

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Sub-Committee on Europe and Regional Security
Senator Steve Daines, Chair
Senator Chris Murphy, Ranking Member

THE BLACK SEA

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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 US 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 control 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, the 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.