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Cooperation Under Pressure: International Organizations and Black Sea Security

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Introduction

In an increasingly fragile security and political environment, the Black Sea has emerged as a critical geostrategic hub for the West, owing to its role as a connective corridor between Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The region's significance is further heightened by the persistent political volatility within several of its littoral and adjacent states, manifested through ongoing armed conflicts, unresolved territorial disputes, hybrid threats, democratic backsliding, and growing authoritarian entanglements. These dynamics contribute to regional instability and generate profound uncertainties for international actors such as NATO, the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), all of which maintain economic and security interests in the wider area. Since the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea has witnessed the densest concentration of military confrontations in Europe, culminating in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war ([Hess 2022](#)).

The Black Sea region holds profound geopolitical, economic, and strategic importance for regional and global actors. Its location makes it a vital transit zone for energy, trade, and military movements. As a maritime multiplier corridor, it offers the shortest route for connecting the landlocked



countries of Central Asia with global markets. This connectivity enhances the Black Sea's role as a critical hub in the East-West and North-South corridors, especially for energy supplies and transport networks.

From a security perspective, the region has become a focal point in the power struggle between Russia and the West. The significance of the Black Sea for Europe has increased, particularly since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which shifted the regional security balance due to Russia's massive military buildup in the region ([Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Kandelaki 2022](#)). Russia's expansion in the Black Sea region not only violates Ukraine's territorial integrity but also reflects broader strategic ambitions to project power into the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa. This assertive posture carries significant implications for European security, threatens the sovereignty of other post-Soviet states, and poses direct

security challenges to the countries of the Black Sea basin, including NATO members and EU states. Hence, the Black Sea has become a new frontline in geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. Simultaneously, the region holds significant economic and strategic value, offering Europe potential access to Central Asian energy resources and broader Asian markets.

Moreover, Russia's military dominance and China's expanding economic presence in the Black Sea challenge Europe's security and undermine economic and energy stability, particularly amid efforts to reduce dependence on China and severed ties with Russia. In this context, the Black Sea has several vital functions in Russian maritime strategy. In particular, it is the world's second-largest oil exporter, with "22% shipments coming through Black Sea loading points like the Novorossiysk Commercial Sea Port" (Black and Kaushal 2025). Apart from this, Russia also has agriculture and fertilizer export interests, to facilitate export through the Black Sea, increase its role in the market, and consequently to cut Ukraine from the global market and undermine Ukraine's not only food export ability but its economic sustainability as well.

Moreover, the Black Sea is a key arena where the strategic ambitions of Türkiye and Russia intersect—sometimes in cooperation, often in competition. Both countries view the region as a sphere of influence, essential to their national security, economic ambitions, and geopolitical status. Cooperation with Türkiye is crucial for Russia in this process due to its monopoly on overseeing the "access to the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus Straits", and it is a NATO

country (Meister 2025). However, the relationship with Türkiye is not simple due to their continuous strategic contestations in different regions, including the South Caucasus (de Waal 2025).

As a result, Europe is rethinking its security architecture, one of the parts of which is the Black Sea. However, the efforts might be ineffective in the fragmented and uncoordinated approaches of the EU, NATO, and other regional organizations. Such a complicated geopolitical environment needs a new multidimensional approach from state and non-state actors to maintain regional sustainability (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). To reach that goal, there is a need for coordination and cooperation of states of the wider Black Sea region and international actors to optimize their engagement in the region, which is not easy due to their different objectives and visions.

Role of Different International Organizations in the Black Sea Security

International actors have a specific role in the Black Sea region, but some objectives overlap. NATO's engagement in Black Sea security stems from the region's strategic role as a geopolitical and connectivity hub linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The presence of NATO member states such as Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria, alongside close partners like Ukraine and Georgia, further elevates its significance. In response to Russia's growing militarization and assertiveness, particularly after the

annexation of Crimea, NATO seeks to enhance regional stability, safeguard freedom of navigation, and support its allies and partners through increased presence, cooperation, and deterrence measures (NATO 2021).

As for the EU, it contributes to the Black Sea security through economic and institutional resilience. However, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was forced to expand its sphere of operation from economic to a security dimension. EU's security initiatives, such as the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the EU Maritime Security Strategy, and the Global Gateway, were addressed by developing the new Black Sea Synergy initiative ([EEAS 2024](#)).

As for the role of the OSCE in the Black Sea region, it covers the security matters linked with the political, military, economic, environmental and human rights and can implement crisis, confidence and peace building initiatives, however some of the experts heavily criticize its effectivity during the crisis after starting the Russian war in Ukraine and even before that. On the other hand, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) focuses on a multilateral political-economic environment and aims for peace, stability, and prosperity in the region ([COE 2021](#)). Some of the missions of these organizations coincide with each other. However, a lack of joint efforts in practice hampers resilience-building and crisis management in the region.

Engagement of NATO in the Black Sea Region

NATO's security strategy scale expanded in 2022 due to the Russo-Ukraine war, and the NATO Strategic Concept 2022 stresses the importance of the Black Sea beyond the Baltic Sea and the Western Balkans. Even before that, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, a naval force (Black Sea Rotational Force – BSRF) was created, and the air defence of the eastern “frontline countries” was strengthened for collective defence via shared security duties, tasks, and threat management ([Szenes 2023](#)). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, resulting into blockades of the Black Sea ports and taking several cities along the coastline under control, disturbance to commercial navigation, attacks from the sea, militarization of Russian occupied Crimea and Abkhazia created the necessity of more adequate presence of the NATO in the Black Sea region (Kakachia, Lebanidze and Kandelaki 2022). However, there is still no separate comprehensive strategy of NATO towards this region ([Szenes 2023](#)), even though one of the key issues on the agenda at the NATO Summit 2024 was addressing the threats emanating from the Black Sea region ([Joja 2024](#)).

NATO Allied presence in the Black Sea region through naval patrols, air policing missions, and military exercises has grown over the past few years ([NATO-EU InfoCenter 2025](#)). Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey have jointly launched a trilateral demining initiative in the Black Sea to enhance maritime safety and security. In addition, all three countries have played a role in

facilitating the export of Ukrainian grain, helping to maintain global food supply chains disrupted by the war. Moreover, in 2022, Allies established multinational battlegroups for Bulgaria (led by Italy) and Romania (led by France), increased BSR air policing, and pledged new defense plans that include an increase of high-readiness NATO troops from 40,000 to 300,000 (NATO-EU InfoCenter 2025).

NATO's cooperation with partner states like Ukraine and Georgia included joint military training and engagement in some missions. NATO has a Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine and a Substantial Package for Georgia, which should be boosted with more complex and comprehensive military educational cooperation. Moreover, a specific assistance package should also be developed for Moldova, whose vulnerability increases (NATO-EU InfoCenter 2025). NATO also created new tools in response to hybrid and cyber threats (NATO 2023) and a new concept providing overarching guidance for fighting information threats within the Alliance and in the partner states ([NATO 2024](#)).

EU's Engagement in the Black Sea Region

It is essential to coordinate the EU and NATO Black Sea policies in a strategically coherent and closely coordinated manner, which is not yet in place ([Saari 2024](#)). The EU's approach towards the Black Sea is described in the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) initiative launched in 2007, aiming at development, identifying and supporting the needs, priorities, and aims of regional partners ([EEAS 2024](#)).

Despite the war in Ukraine, according to the 2024 BSS annual report, activities under the Black Sea Synergy have been successfully implemented in all its fields, namely: integrated maritime policy and sustainable blue economy; fisheries and aquaculture; environmental protection and climate change; cross-border cooperation - Black Sea basin program 2014-2020, (Interreg VI - B) NEXT Black Sea basin program; civil society engagement, democracy and human rights; education, research and innovation (beyond the marine sector), culture and tourism; and energy and transport ([EEAS 2024](#)). The EU's monitoring missions as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy, as well as cooperation in the European Assistance Program for strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and economic reforms, are also notable in the Black Sea states. The EU's financial and diplomatic sanctions over Russia are also a tangible step in support of Ukraine, EU candidate and partner states in the wider Black Sea region.

In 2025, the European Commission launched a call to support the development of a new Joint Communication, outlining the EU's strategic approach to the Black Sea, prioritizing enhancing security, stability, and resilience in the region ([European Commission 2025](#)). The recently adopted new EU strategy for a secure, prosperous, and resilient Black Sea region ([European Commission 2025](#)) is built around three pillars: a) Enhancing security and resilience, b) Promoting sustainable economic growth, c) Advancing environmental protection and climate preparedness.

To support these goals, the EU plans to implement three flagship initiatives:

a) *Black Sea Maritime Security and Hub*: Enhances maritime safety, protects infrastructure and the environment, and fosters regional cooperation, including demining efforts. b) *Connectivity Agenda*: Develops transport, energy, and digital links, positioning the region as a key corridor between Europe and Central Asia. c) *Community and Blue Economy Preparedness*: Strengthens the ability of coastal areas to address environmental damage, adapt to climate risks, and support sustainable development. Moreover, by investing in and deepening key mutually beneficial partnerships, the EU aims to strengthen cooperation with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, while advancing regional collaboration on connectivity. Since the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and its readiness to invest in support of Ukraine via heightened defence of the Black Sea region, the EU can demonstrate commitment to countering Russian influence by planning high-level visits in the strategic maritime locations (Simeonova 2024).

Role of OSCE in the Black Sea

The OSCE security definition includes three key elements: political-military dimension, economic and environmental dimension, and human dimension that consists of the rule of law, democratization, and elections (OSCE 2009). These dimensions are applied in the Black Sea regional states where OSCE operates (*Kakachia, Malerius, and Meister 2024*).

The OSCE Minsk Group managed

Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and OSCE Monitoring Mission was established in the Ukrainian counterparts to form Normandy Group for finding peaceful resolution in Ukraine after Russia annexed Crimea that produced the Minsk protocol in 2014 and in both cases the OSCE involvement is not assessed as successful contribution (*OSCE 2023*). OSCE missions are primarily involved in election monitoring through the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) mechanism, in confidence-building and conflict prevention initiatives, even in the Transnistria disputed region of Moldova.

In general, OSCE, which has experienced a form of institutional identity crisis in recent years, continues to encompass all states within the broader regional framework, particularly when compared to other regional organizations such as the European Union and NATO. However, despite its inclusive membership and comprehensive security mandate, the OSCE is not regarded as a central actor in regional geopolitics. Its perceived marginalization stems partly from limited enforcement capabilities, internal political divisions among member states, and its consensus-based decision-making process, which often hinders timely and decisive action. The OSCE also suffers from a structural deficiency in enforcement mechanisms and lacks effective instruments for persuading or holding its participating states accountable for violating its principles. Constrained by its consensus-based decision-making and limited mandate, the organization can often not move beyond monitoring, reporting, and issuing statements. As a result, its responses to serious breaches

of international norms and democratic standards frequently appear restrained or even conciliatory. This perceived inability to impose meaningful consequences has sometimes rendered the OSCE's statements akin to appeals for appeasement rather than assertive diplomatic interventions, undermining its credibility and diminishing its prestige as a regional security actor.

Presence of the BSEC Format in the Region

BSEC mainly promotes the economic cooperation of the regional states and facilitates the involvement of the strategic external actors in the regional economic development in the energy security, trading, environmental protection, science and technology, and fighting against crime (BSEC 2021). Apart from this, BSEC is essentially developing sectoral cooperation between its member states, including emergency response and resilience against non-conventional threats (Tzounis 2020).

Topic-wise, BSEC could have a possible synergy with the NATO's and EU's approaches regarding the elimination and prevention of the foreign information manipulations and cyber threats. However, because of the tensions between the member states, mainly due to the involvements of Russia in this format, this has not yet been possible (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2020). Therefore, its role in the time of the wars and conflicts is not that effective, which was well reflected in the responses of the expert surveys in Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. BSEC, alongside OSCE, were seen as having

the least positive role in strengthening the Black Sea security (Kakachia et al 2022).

However, while BSEC's role in traditional security remains limited, its economic, environmental, and cooperative security contributions are increasingly significant in shaping a stable and integrated Black Sea region after the war. Although it lacks a hard security mandate, BSEC can still play a meaningful role in contributing to Black Sea security in the post-Ukraine war context through soft security measures and confidence-building initiatives.

Conclusion

The security and resilience of the Black Sea region are indispensable components of European and Euro-Atlantic stability. As geopolitical competition intensifies, marked by Russia's aggression, China's economic assertiveness, and internal fragmentation among regional actors, the need for coordinated, strategic, and multidimensional engagement has become more urgent than ever. NATO, the EU, the OSCE, and other stakeholders must move beyond fragmented initiatives and work toward a comprehensive and coherent approach that addresses traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Revitalizing multilateral frameworks, particularly the BSEC, fosters long-term regional stability and enables economic cooperation. At the same time, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening hybrid and cyber threat responses, enhancing resilience, and supporting vulnerable partner states like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Repairing and recalibrating relations with Türkiye, given its pivotal role as a NATO member and a gatekeeper of maritime access, is equally crucial. The deepening cooperation between the EU, NATO, and the US with Türkiye could be a cornerstone of a more effective Black Sea strategy. The EU, in particular, must recognize the Black Sea not as a peripheral space but as a core element of its security architecture. A renewed vision for partnership with member states and associated countries in the region is imperative.

Addressing the Black Sea's complex and interconnected challenges requires more than isolated national responses. A comprehensive, collaborative, and forward-looking vision is essential, one that prioritizes resilience, inclusive governance, sustainable development, and a renewed commitment to regional peace and security.

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In addition to numerous journal articles, policy papers, and media contributions, he is co-editor of *Georgia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Challenges for a Small State* (I.B. Tauris, 2021), as well as *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders* (Springer, 2024), which explores the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea region.

Professor Kakachia regularly contributes to academic and policy discussions on regional security and EU foreign policy, engaging with international research networks and contributing to policy dialogues on Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration.



The Black Sea region has long been a focal point of geopolitical competition, shaped by historical rivalries, strategic interests, and evolving security dynamics. In recent years, the region has witnessed growing instability due to escalating tensions, hybrid threats, and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These developments have not only disrupted regional security but have also posed broader challenges to the European and transatlantic security order. Given NATO's strategic interest in the region, a comprehensive reassessment of security frameworks is necessary to address emerging threats and enhance regional stability.

SecureBlackSea seeks to examine and propose a future security architecture for the wider Black Sea region, aligning with NATO's evolving strategic priorities. Through an in-depth analysis of existing security structures, regional conflicts, and cooperation mechanisms, it aims to provide evidence-based insights into key threats and potential policy responses. A particular focus will be placed on the intersection of conventional military threats, hybrid warfare, economic security, and geopolitical rivalries, recognizing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of regional security challenges.

The project activities include expert workshops, field research, and data-driven assessments. It will evaluate the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks and NATO's role in shaping stability in the region. In collaboration with policymakers, security experts, and academic institutions, the project team will facilitate policy dialogues and strategic foresight discussions to identify pathways for strengthening regional security cooperation. These efforts will result in the development of comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional resilience and fostering a more cooperative security environment.

The expected outcomes of this initiative include a thorough assessment of regional security threats, a set of actionable policy recommendations, and strengthened dialogue between NATO and regional stakeholders. By producing analytical reports and policy briefs, the project will contribute to an informed security discourse and provide practical solutions for mitigating risks in the region. By fostering collaboration between academic and policy communities, it will support long-term strategic planning and resilience-building efforts.

SecureBlackSea aspires to provide a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving security landscape in the Black Sea region. It will offer insights that can guide NATO's strategic engagement in the region. Thus, it aims to contribute to a more stable, secure, and cooperative Black Sea security environment in the face of emerging geopolitical complexities.

