

# THE FUTURE OF U.S. BLACK SEA STRATEGY

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## HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE AND  
REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

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## THE FUTURE OF U.S. BLACK SEA STRATEGY

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2025

U.S. SENATE,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE AND  
REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:50 p.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Steve Daines, chairman of the subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Daines and Murphy.

### OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. STEVE DAINES, U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA

Senator DAINES. The hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

First, I want to thank our three witnesses for being here today to share their expertise on such an important topic, and I also want to take a moment to thank my ranking member, Senator Murphy, for his partnership on these issues, as well as the work we are doing together to repeal the Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions in Central Asia. It is time to put these antiquated Soviet-era trade restrictions to bed and further strengthen U.S. relations with the region. I am very appreciative of his work on this issue. I am looking forward to continuing to work with him on it.

The Black Sea holds many of the keys for European security and U.S. national interests. A clearly defined Black Sea strategy is imperative to the United States effectively countering Russian aggression in Europe and elsewhere.

Matthew Boyse is a retired career Foreign Service officer, who served as deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs and has extensive experience as Chargé d'Affaires in Switzerland, Finland, Romania, and the U.S. Mission to NATO. In addition to his service as a Foreign Service officer, Mr. Boyse has written extensively about the Black Sea and its importance to the U.S. national interests.

Frederick Starr is a longtime expert on the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Black Sea. Dr. Starr is the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and the Silk Road Studies Program, and is a distinguished fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council. Starr also served as founding chairman at the Keenan Institute, vice president of Tulane University, and president of Oberlin College. He has written numerous books about Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Catherine Sendak joins us from the Center for European Policy Analysis, where she is the director of the Transatlantic Defense and Security Program. Prior to this, Ms. Sendak was the principal director for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, where she led efforts on addressing national security priorities, including great power competition with Russia instability and security throughout Eastern Europe.

Thank you again to each of our three witnesses for agreeing to appear here today. Now to the matter at hand.

Energy security is national security, and this fact was made even more abundantly clear in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In some respects, Europe has made some positive changes, but the fact of the matter is that significant steps need to immediately be taken to protect Europe's future. Reliance on Russia for energy supply is a recipe for European acquiescence to Russian influence and aggression.

The Western side of the Black Sea presents a warning—a warning for the rest of the continent. The nations who border the Black Sea face profound challenges to their national security due to unreliable energy flows and lack of baseload power. They are all taking positive steps toward rectifying the situation, and their proactive action to address their insecurity should motivate the rest of Europe and encourage them to take steps to avoid a similar outcome. Now is the moment for practical energy solutions, which countries like Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria are pursuing.

The recent peace deal in the Caucasus uncorks Central Asia's vast energy resources and creates a future wherein these resources, as well as other sources of power, can flow, be they gas, oil, nuclear, hydro, or others, to build the reliable baseload power necessary for their economies and their national security.

The Eastern side of the Black Sea holds many of the solutions to problems found on the Western side. Now is the moment for further engagement and for the Western world to stand together and facilitate reliable energy flows that will help ensure a bright and more secure future for the region. Beyond energy, the Eastern shore of the Black Sea promises huge opportunities for Western commerce.

The Caucasus and Central Asia contain large amounts of natural resources, much of which has not yet been fully utilized or even developed. Joint investment in westward trade flows will create a rising tide that truly lifts not just the countries of origin, but those along the trade route, as well as Europe and the broader Western world.

What happens in Europe does not stay in Europe. Two world wars have proven that fact. The United States must lead the rest of the world in fighting back against the encroachment of our adversaries. Without U.S. leadership and a secure Europe, we may once again find ourselves fighting a war, cold or otherwise, to protect the values of democracy and universal human freedom.

My sincere hope for this hearing is that we can openly and honestly discuss U.S. Black Sea strategy, the importance of the region for global security, and work toward truly a more cohesive, comprehensive U.S. policy toward the region. This critically important part of the world needs more attention from the United States and

our allies, and I hope today serves as the beginning of that new conversation. And with that, I would like to recognize the distinguished ranking member for his comments. Senator Murphy.

**STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER MURPHY,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Chairman Daines, and I do look forward to continuing to work with you to draw us closer to our allies in Central Asia through the amendment of the antiquated restrictions built into the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. I hope that we can move that bipartisan legislation—that bipartisan effort through the Senate to the President’s desk quickly.

Thank you to the witnesses who are joining us here today. We are facing one of the most dangerous moments in U.S.-Russia relations since the end of the cold war. Unable to militarily conquer Ukraine, but emboldened, in part, by American inaction, the Kremlin is pushing the boundaries with increasingly direct threats to NATO members.

Within the last month, Russia sent nuclear-capable fighter jets into Estonia’s airspace with their transponders turned off and launched a swarm of over a dozen drones into Poland. The aggression has now spread to the Black Sea with a drone incursion into Romania.

Putin is acting with virtual impunity, in part because he knows he will likely face zero consequences from President Donald Trump. The President, who should be leading this response to show Putin these actions are unacceptable, is not leading. The President has rolled out the red carpet for Vladimir Putin in Alaska, but Putin happily pocketed that diplomatic win and went right back to firebombing Kyiv and declined requests to enter serious negotiation.

The administration’s deadlines for peace talks have just come and gone, and yet they still refuse to support bipartisan sanctions legislation that has been pending now in the Senate for months, and there has been no new request for additional funding for Ukraine in Congress.

As Britain’s MI6 chief noted recently, Russia does not have the wherewithal to fully subjugate Ukraine by force. So, the only way that Moscow at this point can achieve its objectives is by weakening the United States’ and European support for Ukraine and exploiting divisions within and among NATO nations, and this is where our conversation today about the Black Sea Region becomes so key.

Russia is pursuing an aggressive strategy to undermine pro-Western, democratic governments throughout Europe, and the Black Sea Region (BSR) is especially vulnerable. Moscow is pouring billions into bribery, propaganda, subversion, and energy bullying in order to install governments in this region that are friendly to Moscow, but the administration’s response has been, basically, to unilaterally disarm. In Moldova, where a pro-Western government was facing a barrage of hybrid attacks from Russia ahead of the elections last weekend, the administration’s response was to pull two-thirds of our assistance programs. While Russia is pouring billions into propaganda and influence campaigns, the administration

shut down the capacity at the State Department to fight back against Russian propaganda, the Global Engagement Center.

This Department of Justice has slashed anticorruption programs and stopped enforcing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which prevented American companies from paying bribes at the same time that we know bribery is one of the main pathways for Russia to gain influence in this region.

In Romania, a key NATO frontline State, the Trump administration is signaling they may draw down our military presence, once again, weakening the argument for why citizens should back a pro-Western, pro-American government.

History shows us that Russia does not respond to concessions or mixed signals. It responds to strength and to clear red lines. U.S. policy in the Black Sea Region must reflect this reality. I thank our witnesses. I look forward to your testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator DAINES. Senator Murphy, thank you. Our first witness is Matthew Boyse, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute Center on Europe and Eurasia. Mr. Boyse, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF MATTHEW BOYSE, SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER ON EUROPE AND EURASIA, HUDSON INSTITUTE, WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. BOYSE. Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Murphy, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

The Black Sea and the broader Black Sea Region (BSR) are more important to the U.S. national interest than is often appreciated. This hearing adds impetus to important work the SFRC has done, including by pressing the State Department and the Interagency to develop a Black Sea strategy by holding hearings, by traveling to the area, and by shining a light on a region of great geopolitical importance.

Thank you so much for organizing this important conversation. The BSR is also important in the context of the ongoing debate within the United States' foreign policy community about it. Given the centrality of the BSR to the balance of power in Europe and Eurasia, and the negative trends there, the region should remain a major focus of U.S. foreign policy, even as the administration focuses on the paramount threat from communist China, challenges in the Western Hemisphere and the Middle East, and other issues.

Putin's war against Ukraine has higher stakes than just reincorporating that country into the Russian Federation. The BSR is indispensable to his efforts to restore status and project power regionally and globally. The BSR is also the primary battlefield for his efforts to reshape a new international order, together with Communist China, Iran, and others, and is an important laboratory for hybrid war against NATO.

In recent years, Russia has been scoring successes on the Eastern Littoral of the Black Sea via its creeping State capture of Georgia. On the Northern Littoral, how Russia's war ends will affect the Black Sea Region in a major way, and the Kremlin has been in a full-court press mode in Moldova, even if on Sunday voters dodged a bullet and chose the West.

On the Western Littoral, the Kremlin has been using its many assets in Bulgaria to turn that critical country away from NATO and has been exploiting societal discontent in Romania, long a bulwark of Atlanticism. Russia's efforts in these States via State capture, weakening key institutions, or supporting pro-Moscow forces could create an arc of—or corridor of instability, from Southeast Europe and the Balkans into the heart of Europe, including from Northern Macedonia through to Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria, all with governments amenable to Russian interests. Of course, this may not happen and should be strongly opposed, but it shows that trends in the BSR could ease Kremlin inroads into what Putin no doubt sees as potential soft underbelly of NATO. The Southern Littoral, of course, is a different case as Turkey is both opposed to many and open to some Russian interests.

A comprehensive Black Sea strategy is necessary but insufficient to advance U.S. security interests and to counter Russian malign influence in the Black Sea Region and its energy markets. Other political, diplomatic, military or economic steps are necessary, which I will touch on briefly in a minute, but just on energy, the USG should ramp up its engagement with BSR States to diversify further away from Russian sources, such as by supporting more LNG sales and nuclear energy cooperation, including SMRs.

Now, the State Department strategy presented to this committee in October 2023 was a start, but it was not whole-of-government. It was more a laundry list of intentions, and it was not that focused on energy, it did not contain a timeline, and it was not resourced. A strategy that focuses more on energy and includes these issues could very well advance U.S. goals, but blunt language as we recently saw from President Trump also reminds allies and friends that the U.S. cannot want European energy security more than they do.

For trade and commerce to flourish in the Black Sea Region, the Black Sea must remain free and open. Freedom of navigation is essential. That is not currently the case. Yes, maritime trade takes place, but the war negatively affects commerce and economic relations in the BSR role as a trade crossroads over the millennia. Crimea, under Russian control, considerably increases Moscow's ability to mess with the Black Sea Region, and if Russia were ever to control the entire Northern Littoral—part of what Putin calls Novorossiia—it would strangle Ukraine's maritime access to global markets. This must not happen. The optimum outcome for trade, economic growth, and peace and prosperity in this broad region is a demilitarized Black Sea, as it was the case for a time after the Crimean War in the 19th century.

The USG has many tools—many ways to advance its strategic interests in the Black Sea Region. I will only mention a few here as I am running out of time, but happy to go into more detail on the discussion. I think the USG should look at the BSR holistically—as a geopolitical region of major importance to NATO and, thus, to the United States. I think the EU should be urged to focus much more on the Black Sea Region now that the Commission in May finally adopted a Black Sea Strategy.

I think allies should be pressed to further reduce the flow of funds to the Russian war machine. NATO should be seized with

the BSR. A whole-of-government USG strategy is needed, as you have called for. I believe that Black Sea security should be mentioned in the Trump administration's National Security Strategy. I believe that USG must not recognize Crimea as Russian territory.

And of course, there are many other issues, for example, vigorously engaging with Turkey as steward of the Montreux Convention to prevent Russia from returning the Black Sea fleet to pre-war status after hostilities end, and, of course, there are also such issues as the Three Seas Initiative, revitalizing that, working with our great Romanian allies.

Perhaps I should stop here. There is much more that can be said, and my time is up. I have submitted a statement for the record that goes into greater detail. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Boyse follows:]

#### PREPARED STATEMENT OF MATTHEW BOYSE

Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Murphy, distinguished members of the subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Before I joined the Hudson Institute, I served in the Foreign Service for 35 years and spent much time dealing with the post-Soviet/Warsaw Pact space, including as Deputy Assistant Secretary overseeing U.S. policy toward Central Europe during most of the first Trump Administration and early months of the Biden Administration. During that time, I was also the Sherpa for the Three Seas Initiative and served briefly as Charge d'Affaires in Romania in the Fall of 2021. I was a Fulbright Scholar in Bulgaria in summer 2024 researching Black Sea security.

#### *The National Interest*

The Black Sea and the broader Black Sea Region (BSR) are more important to the U.S. national interest than is often appreciated. This hearing adds impetus to important work the SFRC has done on this issue in recent years, including by pressing the State Department to develop a Black Sea strategy, by holding hearings, as well as by traveling to, and shining light on, a critical region that needs more U.S. attention.

The BSR is also important in the context of the ongoing debate about U.S. foreign policy priorities and where policy attention and resources should be focused. Given the centrality of the BSR to the balance of power in Europe and Eurasia, and trends there that are not advantageous to the United States, the region should remain a major focus of U.S. foreign policy, even as the Administration prioritizes the threat from Communist China, as well as challenges in the Western Hemisphere and other regions.

#### *Strategic Backdrop*

When I was responsible for policy toward Central Europe at the State Department 2018–2021, USG policy regarding the Eastern Flank of NATO tended to focus more on its NE than the SE sector; the latter of course includes the Black Sea as an area of major geopolitical importance. While the USG has in recent years assigned substantial resources to the SE sector and thus the BSR, the historically heavy concentration of Russian forces in the NE and extraordinary importance of our Polish, Baltic and Nordic allies tended to produce more focus there. Persistent and increasing Russian violations of Baltic, Polish, and Nordic sovereignty in recent months and days continue to highlight the ongoing Russian threat to this region. So a strong focus on that is totally logical.

The NATO Summits after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 upgraded the attention to the SE region according to the general idea of "one flank, one threat, one presence," a phrase I coined that became the title of an excellent study led by LTG (ret) Ben Hodges, former Commanding General, U.S. Army Europe. NATO fixed this anomaly after February 2022, deploying more forces in the SE and investing more in Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, but also supporting Ukraine in its titanic struggle against Kremlin efforts to wipe it off the map. This increase in USG attention has been welcome, but there appears to be a lingering difference between how NATO and EU Member States look at the NE and SE regions, even as both institutions pay increasing attention to the BSR. SE Europe often remains in the lower right-hand corner of mental maps of Europe, away from

the center of gravity, even as it is squarely in the center of current geopolitical struggles.

The SE, which for the sake of simplicity I will refer to as the BSR, is exceptionally important geopolitically, not only because it has been the only region in the European theater that has seen major kinetic activity in the last several decades—mostly since the 2008 Georgia War and in Ukraine, but before that as well. Some 10 conflicts have played out in the BSR in the post-cold war era. Indeed, security trends in the BSR have been trending negatively for many years, and it is high time to devote more USG attention to it. In 2020, my team in the Bureau of Europe and Eurasia at the State Department was drafting a Black Sea strategy to address this State of affairs when the clock ran out on the first Trump Administration. It took some time for the Biden Administration to collect its thoughts and draft one, which was an important improvement, if ultimately insufficient.

Putin's war against Ukraine has higher stakes than his Stated goal of reincorporating the country into the Russian Federation. Ukraine is also at the center of Kremlin efforts to dominate the Black Sea and the broader BSR, a strategy that Putin considers indispensable to his efforts to restore Russian status and project power into adjacent theaters and onto the world stage. Ukraine and the BSR are also the primary battlefield in his efforts to shape a new international order, together with Communist China, Iran—another potentially larger player in the BSR—and others. Russia sees the BSR as the most strategic and vulnerable region on its borders, and thus a particularly valuable and promising “zone of privileged interest,” as it calls its “near abroad.” The BSR has been contested space for some three decades, but particularly since 2014, and it remains the most important laboratory for the Kremlin to practice its hybrid war against NATO and the West.

The Kremlin started to challenge the post-Soviet order in the BSR in the 1990's, even as it also concluded agreements with Ukraine and other former Soviet “republics” and did not pursue an aggressive policy toward other neighbors, including in the BSR. Western statesmen, experts, and commentators tended to ignore or play down those signs until Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and even then many did not react robustly until Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. It is unrealistic to expect the United States to care more about Black Sea security than European countries, but Putin upended the European security order and what happens in the BSR does not stay in the BSR—and matters to the United States.

In recent years, Russia has been scoring successes on the eastern littoral of the Black Sea via its creeping State capture of Georgia. On the northern littoral, how Russia's war ends will have a major effect on the BSR and the Kremlin has been in full court press mode in Moldova, even if on Sunday voters dodged a bullet and chose the West. Moscow is using its many assets in Bulgaria to turn that critical country away from the West and has been exploiting societal discontent in Romania, long a bulwark of Atlanticism. Russian efforts in these States via State capture, weakening key institutions, or supporting pro-Moscow forces could create an arc or corridor of instability from SE Europe/the Balkans into the heart of Europe—from Northern Macedonia and Serbia into Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria—with governments amenable to Moscow. Of course, this may not happen and should be strongly opposed, but it shows that negative trends in the BSR could ease Kremlin inroads into what Putin no doubt sees as a potential soft underbelly of NATO. The southern littoral is a separate case, as Turkey is open to some, and opposed to other, Russian interests.

In the last several weeks alone, a Russian Geran-2 drone breached Romanian airspace September 14, the 11th such case since February 2022. The MoD noted that Russian drones have conducted about 50 strikes near the Ukrainian border since 2022, including 30 in which drone debris fell on Romanian territory. On August 28, a Russian naval drone struck a Ukrainian vessel on the Danube River, on the Romanian-Ukrainian border. These incidents receive much less attention than Russian provocations against Polish, Baltic, and Nordic sovereignty, but they are no less concerning—however serious the other cases are.

#### *A Comprehensive Strategy and Furthering American Interests*

A comprehensive Black Sea strategy has the potential to advance U.S. security interests and counter malign influence from Russia in BSR energy markets. Such a strategy is a necessary element in the U.S. policy toolbox, but it is insufficient to move the needle significantly without other political, diplomatic, military, or economic tools. The USG should continue to support BSR States as they diversify away from Russian energy, such as by supporting LNG sales and ramping up already good cooperation on nuclear energy, including SMRs, by reengaging in the Three Seas Initiative, and by countering the malign influence that accompanies heavy dependence on Russian energy. There is room for growth in this sector even as recent

U.S. administrations have prioritized it because results have not been quick to materialize. Some EU member States have taken the goal of energy diversification very seriously, but others have not, and the USG has also faced resistance from the EU Commission, individual member States, and market realities, which have slowed results.

The reasons for this vary from country to country, but the unfortunate fact is that it took most EU member States too much time, even after Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to prioritize energy diversification and weaning themselves from their addiction to Russian fossil fuels. Gas and oil imports are down considerably, but it has taken blunt language from President Trump to accelerate the cutoff of oil and gas imports that have pumped billions of Euros into Putin's war machine since 2022. The Commission's proposal in the recent 19th sanctions package to move up the deadline for cutting off Russian gas by 1 year, to the end of 2026, is a major step forward but some member States have stated they will not abide by it. Hungary and Slovakia have both pushed back on the Commission's recent proposal to incentivize a decoupling from Russian sources. President Trump's recent pressure on PM Erdogan in the White House may bear some fruit but Turkish firms earn so much from their refining business and the world market demands its products that it is difficult to imagine how that relationship will end.

While the State Department strategy, which Assistant Secretary Robert O'Brien presented to this committee in October 2023, was a start, it was: 1) not a whole-of-government; 2) not a roadmap but rather more of a laundry list of intentions; 3) not focused on energy, whose section was relatively modest and linked to climate, which the Trump Administration will not support; and 4) not resourced. A greater energy focus in a whole-of-government strategy that addresses weaknesses in the 2023 paper has the potential to advance U.S. energy goals in the BSR, but at times blunt language as we recently saw from President Trump that our European friends need to do even more care necessary to generate results.

#### *Energy and Infrastructure Connectivity*

It is in the U.S. interest that the large natural gas reserves in the Black Sea be developed—in Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish waters—because they will grow their economies, reduce their reliance on Russian sources, and strengthen European energy security. The Black Sea is also the central transit region through which Russian gas and oil reach Europe, the Mediterranean, and beyond and needs to remain peaceful. Romania will become the largest gas producer in the EU in 2027 when it starts to exploit the 7,500 square km Neptun Deep field, which contains an estimated 100 bcm, for yields of 7–8 bcm per year. Romania has been producing gas from the Midea project (with U.S. investment) for several years. When Bulgaria begins to exploit the estimated 60 bcm in its Khan Tervel and Khan Asparuh fields, it will be able to cover its entire domestic production and export to the region. The Sakarya field in Turkey contains an estimated 540 bcm, the largest of the Black Sea gas reserves. Turkey also serves as a transit route for Russian gas and oil, which it refines at three locations. It is an open secret that these molecules are Russian, but the fact that they continue reflects market forces while European consumers have generally not cared where their oil products originate. Russia controls much of Ukraine's huge gas reserves, which Ukraine cannot exploit, and uses the drilling platforms it has seized as much for military as energy purposes. Georgian Black Sea reserves are unknown.

Romanian and Bulgarian officials expect the Kremlin to use hybrid measures to interfere with exploitation of their reserves, as many are located in their EEZs, and are thus not subject to NATO Article 5 and easier to disrupt. Russia has intruded into drilling perimeters in the past, and neither country has the naval forces to prevent interference in the development of these resources, which are very expensive to exploit and especially vulnerable when drilling and other infrastructure is being built. Moscow is less likely to interfere with the exploitation of Turkish Black Sea energy resources because of that special relationship.

The Black Sea also can support European energy security via the submarine electricity cable to be laid with participation by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, and Romania. Two Turkstream gas pipelines and several data cables cross the Black Sea and strengthen connectivity. Bulgaria's recent decision to end Russian gas transit contracts on January 1, 2026, to fully exit the Russian gas market by 2028, and to switch to LNG imports is a major step forward in reducing Moscow's ability to blackmail Sofia.

#### *U.S. Engagement in the BSR to Promote Trade and Enhance Security*

For trade and commerce to flourish and contribute to prosperity in the BSR, the Black Sea must remain free and open. Freedom of navigation is essential. That is

not currently the case, as it is negatively affected by Russia's war against Ukraine. Of course, ships ply the waters and trade takes place, but Russia's hot war and creeping takeover of Georgia and hybrid measures against other littoral States have dampened the enormous potential the region has as a crossroads and center of trade and exchange through the millenia.

Commentators have asserted in recent years that Russia has lost the battle of the Black Sea, citing Ukraine's extraordinary success in sinking, disabling, or damaging some one-third of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), forcing the rest from Crimea to Novorossiysk and elsewhere, and largely preventing it from interfering too directly in the larger Black Sea. This not incorrect, but is to conclude that the battle for the Black Sea is over. Crimea bristles with offensive systems and continues to be a platform for attacking Ukraine and threatening the Black Sea, and missile and other attacks against Ukraine regularly originate from Crimea and the Black Sea itself. Hundreds of naval mines are a factor in maritime commerce and keep insurance rates higher than they should be while Russia regularly interferes with GPS signals and has used the pretext of naval exercises to close large parts of the Black Sea even in NATO member State EEZs.

Russian rhetoric has become so shrill that it is easy to imagine that the Kremlin will continue to interfere with trade and other economic activity on the Black Sea after the guns fall silent. Locations such as Snake Island and drilling towers can also affect economic development and secure trade lines. Romanian experts consider Snake Island as important to Black Sea security as Gotland is to the Baltic Sea. A Russian reoccupation of Snake Island would have negative consequences for navigation on the Danube and sea lanes along the Istanbul-Odesa corridor. The BSF could deploy ISR and Electronic Warfare systems to monitor and disrupt communications along the Romanian coast, including where U.S. forces are deployed. NATO member States would not welcome Iranian vessels traversing the Caspian Sea, the Volga-Don Canal, and the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea for joint naval exercises with Russia—a scenario that is not impossible to imagine. The Kremlin has been using Crimea as a platform, an unsinkable aircraft carrier, to launch attacks against Ukraine and to project power.

Russian control of the northern littoral, which is part of what Putin calls "Novorossiia," must be prevented, as it would strangle Ukraine's maritime access to global markets, making it difficult for the country to survive, let alone thrive economically and function as an independent, sovereign State—even if, for now, Moscow has been unable to subjugate and occupy the country. It is not well known that Moldova's southernmost tip is located just miles from the Black Sea, so Moldova is also a Black Sea State. The optimum outcome for trade, growth, and prosperity in the BSR is a demilitarized Black Sea, as was the case for a number of years after the Crimean War.

#### *Recommendations to Enhance the U.S. Strategic Posture in the BSR*

The United States has a wide variety of concrete political, diplomatic, military, and economic options that can advance its strategic posture in the BSR. A few recommendations:

##### *Conceptual/Political/Diplomatic*

The USG national security bureaucracy should look at the BSR wholistically as a geopolitical region of major importance to NATO and the Global West. Most agencies divide the region into as many as four or more parts, creating policy silos and stove piping that complicates efforts to treat the region in a comprehensive manner.

- Urge the EU to focus much more on the BSR, now that the Commission in May finally adopted a Black Sea Strategy, in order to improve regional resilience against Russian and Chinese malign influence. The USG should pay closer attention to the correlation of forces and security-related trends and developments in the BSR, but the USG also cannot care about them more than our European Allies.
- Press Allies to further reduce the flow of funds to the Russian war machine. If the outcome of the war is as important to European security as European leaders say it is, they should be doing even more.
- Ensure that NATO is seized with the BSR. NATO is unlikely to adopt a BSR strategy, but the recommendations in the NATO October 2023 "Troubled Waters" Black Sea report should be implemented, especially following Allies' formal recognition of the importance of the region at the July 2023 Vilnius Summit. More robust efforts by NATO member States will demonstrate to the Trump Administration that European Allies take Black Sea security seriously.

- A whole-of-government USG BSR Strategy is needed. The paper that State Department EUR Assistant Secretary Robert O'Brien presented to the SFRC in October 2023 was a start and overcame years of mixed messaging and what might be considered benign neglect, but it offered rather modest goals, was declarative in tone, only covered the State Department, and did not advocate for additional resources. The Biden Administration did not present a government-wide strategy before the end of its term, as Congress had requested.
- Revisit S. 804, the Black Sea Security Act of 2023, and pass an updated version in 2026. The Senate showed strategic leadership by advocating for this legislation. The recent introduction of the Eastern Flank Strategic Partnership Act is another excellent Senate initiative, but separate Black Sea-focused legislation is desirable.
- Congress should appropriate funds explicitly for efforts related to the BSR. A strategy that sets forth additional requirements without resources will not succeed.
- USG strategic interest in Black Sea security should be reflected in the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy. The Department of War's annual report to Congress on Freedom of Navigation (FON) should also include language on Russia restricting FON in the Black Sea.
- The USG must not recognize Crimea as Russian territory. The consequences of such a decision would go far beyond the BSR and encourage further Russian aggression, as well as aggression from other States that might see border changes by force as possible. The 1940 Welles Declaration regarding the three Baltic States can serve as a guide, and former Secretary Pompeo's statement in 2020 should remain operative.
- Prioritize relations with Romania among U.S. Black Sea Allies. Turkey and Bulgaria are also critical Allies, but Romania is the most active on BSR issues.
- Engage vigorously with Turkey as steward of the Montreux Convention to prevent Russia from returning its BSF to pre-war status after hostilities end. The Kremlin will likely attempt to restore the BSF to its former size and composition as it has been so significantly weakened. With Ankara, pursue a "free and open" strategy for the Black Sea as the best long-term model for this strategic crossroads ("Middle Corridor") between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe, while ensuring FONOPs can be conducted, as necessary. Russia can be expected to condition a cease-fire or end to the war on a return to the status quo ante, but a demilitarized Black Sea, as was the case for a number of years after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, remains the optimum end State.
- Revitalize USG engagement with the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) as a vehicle to support Eastern Flank countries politically, strengthen them economically, and improve their resilience. During his first term, President Trump visibly supported 3SI, but momentum slowed after he left office. The USG should increase its attention to the 3SI, provided 3SI countries themselves participate at significant levels. The United States is the strongest non-member 3SI supporter, but it can also not want 3SI more than the member States.

#### *Military*

- Greater military engagement with the three NATO littoral States can strengthen deterrence and "sea denial" strategy, including air defense, mine sweepers, uncrewed surface vehicles, ISR, mobility, Anti-Submarine Warfare infrastructure, and long-range anti-ship missiles that can hold the BSF at risk should Russia behave aggressively on the Black Sea itself.
- The BSR theater will become more difficult if Putin's war ends favorably for him. Russia will interpret any reduction in U.S. forces in the BSR as a strategic retreat and increase its probes of NATO territory via its toolbox of hybrid measures such as drones, electronic warfare, GPS interference (jamming and spoofing), infrastructure sabotage, etc.
- Resource exportable defense packages for Black Sea littoral harbors (e.g. radar, jammers, hard-kill defensive systems). Enable NATO/USN to rotate mobile harbor-defense detachments. Work with NATO member States to ensure that A2AD can protect coastlines, commercial assets, and infrastructure arteries.
- Respond more resolutely to Russian provocations against sovereign NATO territory. NATO policy has tended to prioritize "escalation avoidance," which has emboldened Russia to test NATO territory repeatedly without sanction. This includes using NATO assets to down air and sea drones and other provocations.

- U.S. investment in Mihail Kogălniceanu air base in Constanta, Romania is a strategic use of U.S. taxpayer funds. It should be increased to the extent that Allies participate similarly and budgets allow.
- Greater USG focus on the military relationship with Bulgaria would also help strengthen resilience against further Russian inroads into that key ally.
- Continue military support for Kyiv via the Administration's Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List mechanism so that Ukraine can better defend itself and put Russian military assets on Crimea and elsewhere at risk.
- Support the NATO Mine Measures Group, including via Countermeasure Vessels as urged by some littoral State Defense Ministers to remove floating mines and enhance a collaborative intervention force that would also safeguard energy infrastructure and trade routes.
- Improve "unblinking eye" assets such as the Varna Black Sea Regional Naval Coordination Center to enhance maritime domain awareness, develop a better Common Operating Picture, and NATO's Maritime Situational Awareness platform. Urge NATO to review the division of labor between Varna and NATO Maritime Command (Northwood, UK).
- Direct DHS/Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to deepen partnerships with Romania and Bulgaria's cyber centers. Fund joint "red team" exercises on ports and rail IT infrastructure.
- Consider conveying smaller ships to Romania that can traverse the Danube and to Bulgaria that can bolster its coastal forces.
- Support Ukraine in ensuring it retains control of major strategic territory such as Odesa, the northern littoral, as well as Snake Island near the mouth of the Danube and drilling platforms in the Black Sea.

#### *Economic*

- Implement economic and energy measures in the State Department's 2023 Black Sea Strategy and other strategies that are compatible with the Trump Administration's approach to the region.
- Engage Turkey regarding reciprocity for Russian shipping. Russia should not receive free passage for ships carrying oil and grain if it restricts the freedom of navigation of commercial vessels from other nations.
- Assist Romania in expanding the Danube as a transport corridor, for example via the Three Seas Initiative infrastructure program.
- Engage more robustly on the Middle Corridor to diversify trade Europe-Asia trade routes further away from Russia.
- Encourage DFC and/or EXIM to finance hardened grain silos, backup power for port IT, and digital customs systems. Encourage World Bank co-financing on Danube logistics resilience.

#### *Additional U.S. National Interests in the Black Sea*

It would be a much better outcome for the United States if Putin were to fail in Ukraine. If he ends the war on his terms, the consequences will be very negative not only for Ukraine but are also likely to seep into the other three NATO littoral States as well as the arc or corridor stretching from North Macedonia, Serbia, into Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. This would continue to erode U.S. influence in the region and demonstrate to adversaries that Russia can challenge NATO interests and get away with it. This would also send a clear signal to Communist China, our most important adversary that is also increasingly active in the BSR.

In S. 804 from 2023, the Senate set forth its sense of the Congress regarding national interests connected with the BSR. These tended to focus on security, but economic issues were also a part, and they remain as valid today as when the legislation was introduced. The United States has an interest that the BSR be a benign, free and open, positive, and stable security environment. A free and open Black Sea will foster economic and other connectivity between Europe, Central Asia, Asia Minor, and the Eastern Med and assure global food security, which is seriously affected by grain and other food shipments via the Black Sea.

The Kremlin has made it very clear that it will continue to treat the Black Sea as a region of special and preponderant interest after the guns fall silent, and Crimea will remain a platform from which Moscow conducts hybrid war, interferes in the region, and projects power beyond it. In other words, the BSR is unlikely to not return to anything like its pre-2014 State. All Allies must do more to ensure that Putin does not end the war on his terms. It is positive that President Trump has spoken forthrightly on Ukraine recently, even if the BSR itself has not figured directly in his public statements. As Ukraine goes, so goes the Black Sea Region.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to your questions.

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*The Strategic Importance of the Black Sea: Regional Cooperation for Energy and Defense.* George Scutaru, et al.

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Senator DAINES. Mr. Boyse, thank you.

Dr. Fred Starr, Chairman of the Central Asia Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program. Dr. Starr, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF DR. STEPHEN FREDERICK STARR, DISTINGUISHED FELLOW FOR EURASIA & FOUNDING CHAIRMAN, CENTRAL ASIA CAUCASUS INSTITUTE, AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL, WASHINGTON, DC**

Dr. STARR. Thank you. Thank you very much. First, I would like to applaud the chairman and ranking member for their attention to this issue. That yours is a bipartisan initiative makes your attention all the more important, attention both to the Black Sea Region, and, I should say, Jackson-Vanik. Bravo.

Let me start with a note on the geographic—geopolitical context. Our focus on the Baltic countries is urgently needed for they are under existential threat from Mr. Putin. However, the entire Black Sea Region is also in crisis and for the same reason. The difference is that Washington has yet fully to acknowledge Black Sea issues.

Like the Baltic area, the Black Sea Region includes three members of NATO: Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. NATO and the— and the U.S. maintains three military bases in Turkey and an important one in Romania. Like the Baltic, the Black Sea plays an important economic role as a gateway to the world's oceans. Without it, Europe's second-longest river, the Danube would be cutoff from world shipping lanes.

Russia seeks to militarize and monopolize both the Baltic and the Black Sea, challenging Europe and the United States. It uses the Black Sea to control access to the West by the three countries of the Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. For the five Central Asian countries, it—the Black Sea is crucial for their access to the West and the West's access to their energy, oil, gas, and also minerals. Beyond this, Russia still maintains the most powerful military presence on the Black Sea and continues to be able to use its assets there to project power into the Middle East, Africa, and beyond.

Now, my written testimony details existing U.S. strategy for the region and identifies some areas where updating and change are called for. Here, however, let me focus on what a strategy embracing current realities might include. A revised strategy should be based on this committee's 2023 document on the region but has to comb out its irrelevancies and be more blunt in identifying and addressing threats. So, let me offer six possible elements of a revised U.S. strategy for the region.

First, add Ukraine, Moldova, and the three countries of the Caucasus—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—to the list of States with direct vital interests in the Black Sea. Also, acknowledge the critical importance of a free and open Black Sea for Western access to the resources of the five countries of Central Asia, and for those countries to—enable those countries to build economic ties with the West that can balance the tide of investment that is coming to them from China and Russia.

Second, affirm the United Nations General Assembly's resolution of 27 March 2014, declaring that Crimea belongs to Ukraine and help Ukraine to implement it.

Third, consistent with NATO's forward posture, strengthen the naval capacities of Bulgaria and Romania, and work with other countries to assist non-NATO members Ukraine—non-NATO member Ukraine to strengthen its navy.

Fourth, establish a rotating NATO naval presence in the Black Sea.

Fifth, to ensure regional buy-in through regular consultations, establish a permanent Black Sea Council, and six, acknowledge Turkey's special relevance and interest in Black Sea security and engage Turkey more actively in advancing the above goals.

Now, these are just suggestions of how our current strategy might be updated to confront current realities, but let me conclude with a very different note. These suggestions identify today's Russia as a malign force in the Black Sea Region. However, President Putin's assault on Ukraine is faltering badly, and Russia is on the brink of bankruptcy.

We grossly underestimate the significance of both these developments, which are disgracefully underreported in the American press and in American political discourse. A post-Putin Russia is already dawning, but its contours remain totally unknown. I, therefore, urge your committee as a whole to begin now to review U.S. strategy in light of all the most likely lines of Russia's further evolution. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Starr follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DR. STEPHEN FREDERICK STARR

First, I would like to applaud the Chairman and Ranking Member for their attention to an issue that warrants more focus by the United States than it has received to date.

Allow me to start with a note on the geopolitical context and existing U.S. strategy in the region.

*The Context*

Due to Russian military and economic pressure both the Baltic area and the Black Sea regions are in acute crisis but in the case of the Black Sea the crisis is less acknowledged than in the Baltic lands and hence inadequately addressed. Like the Baltic area, the Black Sea Region includes three members of NATO: Rumania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. The U.S. maintains three military bases in Turkey and in Rumania. Like the Baltic, the Black Sea plays an important economic role as a gateway to the world's oceans; in the case of the Black Sea it is also the only access to world shipping lanes for shipments on Europe's second longest river, the Danube. And unlike the Baltic, on its shores are the homes of the two largest and best equipped forces in Eurasia besides Russia, i.e. Turkey and Ukraine. Finally, Russia has attempted to militarize both the Baltic and the Black Sea, directly challenging Europe and the United States. And Russia uses its Black Sea assets to project its power into the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. For these and other reasons, the Black Sea Region warrants the same level of attention as the Baltic zone.

*Existing U.S. Strategy*

Washington's existing strategy for the Black Sea Region is serious and multi-sided but falls short in several areas:

1. Because the Black Sea littoral states are less developed and coordinated than their Baltic counterparts, they need a higher level of initiative from Washington than they now receive.
2. Further, the U.S. approach to the Black Sea zone fails to acknowledge that the fates of all three countries of the Caucasus—Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—see free access to the Black Sea as key to their escaping complete con-

trol by Moscow or Beijing. Two of these countries (Armenia and Azerbaijan) have recently pivoted towards the West while Georgia, with two ports on the Black Sea, will likely relaunch its long-term positive relations with the U.S. once its current government expires, as is likely once Moscow's backing flags, as appears inevitable. Under any circumstances, control of the Black Sea will determine the outcome of two important frozen conflicts, in Georgia's Abkhazia and in Moldova's Transnistria.

For the five countries of Central Asia, rich with energy and minerals, free access to the Black Sea is essential to preventing domination by Russia and China. If they are denied access to world ports via the Black Sea they will have no choice but to return to Moscow's fold and submit to China's economic dominance.

3. Finally, as with the Baltic countries, their main threat to all the Black Sea states, the Caucasus, and Central Asia arises from Putin's Russia. Taking advantage of western passivity following the collapse of the USSR, Russia today aspires to restore its colonial domination of the Black Sea. Russia's war on Ukraine is a failure but it has greatly increased its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea and gained control of four fifths of the ports by which Ukraine sent grains to world markets.

#### *U.S. Strategy to Now*

1. Down to 2023 Washington's approach to the Black Sea Region can be characterized as casual. It failed to respond decisively to Russia's seizure of an entire region of Georgia in 2008 and to Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014. Since then, two documents have defined Washington's strategy: first, the terms of the 2016 Three Seas initiative involving the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Sea, and, second, a 2023 statement by Congress on the Black Sea.

The Three Seas initiative calls for increasing the cross-border links, economic development. While laudable in many respects, this project has focused more attention on the Baltic than the Black Sea, and does not include two of the three main littoral states, Turkey, and Ukraine, let alone the Caucasus. And it is all but silent on security.

Acknowledging these lacunae, your committee in 2023 set forth a more comprehensive strategy on the Black Sea and littoral states. It calls for the U.S., NATO, and the EU to deter Russia in the Black Sea by developing a permanent NATO base there, initiating a rotating maritime presence, and fostering U.S. investment in the region. This led to the creation of a NATO base in Rumania at a cost of \$2.7 billion. But the 2023 document, along with the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, was a Christmas tree with too many ornaments and too few focused commitments and actions. And it was soon overtaken by events, which gave rise to a reactive and improvisational approach to the Black Sea Region.

#### *What Is Needed Today?*

A revised strategy should draw on the 2023 document but comb out its irrelevancies, be more blunt in identifying threats, expand the number of countries with which to partner, and engage Turkey in a more active role. It must recognize that even though the Russian Navy has been gravely wounded, it remains the most powerful force on the Black Sea and uses its presence there to project its power into the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. Hence Russia remains the greatest threat to the goals of the U.S. and NATO.

The main elements of a revised strategy should include:

1. Adding Ukraine, Moldova, and the three countries of the Caucasus to the list of states with recognized and compatible interests in the Black Sea.
2. Consistent with NATO's forward posture, strengthening the naval capacities of Bulgaria and Rumania, and also working with other countries to assist non-NATO member Ukraine.
3. Establishing a rotating NATO naval presence in the Black Sea.
4. Affirming the UN General Assembly's resolution 68/262 of 27 March 2014 declaring that Crimea belongs to Ukraine and supporting efforts by the U.S. and its partners to help Ukraine implement it.
5. Assuring regional buy-in through regular consultations with relevant governments in a Black Sea Council.
6. Acknowledging Turkey's special relevance and interest in Black Sea security and engaging Turkey more actively in advancing the above goals.

*Concluding Note*

These suggestions identify today's Russia as a malign force in the Black Sea Region. However, President Putin's assault on Ukraine and the region is faltering badly and Moscow's finances are on the brink of bankruptcy. A post-Putin Russia is dawning but its contours remain unknown. Your committee must therefore prepare now to revisit U.S. strategy in the Black Sea Region in light of Russia's further evolution.

Senator DAINES. Dr. Starr, thank you for your testimony. Catherine Sendak, director of the Transatlantic Defense and Security Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis. Ms. Sendak, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF CATHERINE SENDAK, DIRECTOR OF TRANS-ATLANTIC DEFENSE AND SECURITY, CENTER FOR EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS, WASHINGTON, DC**

Ms. SENDAK. Thank you so much, Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Murphy, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation. It is an honor to address you today on this critical and timely matter of U.S. national Security and policy. I should note that the views expressed in this testimony do not reflect those of the Center for European Policy Analysis or its staff and fellows.

CEPA, for the past 20 years, has spent a lot of time focusing on the Black Sea, producing a lot of analysis and recommendations, looking how to highlight the importance of the region to both European and global security. While much of the policy focus has centered on the war inside Ukraine, rightfully so, the broader regional strategy, particularly concerning the Black Sea, as was Stated before, remains severely ill defined and underdeveloped. This gap in a comprehensive, well-defined, and well-resourced Black Sea strategy puts long-term prospects for stability and security at risk, not only in Ukraine, but across the European continent. We have a real opportunity to seize the momentum to set forward a path for tangible policy and achievable sustainable security in the Black Sea Region.

There are reasons to approach security challenges in the region with some optimism and some pragmatism. In the wake of what looks like to be a majority victory for the Party of Action and Solidarity—the pro-EU party in Moldova—a concentrated Western attention on Black Sea security in light of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine and its ongoing aggressive actions in the region, increased investment on defense technology and capabilities, and plussed-up defense resources across the West, the time is now.

I had the opportunity to lead a year-long study on Ukraine long-term security cooperation and assistance published earlier this year. As a part of that study, we assessed the critical requirements for stability and security in Ukraine with reaching effects of security in the broader region.

In order to achieve long-term stability and security on the European continent, the U.S. and NATO should undertake the following in the Black Sea Region. One, we must enable Ukraine to defend its territorial sovereignty over the long term. That has far-reaching impacts to the security of the entire region. We must draft, resource, and implement clear, concise, and cohesive Black Sea strategies, both in the United States, NATO, and we need to take a look

at U.S.-Russia policy. And finally, we need to provide sustained U.S. leadership in the region, including engagement, presence, and assist our Black Sea NATO allies to further cooperation to bring unified security.

As we know, the Black Sea Region sits at the crossroads of Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central Asia, with a contested and competitive security environment, and we know crucial to Russian's foreign policy objectives is to control the methods and means of commerce and trade in the Black Sea and enjoy unhampered access to project power to other theaters, including the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa.

The threats from Russia, as we know, in the Black Sea Region and all over Europe, are well known: militarily in Ukraine, Transnistria, and Georgia; politically as we have seen over the weekend in Moldova in their attempts to derail that democratic process; and, of course, hybrid actions that are continuing day by day.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the connections of everything else happening on the European continent with Russia hybrid actions and connecting those dots to what is happening in the Black Sea Region. As was mentioned before by the ranking member and others here, the drone incursions, the air incursions in Poland and Estonia, both triggering Article 4 sessions at NATO, the potential drone incursions in Denmark and Norway going on right now, the bombing of the EU building in Kyiv, the GPS jamming of President von der Leyen's plane, these are all cumulative in nature, Russia testing what Europe and the West will actually respond to and react to and try to deter against.

Let me briefly just go over my recommendations again, and I welcome any questions you all have about these. Enabling Ukraine to defend its territorial sovereignty over the long term. So, our study took a look at multiple-year authorities and multiyear funding for consistent and sustained support and assistance from Congress. We also suggested a 5-year memorandum of understanding between the U.S. and Ukraine, providing a full set of objectives and goals and resources to solidify the partnership.

That partnership and solidifying that partnership over the long term, will provide consistency and have ripple effects throughout the region. Security cooperation and assistance programs spanning the spectrum of issue sets—military, civilian, reforms, education—creating the opportunity for substantive, generational capacity building and change throughout the region. Drafting, resourcing, and implementing Black Sea strategies and a U.S.-Russia policy are clear. We need to re-look at the U.S. Black Sea Strategy and how to implement that further.

We need to create a Black Sea strategy at NATO, and the U.S. must examine a comprehensive U.S.-Russia policy moving forward. And then finally, U.S. leadership is so critical in this space, including engagement and presence in assisting our Black Sea NATO allies—Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—to work together further, taking their Mine Countermeasures Task Group and expanding it into other domains, including maritime domain awareness and intelligence sharing. The opportunities are great, and we look forward to those opportunities.

If the U.S. and NATO do not take these actions, then Russia and other potential adversaries will have the unfettered ability to continue to destabilize Ukraine and Black Sea nations and control the strategic terrain, to include the commerce that flows through it, not only putting European stability at risk, but also the global economy. Thank you for the opportunity, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Sendak follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CATHERINE SENDAK

Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Murphy, distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, It is an honor to address you today on this critical and timely matter of U.S. national security and foreign policy. I should note that the views expressed in this testimony do not reflect those of the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) or its staff and fellows.

Since CEPA's founding 20 years ago, we have focused on the security of the Black Sea Region. CEPA publishes extensive analysis and recommendations on the region, we have a robust set of experts and fellows focusing on the region, and we continually seek ways to highlight the importance of the Black Sea to European and global security.

*Framing Statement*

While much of the policy focus has centered on the war inside Ukraine (rightfully so), the broader regional strategy—particularly concerning the Black Sea—remains severely ill-defined and underdeveloped. This gap in a comprehensive, well-defined, and well-resourced Black Sea strategy puts long-term prospects for stability and security at-risk not only in Ukraine but across the European continent.

I had the opportunity to lead a year-long study on Ukraine long-term security assistance published earlier this year. As part of the study, we assessed the critical requirements for stability and security in Ukraine with reaching effects of security in the broader Black Sea Region.<sup>1</sup> The region is a critical juncture of commerce, trade, energy, and agriculture—Russia's war in Ukraine and its long-term goal of manipulation and control of the Black Sea have far reaching effects to European and global security.

To ensure long-term stability and security on the European continent, the U.S. and NATO should undertake the following in the Black Sea Region (BSR): (1) enable Ukraine to defend its territorial sovereignty over the long term; (2) draft, resource, and implement clear, concise, and cohesive Black Sea security strategies; and (3) provide sustained U.S. leadership in the region including engagement, presence, and assisting Black Sea NATO allies to further cooperation to bring unified security. If the U.S. and NATO do not take these actions, then Russia and other potential adversaries will have the unfettered ability to continue to destabilize Ukraine and Black Sea nations and control the strategic terrain—to include the commerce that flows through it—not only putting European stability at risk but also the global economy.

I will proceed by describing the strategic importance of the Black Sea and then further outline my three recommendations for U.S. policy.

*Strategic Importance of the Black Sea*

“Wishful thinking will not keep U.S. safe ... hope is not a strategy.”<sup>2</sup>  
(Rutte 9 June 2025)

“We see the Black Sea being weaponized.”<sup>3</sup> (Kallas 28 May 2025)

At the crossroads of Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia is the BSR—a vital region of economic, commerce, agricultural, and energy resources,

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Sendak and Ilya Timtchenko, “Between Now and NATO: A Security Strategy for Ukraine,” (Center for European Policy Analysis, January 2025),

<https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/betweennow-and-nato-a-security-strategy-for-ukraine/>  
<sup>2</sup>NATO News, “Building a better NATO”; NATO Secretary General speech at Chatham House, 9 JUN 2025,” June 9, 2025,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YiE82ufdHM>  
<sup>3</sup>European External Action Service, Black Sea Strategy: Press remarks by High Representative/VicePresident Kaja Kallas, (Brussels, Belgium: EEAS Press Team, 2025)

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with a contested and competitive security environment. Economically, the region serves as a link between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. It is the center for vital regional trade routes, with the EU, the largest trading partner for most of the region, having an overall trade volume of \$310 billion/\$360 billion.<sup>4</sup> Agriculturally, grain production for the next season across the region is projected at 225 million tons, slightly below record levels—critical to global food supplies.<sup>5</sup> As it relates to energy, Turkey is ramping up its flagship Sakarya natural gas field in the Black Sea.<sup>6</sup> And alternative energy corridors are being explored and seen as a step for regional collaboration and green energy production, developing both economic and strategic benefits for the region.<sup>7</sup>

Crucial to Russia's foreign policy objectives is to control the methods and means of commerce and trade in the Black Sea<sup>8</sup> and unhampered access to power project to other theaters including the Middle East unto Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa.<sup>9</sup>

For decades NATO allies and partners have confronted Russia in an ad hoc fashion in the BSR including, but not limited to, the decades-long presence in Transnistria, the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the illegal annexation of Crimea and subsequent Russian-led separatists in 2014, and the closing of the Kerch Strait in 2018, severely restricting access to the Sea of Azov for Ukraine—the list is long. And in still other cases, we have ignored their intent in the region to our own peril allowing Russia to exert its influence and its ability to sow chaos to destabilize the region with minimal to no reaction including consistent cyber-attacks, sabotage, and corruption.

As President von der Leyen laid out in her 2025 State of the Union, Europe is in a fight.<sup>10</sup> And a frontline of that fight is the Black Sea.

#### *Threats to U.S. Interests in the Black Sea*

Threats include: 1) Russia's military activity; 2) Russian hybrid operations; 3) Chinese and other actors.

First, Russia's war in Ukraine and ripple effects in the region are felt by all nations. Russia's relentless attempts at dismantling Ukrainian democracy, seeking a puppet state under the Kremlin's control, is decades in the making. By sea, the Kremlin's efforts to limit freedom of navigation impact global trade, food supplies, energy, and commerce. Ukraine has shown undeniable success in thwarting the Russian navy in the Black Sea, eliminating 30% of its Black Sea fleet and pushing its basing to the Novorossiysk and the Abkhazia region of Georgia given the vulnerability of Crimea.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Delegation of the EU to Armenia, Questions and answers on the European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea Region, (Yerevan, Armenia: Delegation of the EU to Armenia, 2025), <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/questions-and-answers-european-unions-strategicapproach-black-sea-region-en>

<sup>5</sup>Grains Prices, "Black Sea Region Grain Market Analysis," GrainPrices, May 9, 2025,

<https://grainsprices.com/article/18924>

<sup>6</sup>Nevzat Devranoglu, "Turkey eyes regional energy expansion as Black Sea gas output rises," Reuters, April 21, 2025,

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/turkey-eyes-regional-energy-expansion-blacksea-gas-output-rises-2025-04-21/>

<sup>7</sup>Natia Gamkrelidze, "Can the Black Sea Energy Corridor Power Europe's Green Future?" Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, September 17, 2024,

<https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/can-black-sea-energy-corridor-power-europes-greenfuture>

<sup>8</sup>Daniel Hamilton and Angela Stent, "Russia's Imperial Black Sea Strategy," Foreign Affairs, August 19, 2025,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/georgia/russias-imperial-black-sea-strategy>

<sup>9</sup>Catherine Sendak and Ilya Timchenko, "Between Now and NATO: A Security Strategy for Ukraine," (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2025),

<https://cepa.org/comprehensivereports/between-now-and-nato-a-security-strategy-for-ukraine/>; Samer al-Ahmed, "Russia's military presence in post-Assad Syria: A growing security liability undermining stability," (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2025),

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-military-presence-post-assad-syriagrowing-security-liability-undermining>

<sup>10</sup>Ursula von der Leyen, "2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen," (European Union, September 2025)

<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech—25—2053>

<sup>11</sup>Rayhan Demytrie, Paul Brown and Joshua Cheetham, "Russia's new Black Sea naval base alarms Georgia," BBC, December 12, 2023,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67625450>

This denial has increased the ability for Ukraine and the rest of the BSR to conduct business but constant threats remain.<sup>12</sup> By air, for example, Romania is impacted regularly, by air incursions and drone sightings including drone debris.<sup>13</sup> While these actions span the European continent, Russia has been using these methods for decades in the Black Sea.

Secondly, Russia's hybrid operations include a litany of misdeeds and dangerous confrontations testing the region and alliance's resolve. It is clear Russia views the Black Sea in their sphere of influence and their ". . . imperial ambitions aim to transform the Black Sea into a "Russian lake" through military occupation, economic coercion, and hybrid warfare."<sup>14</sup>

Politically, at the time of this hearing, as we see from this past weekend, the world is watching the outcomes of Moldova's elections. Moldova, containing Transnistria, a region with approximately 1500 Russian troops and 'peacekeepers', is on the frontlines of Russian hybrid and kinetic tactics. Russia has long targeted Moldova with political interference and influence operations, supporting pro-Russian parties, financing illicit networks, and weaponizing energy dependence. Since the election of pro-European leaders in 2020-21, the Kremlin has intensified efforts to destabilize Moldova's democratic institutions and derail its EU trajectory—most recently by financing largescale vote-buying, engineering energy crises, and preparing to disrupt this past Sunday's parliamentary elections.<sup>15</sup> With the victory of the pro-EU party, Moldova has shown a small nation can confront and deny Russian tactics to influence and derail democratic principles.<sup>16</sup> It is a testament to the strength of those systems and of the Moldovan people.

Extending beyond the BSR, we must take into account the cumulative effort of the Kremlin's campaign on European security including NATO allies over just the past few months. Since August, the bombing of the EU building in Kyiv; GPS jamming of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's aircraft; 21 drone incursions in Polish airspace in a single evening; Estonian air incursion (both of which triggered Article 4 sessions at NATO); potential drone incursions in Danish and Norwegian commercial and military airspace and the incidents go on and on. And it is time to confront these challenges in a cohesive, timely, and effective way.

Other actors, including China, Iran, and the Gulf States continue to seek to expand their influence in the region. We clearly see Russia's policy aims of dominance of the BSR but we must not ignore the efforts by the PRC to exude influence including buying up critical infrastructure, investing in energy corridors, and signing free trade agreements not to mention its attempts at purchasing military industrial assets like Ukraine's Motor Sich,<sup>17</sup> interest in leading the brokering of a peace deal in Ukraine, and eyeing opportunities to a perceived easing of Western influences and engagement.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the Gulf States, Iran, and others are either increasing their influence efforts in the BSR and/or working directly with Russia on its war in Ukraine.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Sabanadze and Galip Dalay, *Understanding Russia's Black Sea strategy*, (London, United Kingdom: Chatham House, 2025).

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/understanding-russias-blacksea-strategy/02-russias-use-conflicts-black-sea-region>

<sup>13</sup> "Romania could partner Ukraine to make drones under EU-funded defence scheme," Reuters, September 26, 2025,

<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/romania-could-partnerukraine-make-drones-under-eu-funded-defence-scheme-2025-09-26/>

<sup>14</sup> Tamas Harangozo, 2025—Revised—The War in Ukraine and Mounting Economic Challenges in the Greater Black Sea Region, (Brussels, Belgium, 2025),

<https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-black-seareport-harangozo-017-esctd>

<sup>15</sup> Sarah E. Garding and Cory Welt, *Moldova: Background and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report No. R48664, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2025)

<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48664>

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Rainsford and Paul Kirby, "Moldova's pro-EU party wins vote mired in claims of Russian interference," BBC, September 29, 2025,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2rdlj8ejgo>

<sup>17</sup> William Echols, "Chinese Intrigue Behind Ukraine's Seizure of Aviation Firm Motor Sich," Voice of America, November 10, 2022,

<https://www.voanews.com/a/fact-check-chinese-intrigue-behind-ukraine-sseizure-of-aviation-firm-motor-sich/6829005.html>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Cercire, "China's Black Sea Play," RAND, August 5, 2025

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/08/chinas-black-sea-play.html>; Nino Lezhava and Leon Hartwell, "Russia and China at Odds Over Black Sea Ambitions," Center for European Policy Analysis, September 20, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/russia-and-china-at-odds-over-black-sea-ambitions/>

<sup>19</sup> Iulia-Sabina Joja, "Iran's growing influence in the Black Sea Region: Consequences and Western responses," Middle East Institute, December 6, 2024,

*Recommendations Section*

- Enable Ukraine to defend itself providing capabilities, platforms, training, and continue programs including the ability for European allies to purchase U.S. platforms to provide to Ukraine. These recommendations will have a far-reaching effect on the entire region increasing regional deterrence, capability, and stability.<sup>20</sup> To do that, the U.S. should consider the following:
  - ♦ The U.S. Congress should provide sustained, multiyear funding and authorities for partnership with Ukraine including the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). Providing the tools, support, and assistance Ukraine needs to confront the Russian threat is a necessary step in obtaining a secure region.
  - ♦ Demonstrating a long-term commitment and partnership to Ukraine and regional security, the U.S. should enter into a 5-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Ukrainian government to outline and formalize the priorities and objectives of a long-term security partnership.
  - ♦ The U.S. has played and can continue to contribute heavily to the democratic resilience programs and measures to address corruption, further develop democratic institutions and checks and balances, and reforms to many Black Sea nations including the allied and partner militaries and industrial bases. Security cooperation and assistance programs as well as other U.S. government efforts including programs focused on institutional capacity building, government reforms, and educational and exchange opportunities have the capacity to assist generational changes in Ukraine and the region.<sup>21</sup>
- Develop, resource, and implement comprehensive security strategies for the Black Sea and Russia.
  - ♦ The U.S. Black Sea Security Strategy, authorized and required in the fiscal year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (PL 118–31), was delivered to Congress in June 2024.<sup>22</sup> The strategy laid out five priorities including engagement and relationship building, regional security cooperation, economic assistance to combat Russian and Chinese influences, energy and security, and democratic resilience.<sup>23</sup> As many know from drafted strategies, the more specificity and direct resources directed at implementing the strategy are imperative. But the status of implementation is not clear. As we learned in our study published earlier this year, Ukraine and many regional neighbors consistently look to the U.S. for leadership and guidance to understand policy objectives and goals in the BSR. The U.S. has an opportunity to put forward pragmatic policy to increase regional security.
  - ♦ Alternatively, NATO does not have a Black Sea strategy. There have been calls to examine what the alliance should prioritize to increase the security of allies and partners of the BSR. Any strategy should include a set of recommendations to increase non-BSR allied presence in the Black Sea. Working with Turkey, in line with the Montreux Convention, and foreseeing a potential ceasefire and/or negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia, those discussions and planning can begin now.

<https://mei.edu/publications/irans-growinginfluence-black-sea-region-consequences-and-western-responses>; Natia Seskuria, “A Strategy Long Overdue: The EU’s New Vision for the Black Sea,” Royal United Services Institute, August 22, 2025

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/strategy-long-overdue-eus-newvision-black-sea>

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Sendak and Ilya Timtchenko, “Between Now and NATO: A Security Strategy for Ukraine,” (Center for European Policy Analysis, January 2025),

<https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/betweennow-and-nato-a-security-strategy-for-ukraine/>

<sup>21</sup> Education and exchange programs including, but not limited to, International Military, Education, and Training (IMET), Professional Military Education (PME), and State Partnership Programs (SPP).

<sup>22</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, Pub. L. No 118–31 †1247, 137 Stat. 462–463(2023).

<https://www.congress.gov/118/plaws/publ31/PLAW-118publ31.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Hearing on U.S. Black Sea Strategy: Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 118th Cong. (2023) (Statement of James O’Brien, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs from 2023-2025)

<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/ac0fdbbe-cf96-dd04-5958-6d40af5b63ef/102523—O%27Brien—Testimony.pdf>

*U.S. and NATO Russia Strategies*

- ◆ Hand in glove to well drafted and resourced Black Sea and Ukraine strategies is a U.S./Russia policy. It is time to develop a comprehensive and clear strategy and objectives related to the U.S. relationship with Russia.
- ◆ Additionally, at the NATO Washington Summit in 2024, a key aspect of the communique included the alliance to “develop recommendations on NATO’s strategic approach to Russia.”<sup>24</sup> But at the 2025 Hague Summit, there was no mention in the communique, and no strategy has been delivered to the alliance.<sup>25</sup> NATO work on these issues and policies should continue.
- Channel U.S. leadership to take full advantage of momentum and resources to enable Black Sea allies and partners to cohesively and collaboratively work towards to achieving long term stability and prosperity.
  - ◆ Utilize key programs and markers to strengthen the region’s defenses. There are many positive and substantial new programs, initiatives, and funds for increasing European security including NATO’s 5% GDP on defense spending commitment, regional defense plans, critical capability targets, innovation programs and procurement targets. The EU published a defence white paper,<sup>26</sup> a Black Sea Strategy, and established the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 program including Security Action for Europe (SAFE) funding mechanism opportunities for production and procurement for EU nations, with the intent of spending over ?800 billion in the coming years on defense.<sup>27</sup> But there is concern the deluge of opportunities will result in lack clarity, efficiency, and cohesion. U.S. leadership can play a vital role in cohering programs across organizations and capitals to streamline efforts.
  - ◆ Black Sea NATO allies have an opportunity to align on key security priorities in terms of capability and capacity. Using the template of the Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group, NATO allies Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey should expand cooperation on regional security challenges.<sup>28</sup> The Task Group should seek to develop a multi-year framework focused on common security goals including domain awareness, information sharing, maritime security, and training and exercising. This framework would provide goals and objectives to use, in conjunction with, security cooperation and assistance levers with NATO, the EU, and the United States. It is an opportunity for the NATO neighbors of the Black Sea to lead on executing the region’s security and speak and act with a common voice.

*Conclusion*

It is prudent for the US, NATO and other allies and partners to seize the momentum of international focus on the security situation in the BSR and deliver. Without a coherent, well-resourced strategy for the Black Sea Region, the U.S. and NATO risk ceding strategic advantage to Russia—allowing it to continue undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty, threatening regional allies and partners, and jeopardizing European security and global commerce. Consistent support and partnership with Black Sea allies and partners, a strong, pragmatic, well-defined, and well-resourced Black Sea strategy anchored in clear policy objectives, and sustained commitment will deny Putin and his global partners the strategic leverage sought and ensure he cannot hold European security/stability and the global economy at risk.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Ms. Sendak. I will start with Dr. Starr.

I was reflecting on our former colleague, Senator McCain’s, famous comment he made in 2014 shortly, I believe, after Russia in-

<sup>24</sup>North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Washington Summit Declaration, (Washington, DC: North AtlanticTreaty Organization, 2024), <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official—texts—227678.htm>

<sup>25</sup>North Atlantic Treaty Organization, The Hague Summit Declaration, (The Hague: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025), <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official—texts—236705.htm>

<sup>26</sup>Strategic Communications, “White Paper for European Defence—Readiness 2030,” (European Union External Action, March 2025) <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/white-paper-for-european-defencereadiness-2030—en>

<sup>27</sup>European Union, “SAFE Security Action for Europe,” (European Union, July 2025) <https://defenceindustry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/safe-security-action-europe—en>

<sup>28</sup>Kate Tringham, “MCM Black Sea Task Group starts operations,” (Janes, July 2024) <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/sea/mcm-black-sea-task-group-starts-operations>

vaded Crimea when he said, “Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country.” When we look back on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, it has become undeniable that energy security and national security are intertwined. In fact, one could argue energy security is national security, and that Europe’s reliance on Russian energy is both a regional security as well as economic risk.

My question, Dr. Starr, is, do you believe that the development of the Middle Corridor, as we saw what has occurred now with that historic August 8 signing of the peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia when we had both President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan here in Washington, that President Trump got that deal put together, do you see that as a means to uncork the energy potential of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and how that might change the landscape of European energy flow for the better, especially on NATO’s eastern flank?

Dr. STARR. This is an important issue that did not begin yesterday. It has been more than a decade since the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline was opened. There was so much skepticism about that in this country, that we organized a motorcycle run, from Azerbaijan on the Caspian, all the way to Turkish Port of Ceyhan in order to deliver the first oil from Central Asia to Europe by motorcycle.

My point is this: It is possible to send energy from Central Asia and the Caspian Region to Europe by land corridors. However, it would be better to have backups and multiple systems, including one that would cross the Black Sea. But if the Black Sea is dominated by Russia, which has its own energy interests, obviously that will not work. So, yes, the so-called Middle Corridor is very important, but at the same time, we cannot rely solely on the land route through the Caucasus. We should also have the alternative of a sea route across the Black Sea.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Dr. Starr, for your insights on that. It is appreciated. Mr. Boyse, I want to continue on this theme of energy security. In May of this year, Western States of the Black Sea Region began construction of a Vertical Gas Corridor as a means to push energy into starved parts of Europe. Mr. Boyse, do you believe that U.S. allies in countries like Romania would benefit from such a proposal, and could this idea succeed where the Nabucco pipeline and other energy projects have failed?

Mr. BOYSE. That is a very important question because it gets to the root of the question of how to diversify sources, expand options, and increase energy security, so that the countries of that region do not need to rely on Russian sources—which brings all sorts of opportunities for malign influence, which we have seen over the course of many, many years.

Now, the main principle is that the more projects like this the better because they bring more sources of energy. Romania can contribute to this objective because it is blessed with enormous resources—fossil fuels in the Black Sea and on land. It is also a key corridor through which the resources from those countries that are not blessed with those resources need to go. This project has been long in the making, in the conceptual stage. It goes back almost 10 years when it was first a bright idea in some foresighted people’s minds. It has taken quite a long time for it to get off the ground.

It is about time that it is happening. It will be a great resource when it finally starts to produce the sorts of diverse supplies that countries of the BSR region need—that Ukraine needs, that Moldova needs, that Hungary needs, that Slovakia needs. And so, we should welcome this and support it in every way we can.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Mr. Boyse. Ranking Member Murphy?

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Sendak, we have seen both the capability and the limitations of Russian military force in Ukraine, and I mentioned intelligence estimates are that this will likely be some form of a stalemate for a long period of time.

Thus, Russia is going to be more reliant on non-military means, as they always have been, to try to undermine support for Ukraine and to undermine pro-Western governments. And we see all of the myriad ways that Russia uses, you know, funding for corrupt politicians, misinformation campaigns, just outright intimidation in order to get what it wants, and yet, as I mentioned in my opening testimony, this administration has effectively shuttered many of the tools that we use to fight Russian asymmetric warfare techniques.

The Trump administration has slashed funding for pro-democracy programs in the Black Sea Region, which are run by NDI and IRI. As I mentioned, it shut down the Global Engagement Center, which chased down a lot of Russian propaganda in and around the Black Sea Region. It has withdrawn from working groups with European countries to expose and counter anti-Western and anti-U.S. Russian-backed disinformation in the Black Sea Region.

Is there any way to support democracies—pro-Western democracies in the Black Sea if the United States is not actively engaged in trying to counter the non-military ways that Russia seeks to gain influence and undermine governments that are pro—are supportive of the West and supportive of a democratic future?

Ms. SENDAK. Thank you, Senator Murphy. You know, it is an excellent question, I think, that one that the United States has tried to tackle for many years on how do we address this hybrid threat in a very holistic and tactical way. We have seen successes in some respects and, I would say, a lot of failures. We play reaction mode a lot when it comes to these things, and as you mentioned and I mentioned in my opening testimony, Russia is constantly testing the waters to see what they can get away with.

I would say holistic support and assistance for these democracies is really important, and understanding it is not just about mill-to-mill conversations or relationships. It is not just about civilian. It is not just about one sector. It is about all sectors, and I think we can see that in Ukraine.

Prior to the Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, we saw a majority of programs that we helped Ukraine with really not necessarily even being military, right? You know, standing up agencies, understanding budget processes, really weedy things, so they understood capacity building and how to do this. I think it is very important that U.S. leadership is here.

The Black Sea Region is a nexus of many organizations and alliances, and the U.S. has an opportunity to lead that from various

venues and various streams of effort to really have a holistic perspective. So, yes, sir, I agree that a holistic approach to these problems is necessary.

Senator MURPHY. I would point to our support for independent media in Moldova. I know this becomes a fraught political issue, you know, support for countering propaganda overseas because a lot of conservatives worry that that is going to prejudice certain types of speech as propaganda. But in Moldova, there is really no way to have a fact-based narrative without there being some support for independent truth telling because Russia commands so much of that space, and so I appreciate that answer.

Mr. Boyse, I wanted to sort of stay on this thread of how we use non-military funds to support our allies in the Black Sea, and I agree with Senator Daines that energy independence is a key goal for the region. And it was always curious to me that in the wake of the early invasion of Ukraine by Russian proxies, we spent \$4 billion on something called the European Reassurance Initiative, but it was, basically, all bread-and-butter military programming. Had we spent maybe \$1 billion of that \$4 billion helping Eastern Europe, Europe, and the Black Sea become energy independent of Russia, we might not be in the position that we are today.

And so, I always find it curious that—you know, I agree with Senator Daines that energy security is national security, and I guess my question is, should we be considering putting sort of hard U.S. national security dollars into regional energy independence projects? Should we start to fund energy independence in the same way that we fund military support for the region? A lot more projects could get done there if the United States was willing to put some muscle behind it.

Mr. BOYSE. That is a question, Senator Murphy, that is near and dear to my heart because I was the Sherpa for the Three Seas Initiative during most of the Trump administration, and we were actually making a fair amount of progress on the principle you mentioned—and energy is one of the three pillars.

And much of the investment did, in fact, go into the Three Seas Investment Fund, a lot of it into the energy pillar. That initiative has a lot more potential than has been realized, and I hope the Trump administration takes it up again because there is a lot of goodness there, a lot of interest on the part of our allies in the region, the members of the Three Seas world. As you say, taxpayer dollars are available for this through the DFC.

So to the extent that the USG can get this going again, there would be a lot of receptivity in the Three Seas countries. Many of the countries in the BSR region have been the beneficiaries of U.S. investment via the DFC and via the Three Seas Investment Fund. There is so much more potential there.

The investment needs are enormous. The capital markets are also available for this, because a lot of the investment that is going into the Neptun Deep Field, for example, in offshore Romania, and has been going into the pipelines, and has been going into offshore wind farms and onshore wind farms, and would go into investment in Bulgarian EEZ as well, not to mention Turkey, could come from the private sector. There is a considerable financial resources avail-

able in the capital markets, too, because those projects will all be profitable.

This also raises the question of freedom of navigation because the peaceful nature of the Black Sea could be affected by—and the investments in infrastructure that will help these countries become more energy secure—could be impacted negatively if Russia’s war against Ukraine ends in an unsatisfactory manner.

In other words, if Putin ends this war on his terms, it could negatively affect energy investments in the Black Sea and energy security. For example, a U.S. firm, Black Sea Oil & Gas, has been exploiting resources in Romanian waters, working with Romanian partners for a number of years. Their executives have talked about what it is like to be drilling in the Black Sea and then to be buzzed by Russian planes or to have Russian ships not far from their platforms.

And so, you can imagine when the vast energy resources that are in Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Ukrainian waters—much of that has been taken over by Russia—that when this enormous potential in the maritime domain is dominated by Russia and this threat exists, firms are less likely to invest or it becomes much more expensive, or it becomes much more risky.

And so, it is important that the maritime domain remains peaceful and stable, so that the vast energy needs in Europe can be supplied in part by the countries on the Black Sea—in addition to the other ways the USG, for example, could support. Thank you.

Senator DAINES. I want to shift gears for a moment and talk about maritime security and, specifically, the Bosphorus. I know every time you fly in and out of Istanbul, if you are transiting or stopping there, you are coming in the final approach, you just look at all the ships, cargo, and the containers there that are backed up going in and through there, that very important part of the world.

I think most estimates suggests it is about 6 percent of global trade transits through the Bosphorus. It is an economic conduit, obviously, facilitating energy, agriculture, raw minerals, and the economic disruptions caused by the War in Ukraine impact truly the whole of the globe. It is kind of their Strait of Hormuz, pinch point, certainly, for the world.

My question for everybody, I would like each of you maybe to answer this, is, how do we work with our allies to invest in maritime security and to ensure that Russia or other adversaries do not stifle navigation and trade? Dr. Starr, I will start with you, but I am going to ask the whole panel to give some thought to that question. Dr. Starr?

Dr. STARR. It is a worthy question. The reality at the moment is that the Black Sea is closed because Russia has imposed a no-sail zone that covers the entire Sea except for a very narrow corridor along the Rumanian. This control has been cracked but not broken. How do you do this? Rather than give you a slick answer, let me instead suggest you do not do it by a bunch of bilateral deals or by a bunch of bilateral consultations.

There exists no Black Sea council that we could work with. Instead, we are trying to make a series of bilateral deals. In a sense, we divide and Russia conquers. What is needed is a more regional approach. I have also suggested expanding the Black Sea concept

to include the Caucasus, to include Moldova and Ukraine, which are not yet members of NATO. Expand the group, and deal with this as a group problem that needs a group solution because, country by country, you cannot solve this Rubik's Cube, hence—

Senator DAINES. Thank you for that insight.

Dr. STARR [continuing]. Excuse me. Hence, the need for a Black Sea council.

Senator DAINES. Well, it is—thinking about the Caucasus, too, in terms of Georgia has—

Dr. STARR. Added to them.

Senator DAINES [continuing]. Oceanfront property there on the Black Sea, absolutely. Ms. Sendak, your thoughts.

Ms. SENDAK. Thank you so much, and tagging along to Dr. Starr's comments, you know, it is really critical. We have seen Ukraine be so successful in the Black Sea in terms of fighting back against Russia's Black Sea Fleet, down 30 percent, pushback off of Crimea, which is a huge success, but exactly to your point, how do we open this up consistently to commerce and economics?

This is why I think a great suggestion is broadening what the NATO allies on the Black Sea can do. I do believe NATO should be talking now about how to start opening up the Black Sea to non-Black Sea allies. I think that is a really important step in a series of discussions that NATO should be having now, of course, in light of Turkey and the Montreux Convention.

But I would say the opportunities for Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey to come together, agree on a list of items to push forward in a leadership position at the alliance, and really come at this from a position of this is our neighborhood, we are going to take these things on, much like what we have seen in the Baltic Sea.

I think what we have seen from our Baltic allies is the ability to speak with one voice on threat and speak with one voice about how they would like to see the security of their region look, and I think the opportunity is there for our NATO allies in the Black Sea to do the same. And that leadership should have the ripple effect that we might be seeking in terms of stability on the sea.

Senator DAINES. Ms. Sendak, you brought up Turkey, and I think, when you look at the map, nobody has more square footage than Turkey in terms of front of—friends on the—on the Black Sea.

Your thoughts on Turkey?

Ms. SENDAK. Yes. Well, you know, we have seen them pivot to a little bit more concentration on the Black Sea, which I think is a very positive step, and I see them having, obviously, a huge leadership role in the Black Sea. Given the Bosphorus, given the Montreux Convention, letting people in and out and ships in and out, it is a critical, critical role.

And I think the more that we can incorporate—I think Dr. Starr mentioned in his opening statement the more we can incorporate Turkey's role in this, in a leadership position with their other allies, I think, is absolutely critical. They are mentioned frequently in the EU Black Sea Strategy, knowing full well that their buy-in and leadership is absolutely critical to make any of this happen.

Senator DAINES. Thanks, Ms. Sendak. Mr. Boyse.

Mr. BOYSE. So, there is some activity already ongoing, but first hats off to the Ukrainian military for keeping the Black Sea rel-

atively, or at least partly open, because the Russian Black Sea Fleet is pretty much bottled up and unable to operate freely, even if it is able to put at risk a lot ship traffic, maritime traffic. The fact that there is still commerce going on can be attributed, in large part, to them as well as to our Turkish allies who have helped to keep trade routes open.

A fair amount of activity has been going on for a number of months with the NATO Mine Measures Group that includes Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, that is trying to remove mines in the Black Sea. Nobody knows how many mines there are actually, but they threaten freedom of navigation because they raise insurance rates and they make it much more risky to ply the waters commercially.

This effort, which is a great start, needs more attention because there there are so many mines in the Black Sea. Some people talk about 400, some estimates are in the thousands. Nobody quite knows, but they wash up on shores and the Mine Measures Group finds them every so often. That is a very useful way of trying to keep these trade routes open and to support freedom of navigation.

Some of this also has to do with domain awareness and pushing back on intrusions. Russia has boarded commercial vessels in Bulgarian waters. I do not know if you want to call it piracy, but it is that, essentially. In cases like this with Russia testing and probing and pushing and engaging in illegal behavior according to maritime law, there needs to be a response. It cannot be ignored.

As long as NATO member-States do not react or do not impose some costs on Russia for behavior like this, that affects the freedom of navigation in a body of water that should be free and open. Russia will continue to do it. And so, reciprocity or pushing back in ways that demonstrate that this is not acceptable will have more effect on Russian behavior than other more diplomatic ways.

Senator DAINES. Before I turn it back to Ranking Member Murphy, Dr. Starr, I can just tell you have got something else you want to say. You were scribbling some notes here.

[Laughter.]

Senator DAINES. Did you want—did you want to add anymore because you led off on this round-robin. Do you have something else you want to add to it?

Dr. STARR. Thank you very much.

Senator DAINES. It looks like you got something else you want to say.

Dr. STARR. I thank you. I was thinking about the comments you made, and I think we all agree about the absolute centrality of energy, oil, and gas, and crucial minerals, and so on. But if we only attend to them, we will not get to where we want to go. Senator Murphy has asked: What else do we need to do? Well, look what we are dealing with. We are dealing with the—many countries whose long-term fate is absolutely not clear at this point, of course Ukraine.

In Moldova, look at the situation there. Positive steps have been taken very recently. We will see. Georgia, my goodness, what a—what a complex mess that is at the moment. Armenia, Azerbaijan, well, they have recently taken very significant steps, but the issue is not clear there either, and I am—I am not even going to dwell

on all of Central Asia, which is a region that is of much greater importance to us than merely energy—and to the West than merely energy and resources.

It is important because this is the—a new zone of independent and sovereign States that are doing remarkably well. After shuffling around for a generation or so after the collapse of the USSR, their post-colonial recovery has been remarkable, very impressive.

Now, the question is, are we going to do the things that are needed to enable them to continue that kind of progress toward relatively open societies, relatively participatory, with business—normal business relations with an increasing number of American firms? Are we going to advocate that and do what is necessary to develop it further, or are we going to just sit on the back—as observers and focus only on energy and resources?

I think we have got to do both, and that is a key to the Black Sea, because by focusing on these impressive countries—Moldova, my goodness, look what they just have been through. Ukraine, none—there is no need to discuss their heroism. This is—look how—look how Romania has emerged as a—as a regional leader. There are real developments, complex tendencies within Turkey today, but some very promising ones, too.

I think we have to keep in mind that not just the immediate concern over energy, but especially what is going to be the fate of these regions. And my assertion here and answer to your needling me a little bit, which I appreciate, my assertion is that I think we cannot do this on a country-by-country basis. We have to define a new region and institutionalize it in a way that makes sense to us.

Senator DAINES. Dr. Starr, thank you for those comments. Appreciate it. I completely agree with the geopolitical importance of that part of the map of the world as you just articulated.

Ranking Member Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much.

Ms. Sendak, this is 2025, not 1955. Europe is in a position to defend itself in a way that it was not when we made our initial commitment through NATO. I believe in that NATO treaty, I believe in Article 5, but I also think it is absolutely time for the members of NATO on the other side of the Atlantic to take more responsibility for their collective defense. At the same time, this is an incredibly fraught moment, I mean, the moment we are literally sitting in today as jets are flying over the heads of our European partners, as drones are being flown into Romanian airspace, into Polish airspace. And yet, we are hearing reports that the Trump administration is considering withdrawing some of our troop presence from Romania, the subject of today's hearing, and from Poland.

Again, I do not necessarily believe in a world where the United States permanently has to have 60,000, 70,000, 100,000 troops in Europe, but at this moment, like right now, it would seem to be a curious time to send a signal that we are pulling out as drones and jets are flying in from Russia. What is your sense of the signal we would be sending to Putin if, in the next 30 days, we got an announcement from the Trump administration that they were pulling troops out of some of these frontline States?

Ms. SENDAK. Thank you for the question, Senator Murphy. Obviously, U.S. presence in Europe has been tantamount to ensuring the security over the past 75 years. I had the privilege of working on the House Armed Services Committee several years ago at the start of 2015, where we were spending money on the European Reassurance Initiative, as you pointed out, then became European Deterrence Initiative, where we flooded the zone with pre-positioned equipment, rotational forces, training and exercises, which we are still doing today, which is completely and utterly necessary to increase deterrence value.

I agree with you completely. I think Europe has received the message and our NATO allies have received the message that they need to increase their capabilities and capacity, and they are doing that. But we are at a very critical juncture where that has not happened completely yet, and none of us have exactly what we need in a potential conflict.

I think as we look at this, U.S. presence is absolutely crucial, not just from the sense of what do we want to do in Europe, but that is power projection for ourselves. We are not just in Europe to train and exercise. We are there to be part of an alliance, we are there to ensure security and stability, and it has far reaches past the Black Sea, past the Caucasus into Central Asia, et cetera. So, I think it is absolutely critical that the U.S. remains a strong presence on the European continent.

Senator MURPHY. I have one final question. I will pose it to you, Dr. Starr. I think one of the most extraordinary directives that has come out of this State Department is a prohibition on our embassies opining on the fairness of elections. So, our ambassadors have been told, even if you think that it is a rigged election, do not say it.

That seems to be an invitation for a country like Russia to come in and play games because they are just not going to be called out on their provocations, on their corruption. I think that is extraordinary and, I think, very damaging to the United States' reputation, our power around the world, and our aligned democracies.

You sort of teased the question of what is happening in Georgia today. This is a country that had made great progress that was, you know, a fraught, but working democracy with balance on both sides, and today we have a ruling party in Georgia that has reversed the progress on European integration, has moved dramatically backward away from democratic norms.

There have been huge protests, and yet they still have pushed forward laws that, you know, suggest this country is sliding into something very, very different than a democracy. There is a headline out of Georgia that reads, "As USAID Dies, Many of Georgia's 'Vibrant' Civil Society Organizations Face Extinction." Just like it would be a really bad moment right now for the United States to pull military support from a region of the world that is having Russian military incursions on a weekly basis, it seems like a really bad time for the United States to be pulling support for civil society and pro-democracy groups in Georgia while there is still an open question as to whether Georgian democracy survives. What is your recommendation on what this administration should be doing to try

to push back against this really troubling trend line in the country of Georgia?

Dr. STARR. Well, first, hats off to the Georgians for what they have accomplished over the decades since independence. It has not been an easy path. Remember, they were invaded by Putin in 2008. We did next to nothing, and, therefore, our authority there, it was qualified by that neglect, just as our authority in Ukraine was qualified by our failure to do anything after Putin stole Ukraine 2014.

So, in general, though, I—it seems to me that we can be a little bit more optimistic than your question implies with regard to Georgia. Why do I say that? Because Putin is not a long termer. It is over. Exactly when and how it will be over, it is over. He does not have the resources. He does not have the manpower. He does not—he does not have the exports that he did have, and he has a society that is deeply, deeply alienated, not by the war, but by the economic hardship that is now felt by everyone outside of the two major cities. He is going to be out of there sooner than we think, and the minute that happens, Mr. Ivanishvili, even though he has moved his money out of Russia, he is out, and the whole situation in Georgia will change.

I think we should be concentrating on what is going on in Russia. I do agree with you that we served—we accomplished a lot through our support for various democratic institutions during that period. I also have to admit, having been an election observer several times in Central Asia, that there were—there have been cases where official—officially sponsored observers by the U.S. have actually missed the—missed the reality and distorted things, which is widely known locally.

So, I am for moderation on that—not elimination, but moderation—but concentrating on the dominant issue throughout the region, and that is, what is going to follow Putin in Russia. If it is more of the same or worse, we should be planning for it. If it is a dramatic change for the better, as occurred after the disastrous Russian defeat in the Crimean War in the 19th century—disastrous—that produced an age of reform. That is when they emancipated 90 million serfs before we freed slaves 2 years before Lincoln.

That is when they created a new legal system. I am not saying that is going to happen, but we have to consider all post-Putin possibilities because they are going to determine the validity of what we propose and do now.

Senator MURPHY. Well, it is certainly true that throughout history, it is the overextension of Russian military power that has led to collapse of Russian regimes. It is probably also true that it has been generally a bad bet to bet on Russian enlightenment following those moments of leadership change, but I think it is an important caution.

We were told forever, for instance, that, you know, Assad was weak, it was just a matter of time. It seemed to be a fool's errand, and then all of a sudden, overnight he was gone, and maybe we did not spend enough time planning for that moment because we just did not believe that it was true. And so, it is, I think, wise counsel for us to think about how you would manage a post-Putin Russia,

and maybe an opportunity for this committee to engage in important inquiry and a little bit of trolling at the same time.

Senator DAINES. Noted there.

[Laughter.]

Senator DAINES. OK. Well, thank you. A sincere thank you to a great back-and-forth and dialog on some very complicated issues in a complicated part of the world. A sincere thank you to all of our witnesses for attending today and providing us with the benefit of your testimony.

For the information of members, the record will remain open until the close of business tomorrow, October 1. We ask the witness to respond as promptly as possible. Your response will also be made a part of the record.

Senator DAINES. With the thanks of this committee, the hearing is now adjourned.

**[Whereupon, at 3:56 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]**

