

# Towards a Strategic Respite in the Black Sea Area

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## **Introduction**

In this brief paper I will try to analyze whether the Black Sea may acquire a meaningful place in the international relations of Eurasia. While there are very few reasons to treat the Black Sea region as a promising construct in an economic, strategic, or ideational sense, the notion of Black Sea regionalization has had the capacity to attract a significant amount of attention from both U.S. and local policymakers, due to a coincidence of short-term interests related to the creation of a zone of stability bordering Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Moreover, given the virtual absence of serious revisionism over the status quo, virtually all great and small actors around the Black Sea are interested in what I would call a "strategic respite." This gives the region a chance to become a hub for short-term regional cooperation.

## **The Black Sea as a Region – Pros and Cons of Cooperation**

It is very difficult to argue that the Black Sea region is likely to reach an advanced level of international cooperation. There may be some grounds for optimism in terms of regional trade, but there are also significant barriers to such cooperation. In the first place, there is no hegemonic power that is ready to provide the public good necessary for creating the structures of cooperation. Second, there is very little shared cultural or ideological basis upon which to build such structures. Third, major regional states are looking elsewhere for the purposes of economic integration, mostly towards the European Union, but not necessarily towards each other. Finally, and perhaps

most importantly, regional states are preoccupied with mitigating different security threats in order to create meaningful long-term cooperative structures for enhancing their respective national securities.

These predicaments are compounded by the absence of any cooperative institutional structures that would buttress their interaction. The only existing arrangement, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), is too widely stretched and diverse to effectively manage regional cooperation. Not only are multilateral institutions absent or largely ineffective, critical bilateral relations are also in disarray: Russian-Ukrainian and, particularly, Russian-Georgian relations are worsening. Also, Turkey's strategic cooperation with Georgia (and the United States) is under strain in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008.

Despite the lack of obvious imperatives for regional cooperation, the Black Sea region may become a hub of cooperative regional interaction in the short-term, based on an increased need for stability and regional predictability by states in the region. Moreover, the United States may use the notion of regional cooperation to restore its regional standing in the Middle East and the southern tier of the former Soviet Union (the Caucasus and Central Asia). The confluence of these rationales for creating a cooperative environment around the Black Sea may lead the United States and regional states to increase efforts at enhancing bilateral and multilateral ties across the Black Sea.

## **U.S. Policy in the Region: Regaining Hegemony Through Multilateralism**

During U.S. President George W. Bush's last term in office, a largely rhetorical policy of democracy promotion replaced the emphasis on energy transportation prevalent under Bill Clinton. The next administration is likely to encounter numerous challenges in the Caucasus and Central Asia, including declining security cooperation with Russia, further backsliding on democracy in local states, the deterioration of the security environment in Central Asia following mounting difficulties in Afghanistan, the erosion of the U.S. strategic partnership with Turkey, and the weakening of the most trusted U.S. partners - Ukraine and Georgia.

Thus, the next U.S. administration is likely to inherit a challenging environment for U.S. interests, as well as no coherent policy towards the Caucasus and Central Asia. Under conditions of scarce resources, the new president will face a dilemma of either continuing efforts of expanding American influence further into Central Asia in search of energy security or consolidating existing relations with key regional allies and partners around the Black Sea. If the next U.S. administration chooses the latter, it may consider revitalizing relations with Turkey and further strengthening Ukraine and Georgia as strategic partners in the region, thus consolidating the base for future expansion into Central Asia. For this purpose, the provision of more regional hegemony (even if under conditions of scarce resources) may be a

worthwhile decision.

More broadly, it is likely that the United States will adopt a more multilateral approach in its foreign relations, including the Black Sea area. Recent turbulence in U.S. bilateral ties with regional states (most prominently Turkey and Russia) constrains U.S. capabilities to carry out any more ambitious plans in either the Middle East or Central Asia. The Black Sea region seems to be a natural point of departure for rebuilding multilateralism.

## **Rationales for Cooperation for the Regional States – Stability and Predictability**

Besides the United States, regional states are also interested in at least short-term stability around the Black Sea. Russia has been doubly hit by international ostracism and the recent financial crisis, after which it may need to recover its international standing as well as seek other avenues of international cooperation. Enhanced cooperation in the Black Sea would dispel some of the fears about Russia, as the region involves the most volatile Russian neighbors (Ukraine and Georgia), as well as Russia's major partners (the EU and Turkey). Moreover, the failure of the color revolutions to spread must have produced a cooling effect for Moscow and shifted its attention to less "zero-sum" areas of interaction with the West than ideological battles (such as economic relations or even regional security cooperation).

Turkey's foreign relations have been strained by recent U.S.-Russia and EU-Russia controversies, as well as the crisis in Georgia. The restoration of some form of cooperation in the Black Sea, involving Russia, the United States, and the EU, would bring the traditional Turkish policy of simultaneously engaging different and disparate actors to its desired equilibrium.

Ukraine and Georgia, in the absence of a clear time horizon for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, are looking for new international structures that would, on the one hand, make Russia a bit more predictable and, on the other hand, would enhance these countries' prospects of integration within Western economic and security structures. The Black Sea dialogue may provide an alternative for immediate NATO membership and help Ukraine to manage its imminent crisis with Russia over the status of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. For Georgia, in the absence of ideological commitments from the United States and strategic disregard from the EU, the Black Sea remains the only viable way of promoting a "pro-Western" foreign policy.

Bulgaria and Romania may benefit from new cooperation in the Black Sea as this would give them a new transit function linking Europe to the wider Central Asia, especially considering the distant but still credible prospect of gas pipelines running from Central Asia to the EU. As for the broader EU, Black Sea cooperation would add to the existing network of multiple regional agreements to safeguard European energy and security interests.

## **A Way Out of Georgia's Strategic Predicament**

Russian military intervention in the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has highlighted the fact that these formerly "frozen conflicts" are *de facto* Russian-Georgian conflict areas. This recognition indicates an urgent need for both countries to settle their recently tumultuous relationship on the basis of an enduring security pact, guaranteed by third parties.

Much like the beginning of the Cold War 60 years ago, it is now commonly assumed that recent Russian assertiveness toward the post-Soviet space reflects the Kremlin's decision to regain control of its lost areas of influence. In fact, Russian politicians may be motivated by their own perceived security concerns, namely: (1) the stability of Putin's regime, and (2) the resurgence of militant separatism in the North Caucasus and elsewhere, threatening, again, Putin's grip on power.

Both of these threats, as perceived by ruling circles in Moscow, have been directly related to Georgia as a revolutionary pro-Western country bordering the North Caucasus that proved to be an awkward partner in Putin's war in Chechnya. It is also evident that the Kremlin sees NATO and the United States as prime potential troublemakers, who operate from behind Georgia.

What can be done to address Russian fears and insecurities and, at the same time, contribute to Georgian security as well as the peaceful resolution of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia? A potential Russian engagement in the Black Sea security dialogue could create a forum for establishing a Russian-Georgian security pact, backed by the United States, regional countries, and, potentially, the EU.

Such a pact could alleviate fears on both sides. It would guarantee (1) Georgian independence and sovereignty; (2) the stability of the Russian North Caucasus; (3) definition of the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the peaceful and secure return of refugees (under international guarantees). The United States, Turkey, and European states could become the guarantors of this security pact, restraining both Georgia and Russia from repeating the August 2008 scenario. Possible legal guarantees of the pact may range from the potential neutrality of Georgia to international peacekeeping in conflict areas.

It is the right time for the Georgian leadership to realize there is no escape from their country's regional security predicament. What creates both short- and long-term security threats to Georgia is the actual and potential instability on the northern and southern slopes of the Caucasus. Rather than trying to extract itself from its regional setting by joining elusive European and transatlantic structures, Georgia's policies should be directed toward cooperative efforts with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, with the involvement of outside powers, to prevent the spillover effects of ethnopolitical conflicts in the region.

Despite numerous efforts to create such a regional security arrangement, none has yet to emerge. The obvious reasons behind this failure have been the

absence of a single regional hegemon and of common threats and resources, as well as the difficulty of bringing all disparate and contradictory issues into a single overarching solution. However, the potential multilateral Black Sea security dialogue, with most interested parties involved and a focus on a Russian-Georgian security pact, could give a plausible start to security management on a wider regional level.

## **Conclusion: Assessing the Prospects of Black Sea Regional Cooperation**

The convergence of short-term interests between the United States and the Black Sea littoral states for promoting regional stability may compensate for the absence of institutional structures and immediate economic incentives. The objectives of security, energy, and stability through democratization may bring most of the regional states to the same table, at least until the next round of regional competition takes off. The Black Sea region may become a hub of stability by default, providing a buffer between the Middle East, Europe, and Russia, with the consented hegemony of the United States, in conjunction with the EU and NATO. It is unlikely that such cooperation will resolve some of the most pressing problems of the region, such as the conflicts in Georgia or Turkey, but it may provide an institutionalized forum for discussion that would enhance predictability, which remains a serious challenge for all regional states. The Black Sea has not yet formed into a security complex, which leaves opportunities for constructing a security community in this area.

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