of the sea, while on the surface hundreds of ships crisscross it daily, moving people and goods. For centuries the Black Sea has been fought over by some of the world's major empires. Throughout history, it has proven to be one of the most geopolitically and economically important locations in the broader Eurasian region.

Adding to the geopolitical complexity of the region is the kaleidoscope of regional cooperation, alliances, conflict and



There is an expectation that private investors in the Middle East will take an interest in the Black Sea

competition among the six littoral Black Sea states: Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Georgia and Russia.

For example, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania are in NATO,¹ but Turkey is not in the EU. Georgia and Ukraine both hope to join NATO and the EU, but little progress has been made to realize this aspiration. The two countries also share the dubious distinction of having some of their territory occupied by Russia. Russia has occupied a large section of Georgia's Black Sea coastline in Abkhazia since 2008² and has occupied all of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula since 2014.³

As for Russia, it sees itself as having a special status in the Black Sea region that has its origins within its imperial days of the 18th and 19th centuries. Therefore, Moscow has pursued policies that are often at odds with Europe and NATO to maximize its influence in the region.

GEOPOLITICAL ACTORS IN THE REGION

The US, the EU and Russia are active in the region, and any examination of the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea must understand what motivates and drives policymakers in Washington, Brussels and Moscow.

It is worth taking them in turn.



The US

Even for a country located thousands of kilometers away, like the US, the Black Sea is important. For the US, the Black Sea's strategic importance is primarily derived from two issues. The first is America's treaty obligations under NATO. Three of six Black Sea countries (Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania) are in NATO and fall under the alliance's security guarantee. Another two countries (Ukraine and Georgia) participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace program.⁴ Second, one of America's biggest geopolitical competitors and adversaries, Russia, is highly active in the region, constantly undermining the interests of the US and its allies.

The Russian Federation

Russia depends on the Black Sea region for energy, trade, security and economic reasons. For Russia, its domination of the Black Sea region has always been considered



Russia's treatment of the Crimean Tatars should be a concern for the Middle East and the broader Muslim world

a matter of national survival. Russia's Black Sea ports, as the country's only warm water ports, have always served its economic interests. For example, on the eve of the First World War, 50 percent of all Russian exports, including 90 percent of its agriculture exports, passed through the Bosphorus Strait leading out of the Black Sea.⁵ Currently, 3 million barrels of Russian, Kazakh or Azeri oil passes through the Turkish straits each day (oil from the latter two, of course, first transits Russia, so Moscow receives transit fees).⁶

At the heart of Russia's presence in the Black Sea is its illegal occupation of Crimea. Russia's annexation of Crimea was an unprecedented act of foreign-state aggression in the 21st century. It was the first time that borders in the world had been changed by military force since Saddam Hussain's Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

Crucially for Moscow, the annexation has de facto cut Ukraine's coastline in

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Muslim Tatar men pray in the Kebir-Dzhami mosque in the old town of Simferopol in the Crimean peninsular.

Reuters

half and essentially turned the Black Sea into a Russian-controlled lake. Since 2014, Russia has militarized Crimea by deploying thousands of soldiers there along with dozens of warships and air defense systems.⁷ All of this is aimed at strengthening Moscow's grip on Crimea and boosting its military footprint in the region.

The EU

The EU's interest in the Black Sea is based mainly on the fact that two of its members, Romania and Bulgaria, are littoral states. However, the organization is also closely linked with other non-EU Black Sea states, be it economically or politically.

Ukraine and Georgia aspire to be EU members,⁸ while Russia and Turkey both have their own unique and difficult relationships with the bloc.

The Black Sea is an important region for the EU for a variety of reasons, from economics and security to energy and transportation. Hundreds of kilometers of pipelines and fiber-optic cables crisscross the bed of the Black Sea. Major European ports are an important source of economic activity in the region. The largest port in the Black Sea, Constanta, is in Romania. The mouth of the Danube River, which for centuries has served as a key economic and trade artery for Central and Eastern Europe, is located in the Black Sea.

In addition to the EU's institutional



involvement in the region, there are also Black Sea subgroupings that include EU member states but are not exclusive to the EU. For example, the Black Sea Euro-region and Black Sea Economic Cooperation Council. Both organizations promote closer cooperation on a local and regional governmental level on issues pertaining to the Black Sea.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

While the Black Sea might seem distant for most policymakers in the Middle East, there are at least three geopolitical challenges and opportunities for the region.

First, Russia uses the Black Sea as a platform for operations further afield and this has consequences that affect the Middle East. For example, Russia has used its Black Sea presence on occupied Crimea to launch and support naval operations in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

In the early days of Moscow's intervention in Syria, the Moskva, a Russian navy guided missile cruiser, played a vital role in providing air defense for Russian forces.⁹ Hundreds of thousands of tons of grain and wheat have been shipped from Crimea to Syria to help the Assad regime's food shortage problems.¹⁰ Hundreds of trips have been made between Crimea's port city of Sevastopol and the Russian naval base in



For centuries the Black Sea has been fought over by some of the world's major empires



Tartus to transport military hardware and resupplies.¹¹

Second, Russia's treatment of the Crimean Tatars should be a concern for the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. The Sunni-Muslim minority group indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula has faced mounting persecution since Russia's illegal occupation in 2014.

Thousands have fled Crimea since Russia's annexation, but those who remain are subject to repression and discrimination on account of their perceived opposition to Russia. Since 2014, the Crimean Tatars have experienced abductions, forced psychiatric hospitalizations and imprisonment, according to human rights and international organizations like Human Rights Watch.¹² Mosques are monitored, and cultural and language teaching has been greatly restricted.

Finally, there are investment opportunities in the Black Sea region for the Middle East. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was launched in 2016 with the main purpose of strengthening trade, infrastructure, energy and political cooperation among EU countries bordering the Adriatic, Baltic and the Black Sea. A similar deal could in turn be struck with the Arab world.

In terms of infrastructure, the Black Sea region lags behind western Europe. Moreover, a legacy of the Cold War and the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact is that



Russia sees itself as having a special status in the Black Sea region

infrastructure runs east to west, which stymies greater regional interconnectedness. This is why the 3SI is focused on developing north-south connections, such as pipelines, roads, railways, and electrical grids. It is hoped that this will spur economic growth, prosperity and security.

Of course, there is always the issue of funding. To encourage private sector interest and investment, European countries and the US have committed about €1.3 billion (\$1.6 billion) to the Three Seas Investment Fund created last year.¹³

According to off-the-record senior EU sources, there is an expectation that private investors in the Middle East will take an interest, too. The plan is for private sector managers to run the fund on purely commercial terms, driven by two principal goals: Investment in regional infrastructure projects and returning a profit.

The Black Sea will remain an important region for the great power competition for the foreseeable future. As the incoming Biden administration seeks to craft its European, Russia and NATO policies, the Black Sea will play a central role. Due to its importance to the US and Europe, it is likely that in the near term Russia will keep the region simmering. Policymakers in the Middle East must not ignore the Black Sea. Ultimately, if the Black Sea is safe, secure and prosperous, the broader region will be, too.

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The guided-missile frigate USS Taylor (foreground) and the Turkish frigate TCG Turgutreis conduct a tactical maneuvering exercise in the Black Sea,

Getty Images

NOTES

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