

Why a New Black Sea Strategy Is in the U.S. Interest

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Black Sea is an active region for geostrategic competition among the U.S., Russia, and China—and it must become a high priority for the U.S. and NATO.

The Black Sea Security Act, currently under consideration in the Senate, seeks to rectify the deficiencies in U.S. policy.

Congress should raise the level of U.S. engagement with allies and bolster its economic–military footprint in the Black Sea region.

The Black Sea sits at the important crossroads of Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe. Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 thrust the region into the spotlight as the setting for an ongoing battle against Russian revanchism, and for the ability of nations to freely choose their future.

The Black Sea remains an active site as well for geostrategic competition among the U.S., Russia, and China. For too long, the region—even after Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014—has remained a lower priority theater for the United States and for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), failing to attract the attention and resources necessary to safeguard U.S. interests.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/ib5318>

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Legislation currently under consideration in the Senate (S. 804, the Black Sea Security Act of 2023) seeks to rectify some of the deficiencies in U.S. policy.

The Black Sea is becoming a gravitational center for Europe's future, and whether that future is for better or for worse will be a function of actions taken in the near term. Therefore, Congress should insist on and increase needed resourcing to deepen the level of U.S. engagement with allies and bolster its economic–military footprint in the Black Sea region.

The Black Sea

U.S. interests in the Black Sea derive primarily from the three NATO allies (Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye) which are littoral nations, and for whom the U.S., alongside the rest of the Alliance, is treaty-bound to protect. Protecting these countries from nefarious Chinese activities and Russian military adventures requires proactive measures. Given the persistent threats, two other Black Sea littorals, Georgia and Ukraine, would like to one day join NATO. U.S. interests also stem from Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the invasion and illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and continued for eight years until reaching a crescendo with the ongoing massive invasion of Ukraine begun in February 2022.

In Ukraine there is much at stake, not only principles of sovereignty, the right of nations to choose their futures, and freedom of navigation in international waters, but the future existence of the Ukrainian ethnicity, which Russia has no qualms in seeking to destroy. The U.S., while not a party to the conflict, has, alongside several allies, invested heavily in supporting Ukraine's self-defense. A Russian defeat in Ukraine, will not only make a future conflict against NATO allies less likely, but it will also likely deter Chinese aggression in the Indo–Pacific against allies such as Taiwan. Beyond the Black Sea coastline directly affected by Russia's war of aggression, both Russia and China are seeking to garner influence through elite capture, espionage, investments, and propaganda.¹ The U.S. must remain present to push back against these pernicious influences. The Black Sea, for security and economic reasons, will continue to draw Europe's center of gravity further eastward. The significant potential of the region will undoubtedly capture American attention for years to come, and the U.S. should position itself now to be able to respond.

MAP 1

The Black Sea Region and Areas of Russian Occupation



SOURCE: Institute for the Study of War, "Interactive Map: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375> (accessed June 16, 2023), and authors' research

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Advancing Maritime Security

As a non-Black Sea nation, the ability of the United States (as well as that of other non-Black Sea NATO allies) to maintain a consistent maritime presence is constrained. The 1936 Montreux Convention gave Türkiye control of the Bosphorus and placed limitations on the number, transit time, and tonnage of naval ships from non-Black Sea countries that may use the straits and operate in the Black Sea.

Just days after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye used its treaty powers to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to warships not based in the Black Sea from any nation entering the sea. Littoral nations can return warships to home ports in the Black Sea but cannot transfer ships based at other ports into the Black Sea—effectively freezing Russian naval presence in the war zone. This stipulation became especially important after the sinking of the Russian Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva* in April 2022, making a replacement from other Russian fleets impossible. Türkiye's commitment to the closure was evident in November 2022, when two Russian vessels, a missile cruiser which is the flagship of the Pacific Fleet, and an anti-submarine ship, withdrew from the Eastern Mediterranean after being denied access for nine months.²

Denying Russia the ability to reinforce its Black Sea fleet has paid some immediate dividends, as has denying Russian ships in the Mediterranean access to Russian Black Sea ports like Sevastopol currently under Russian control. However, Türkiye's actions also hinder the ability of NATO allies as non-belligerents to sail warships into the Black Sea.³ The U.S. and like-minded nations must express to their NATO ally Türkiye that they are not legally barred from transiting the straits in accordance with article 19 of the Montreux Convention.

This expression is unlikely to change Türkiye's mind on requesting that non-belligerent nations not send their warships to the Black Sea, but the U.S. should begin preparing to maintain a persistent maritime presence in the Black Sea once the war in Ukraine ends or subsides. Not only does the U.S. have an interest in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, but the U.S. is also treaty-obligated to defend three Black Sea littoral nations. The Black Sea Security Act of 2023 would in part direct the interagency process to assess “the challenges and opportunities of establishing a regular, rotational NATO maritime presence in the Black Sea, including an analysis of the capacity, capabilities, and commitment of NATO members to create this type of mission.”⁴

Furthermore, the interagency process should promote a plan for “greater freedom of navigation” in the Black Sea and assess “the value of establishing a joint, multinational headquarters on the Black Sea, responsible for planning, readiness, exercises, and coordination of all Allied and partner military activity in the greater Black Sea region.” While this consideration would be a step in the right direction, Congress should resource maritime capabilities that can be deployed to the region as soon as conditions allow. The U.S. has long operated in the Black Sea independently and as a NATO member and must be prepared to deter future adventurism by the Russian Federation and guard against unwanted Chinese influence.

A Comprehensive Approach to the Black Sea

While a U.S. military presence in the region would act as a deterrent, the Black Sea Security Act of 2023 rightly recognizes the necessity of a holistic strategy which considers the importance of fostering economic, energy, and political linkages. This comprehensive approach was highlighted is the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), a valuable project for strengthening trade, infrastructure, energy, and political cooperation among countries bordering the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. Congress should seek to move the Administration's rhetorical support for 3SI to positive, concrete actions.

Congress has a key role to play in reinforcing robust engagement with the Black Sea. The Black Sea Security Act of 2023 would underscore that role by introducing concrete actions that will serve the nation's long-term interest. When considering the Black Sea Security Act of 2023 and broader U.S. policy toward the region, Congress should:

Recommend the Establishment of a Black Sea Squadron and Associated Standing NATO Naval Group. These forces⁵ will be limited by both the number of warships allowed in the Black Sea and the number of days they can remain. However, maintaining a persistent presence of U.S. and allied forces will help to ensure freedom of navigation for vessels operating in the Black Sea. As Russia has not been deterred by recent military presence in the region, a more robust post-conflict maritime presence will be required for some time. Key will be the capabilities that a U.S. presence would bring while sending an unmistakable message of resolve, and that in time regional allied militaries can buttress and eventually see a reduced necessity for a U.S. component. Congress should require the Departments of Defense and State to provide an assessment of the costs and a timeline to establish an effective Black Sea Squadron. This would be in addition to the U.S. working within NATO to create a new complimentary standing maritime group for the Black Sea at the upcoming summit in Vilnius on July 11 and 12, 2023. These actions would allow the U.S. and its allies to be prepared to sail in the Black Sea and remain there as soon as conditions allow.⁶ The U.S. should open discussions with Türkiye about its intention to regularly return naval vessels to the Black Sea.

Authorize a Study of U.S. and Allied Maritime Security Assistance to the Region. A more complete understanding of both U.S. and allied security assistance provided to Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Türkiye, and Ukraine is needed to maximize effectiveness of such assistance. Such a study should include recommended contributions from the U.S. Coast Guard. This study should form the basis for a regional maritime security initiative

modeled on the one established in 2015 to bolster South China Sea maritime states in dispute with China—the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI).

Push for NATO to Put in Place Resources to Enable Deterrence by Denial in the Region. Russian atrocities in Ukraine underscore the necessity of moving NATO from a posture of deterrence by punishment to one of deterrence by denial. This change would mean that the Alliance has the capabilities, logistics, and plans in place to stop Russia from seizing territory in any NATO member state, thus deterring Russia from any future attempts to do so. Congress should make known its sense that a key component of this strategy is NATO’s multinational eastern battalions, and that these battalions in Bulgaria and Romania need to be expanded to brigades with enablers with contributions from allies across Europe and Canada. As Heritage Foundation analysts have noted, a persistent and continuing presence in Eastern European member states is militarily advantageous as it “allows better person-to-person contacts with allies, as well as improved doctrinal, technical, and cultural interoperability.”⁷ Until the threat from Russia subsides, an increased U.S. and NATO military presence in the region will be necessary. The U.S. should also consider Romania as a potential location for the long-term stationing of an armored brigade combat team with military officials determining from where troops are best brought forward.

Affirm the Understanding that the U.S. and NATO Allies Face No Legal Barrier to Sailing in the Black Sea. Article 19 of the Montreux Convention addresses the passage of ships through the straits in times of war when Türkiye is not a belligerent. Vessels of non-belligerent powers (which would include the U.S. and NATO allies) are not legally barred from sailing the straits provided that other stipulations on transit are met.⁸ The U.S. and allies should advance this understanding by notifying Türkiye of plans to transit minesweepers with the aim of aiding Bulgaria and Romania.

Reduce Post-Conflict Residual Russian Black Sea Naval Presence. In any post-conflict negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, the United States should propose a reduction of Russian presence in the Black Sea below pre-conflict levels. The goal is to ensure that Russia cannot recapitalize its Black Sea navy to threaten Ukraine or any Black Sea state in the future.⁹

Keep the U.S. Pledge of \$1 Billion for the Three Seas Investment Fund. As Heritage analysts have written, “3SI is a force multiplier that bolsters security in Europe and strengthens transatlantic trade ties by marrying private capital with some of the most dynamic and growing economies in Europe, while also helping to stymie Chinese and Russian efforts to make inroads in the region.”¹⁰ The U.S. under President Trump pledged

to match contributions to the Three Seas Investment Fund up to \$1 billion.¹¹ The Biden Administration has slow-walked the initial U.S. contribution of \$300 million, with the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation and the fund only announcing a terms sheet in June 2022. The fund, which operates on a commercial basis, is a worthwhile investment for U.S. taxpayers as well as a positive, concrete example of U.S. determination to build linkages to the region, while simultaneously sending clear signals to private investors that the 3SI is worth considering.

Encourage Black Sea Allies to Leave China's 14+1. While largely defunct, some allies in the region remain part of China's 14+1 engagement format. The 14+1 initiative¹² is an attempt by China to expand its business and investment opportunities in Eastern and Central European nations. For economic, political, and security reasons some countries, such as the Baltic states, have already withdrawn, and most others have downgraded their participation. Remaining participants should follow suit and abandon the initiative, thus signaling to China that its predatory lending practices and pernicious political influence are not welcome in the Black Sea.

Conclusion

A robust, actionable strategy for engagement with the Black Sea region is in the interest of the United States. U.S. NATO allies in the region remain on the front lines of alliance deterrence efforts, a situation that necessitates focused attention especially while Russia continues to propagate a war against Ukraine. Furthermore, both China and Russia have sought to utilize myriad levers to nudge the geostrategic direction of the region to their advantage while elbowing out the U.S. The Black Sea will continue to grow in importance, including the chance that it could emerge as key component of a functional Middle Corridor of the future.¹³ Congress is correct to focus the Biden Administration's attention on the region with the development of a clear strategy and the consideration of concrete actions that will magnify the impact of any proposed legislation, including the Black Sea Security Act.

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Endnotes

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