

The Future of United States Black Sea Strategy

PREPARED STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

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HEARING ON

The Future of United States Black Sea Strategy

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 to develop a Black Sea strategy, by holding hearings, by traveling to the region, and by shining light on a region of great geopolitical importance.

The BSR is also important in the context of the ongoing debate about U.S. foreign policy priorities. 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 threat from Communist China, challenges in the Western Hemisphere, and other issues.

STRATEGIC BACKDROP

Putin's war against Ukraine has higher stakes than 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](#) in his efforts to shape a [new international order](#), together with Communist China, Iran, and others and a very 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 BSR 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. The Kremlin is 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. 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 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 different case, as Turkiye is both open to some, and opposed to other, Russian interests.

A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY AND FURTHERING AMERICAN INTERESTS

A comprehensive Black Sea strategy is necessary but insufficient to advance U.S. security interests and counter Russian malign influence in BSR energy markets. Other political, diplomatic, military, or economic steps are necessary, which I will touch on briefly in a minute. 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.

The State Department strategy presented to this committee in October 2023 was a start, but it was: 1) not whole-of-government; 2) more a laundry list of intentions; 3) not that focused on energy; and 4) not resourced. A strategy that focuses more on energy *may* advance energy U.S. goals, but blunt language like we recently saw from President Trump also reminds Allies and friends that the U.S. cannot want European energy security more than they do.

U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE BSR TO PROMOTE TRADE AND ENHANCE SECURITY

For trade and commerce to flourish in the BSR, the Black Sea *must* remain free and open. Freedom of navigation is essential. That is not currently the case. Yes, trade takes place, but the war negatively affects trade and economic relations and the BSR role as a trade crossroads for millennia. Crimea under Russian control considerably increases Moscow's ability to mess with the BSR. If Russia were ever to control the entire northern littoral, part of what Putin calls "[Novorossiya](#)", it

would strangle Ukraine's maritime access to global markets; this *must not happen*. The optimum outcome for trade, economic growth and prosperity in the BSR is a demilitarized Black Sea, as was the case for a time after the Crimean War.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE U.S. STRATEGIC POSTURE IN THE BSR

The USG has many concrete political, diplomatic, military, and economic options to advance its strategic posture in the BSR. I will only mention a few here and am happy to go into more – and in more detail -- in the discussion.

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.
- Urge the EU to focus much more on the BSR, now that the Commission in May finally adopted a [Black Sea strategy](#).
- Press Allies to further reduce the flow of funds to the Russian war machine.
- Ensure 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.
- A whole-of-government USG BSR Strategy is needed.
- Revisit S.804, the [Black Sea Security Act of 2023](#), and pass a new version.
- Congress should appropriate funds explicitly for efforts related to the BSR.
- Reflect USG strategic interest in Black Sea security in the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy.
- The USG must not recognize Crimea as Russian territory.
- Prioritize relations with Romania among U.S. Black Sea Allies. Turkiye and Bulgaria are also critical Allies, but Romania is the most active on BSR issues.
- Engage vigorously with Turkiye as steward of the Montreux Convention to prevent Russia from returning its BSF to pre-war status after hostilities end.
- Revitalize USG engagement with the Three Seas Initiative (3SI).

MILITARY

- Greater U.S. military engagement with the three NATO littoral states can strengthen deterrence and “sea denial” strategy.

- Resource exportable defense packages for littoral harbors.
- Respond more resolutely to Russian provocations against NATO territory.
- U.S. investment in the Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) air base in Romania is a strategic use of U.S. taxpayer funds.
- Continue military support for Kyiv via the Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List mechanism.
- Support the NATO Mine Measures Group.
- Improve “unblinking eye” assets to enhance maritime domain awareness and develop a better Common Operating Picture.
- Direct DHS / Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency to deepen partnerships with Romanian and Bulgarian cyber centers.
- Consider conveying smaller ships to Romania that can traverse the Danube and to Bulgaria that can bolster its coastal forces.

ECONOMIC

- Implement economic and energy measures in the State 2023 Black Sea Strategy compatible with the Trump Administration’s approach to the region.
- Engage Turkiye regarding reciprocity for Russian shipping.
- Assist Romania in expanding the Danube as a transport corridor.
- Engage more robustly on the Middle Corridor to diversify trade from Russia.

There is much more that can be said on these issues, but 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. I look forward to your questions.

