



United States Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation

Hearing on “The Future of the U.S. Black Sea Strategy”

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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 US 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.¹ 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 US 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 US leadership in the region including engagement, presence, and assisting Black Sea NATO allies to further cooperation to bring unified security. If the US 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 US policy.

Strategic Importance of the Black Sea

“Wishful thinking will not keep us safe...hope is not a strategy.”² (Rutte 9 June 2025)

“We see the Black Sea being weaponized.”³ (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, 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.⁴ 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.⁵ As it relates to energy, Turkey is ramping up its flagship

¹ 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/between-now-and-nato-a-security-strategy-for-ukraine/>

² 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=IYiE82ufdHM>

³ European External Action Service, *Black Sea Strategy: Press remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas*, (Brussels, Belgium: EEAS Press Team, 2025) https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/black-sea-strategy-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas_en

⁴ 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-strategic-approach-black-sea-region_en

⁵ Grains Prices, “Black Sea Region Grain Market Analysis,” *GrainPrices*, May 9, 2025, <https://grainsprices.com/article/18924>

Sakarya natural gas field in the Black Sea.⁶ 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.⁷

Crucial to Russia's foreign policy objectives is to control the methods and means of commerce and trade in the Black Sea⁸ and unhampered access to power project to other theaters including the Middle East unto Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

⁶ 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-black-sea-gas-output-rises-2025-04-21/>

⁷ 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-green-future>

⁸ 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>

⁹ 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/comprehensive-reports/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-syria-growing-security-liability-undermining>

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ 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.¹² By air, for example, Romania is impacted regularly, by air incursions and drone sightings including drone debris.¹³ 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."¹⁴

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 large-scale vote-buying, engineering energy crises, and preparing to disrupt this past Sunday's parliamentary elections.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.

¹² 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-black-sea-strategy/02-russias-use-conflicts-black-sea-region>

¹³ "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-partner-ukraine-make-drones-under-eu-funded-defence-scheme-2025-09-26/>

¹⁴ 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-sea-report-harangozo-017-esctd>

¹⁵ 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>

¹⁶ 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>

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,¹⁷ interest in leading the brokering of a peace deal in Ukraine, and eyeing opportunities to a perceived easing of Western influences and engagement.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

Recommendations Section

- **Enable Ukraine to defend itself** providing capabilities, platforms, training, and continue programs including the ability for European allies to purchase US platforms to provide to Ukraine. These recommendations will have a far-reaching effect on the entire region increasing regional deterrence, capability, and stability.²⁰ To do that, the US should consider the following:
 - The US 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 US 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 US 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 US government efforts including programs focused on institutional capacity building, government reforms, and

¹⁷ 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-s-seizure-of-aviation-firm-motor-sich/6829005.html>

¹⁸ 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/>

¹⁹ Iulia-Sabina Joja, "Iran's growing influence in the Black Sea region: Consequences and Western responses," *Middle East Institute*, December 6, 2024, <https://mei.edu/publications/irans-growing-influence-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-new-vision-black-sea>

²⁰ 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/between-now-and-nato-a-security-strategy-for-ukraine/>

educational and exchange opportunities have the capacity to assist generational changes in Ukraine and the region.²¹

- Develop, resource, and implement **comprehensive security strategies** for the Black Sea and Russia.
 - The US 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 2024.²² 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.²³ 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 US for leadership and guidance to understand policy objectives and goals in the BSR. The US 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.

US and NATO Russia strategies

- Hand in glove to well drafted and resourced Black Sea and Ukraine strategies is a US/Russia policy. It is time to develop a comprehensive and clear strategy and objectives related to the US 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.”²⁴ But at the 2025 Hague Summit, there was no mention in the communique, and no strategy has been

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

²² 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>

²³ *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

²⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Washington Summit Declaration*, (Washington, DC: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm

delivered to the alliance.²⁵ NATO work on these issues and policies should continue.

- Channel **US leadership to take full advantage of momentum and resources** to enable Black Sea allies and partners to cohesively and collaboratively work towards 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,²⁶ 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.²⁷ But there is concern the deluge of opportunities will result in lack clarity, efficiency, and cohesion. US 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.²⁸ 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

²⁵ 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

²⁶ 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-defence-readiness-2030_en

²⁷ European Union, "*SAFE | Security Action for Europe*," (European Union, July 2025) https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/safe-security-action-europe_en

²⁸ 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>

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.