

The Role of the United States in the Black Sea Region

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Characteristics of the Black Sea Region

The Black Sea region stands out among the numerous regional and sub-regional structures that exist today. It includes Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine; not all these states border the Black Sea but all take an active part in the cooperative processes in the region, including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). The region also possesses the several distinguishing features, some of which are longstanding and others that reflect current trends and global and regional changes:

- It is situated in an area of the world that divides or, depending on one's outlook, connects different cultures, civilizations, continents, and geopolitical regions.
- It is characterized by a great degree of openness to several neighboring areas, namely the Mediterranean, Balkan, and Caspian regions. This openness creates problems in defining the nature of the region, as well as its borders, as is already shown by the development of the terms "Black-Caspian Seas region" and the "Black-Mediterranean Seas region." The whole idea of a cross-continental Baltic-Black Sea zone of security still exists, even with the second wave of NATO expansion under way.
- It is becoming an operational field for several regional organizations functioning in the spheres of security, economics, and politics, including the BSEC, NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Collective Security Treaty, and GUUAM Group (a political, economic, and strategic alliance comprised of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova).
- The region is prone, or at least has the potential to be prone to conflict. Several conflict hot spots—Transdnister, the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh, and instability in the Northern Caucasus, including the Chechen case—are located there. Currently, most of these areas are not involved in heated conflict, but could explode in the future.

- The Black Sea region has increased in importance in recent years thanks to the emergence of potential new pipeline transit routes that would transport energy resources from the Caspian area and Central Asia. The security situation in the region will depend to some extent on the energy transportation options selected.
- The Black Sea region is in close proximity to areas of special interest to the United States—the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

Currently, the Black Sea region is characterized by heightened dynamics and ongoing changes. A power vacuum has brought about a security vacuum in the region. Both stabilization and destabilization are possible scenarios for the future. Although the countries in the region are relatively weak, the active presence of influential outside powers could serve as a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of a stable regional system.

The list of security problems in the Black Sea region is long and complex. These problems are related to the fields of both hard and soft security. In addition to traditional issues of relationships between the military forces in the region, for example, these weak states are also a source of insecurity, have seen slow progress in economic reforms, undemocratic trends in domestic politics, environmental degradation, illegal migration, trafficking of women, and drug and weapons smuggling. These problems must be dealt with urgently, because they will worsen if not countered. Clearly, these issues are of significance not only to the countries within the region, but also to any other power that becomes involved in the area.

Making Advances Toward the Region

It is no secret that the United States wasted much time elaborating a new post–Cold War foreign policy strategy. Even further difficulties were faced in creating a conceptual background for specific regional dimensions in U.S. foreign policy. The Black Sea region remained a peripheral concern of the major powers during the Cold War, having lacked strategic significance in the context of the rivalry of the two superpowers. Thus, very few preconditions existed for this region to become a priority for U.S. foreign policy. The region has remained on the sidelines for some time, with only a few issues receiving attention from scholars. Recently, the United States has begun to implement a more broadly focused foreign policy that recognizes the importance of this area of the world.

Today, the Black Sea region is even more important due to the view of the Bush administration that support for U.S. policy must be obtained from all corners of the world to achieve U.S. goals. Although the concept of the spread of U.S. influence throughout the world has been discussed for a long time, it is only now that this idea is truly being implemented. The world has witnessed the United States take action in the Balkans, execute military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and deploy military instructors to Georgia. The U.S. view of international security has changed drastically since the events of September 11, 2001, brought to fruition a situation that some have termed the “arch of instability.” It is now becoming obvious that it is impossible for the United States to control the situations in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and remain an

influential player in the Transcaucasus and Caspian regions, without becoming involved in the Black Sea area.

U.S. Leverage and How To Use It

The United States can use several different levers of power to influence security developments in the Black Sea region. This memo will focus on the following methods:

- implementing a direct military presence in the region;
- taking action through political-military structures such as NATO;
- politically influencing the countries in the region; and
- U.S. investment in the region, actively supported and promoted by the U.S. government.

Military Leverage

From the military perspective, the United States has stayed out of the region, having deployed its military only to Georgia, and even then, only sending a small number of instructors. The United States has, however, developed bilateral military cooperation with a number of states. Ukraine is a perfect example. Although many problems have developed in the relationship between Washington and Kyiv, military cooperation between the two countries has continued.

The U.S. military has taken part in numerous exercises in the Black Sea region, including “Sea Breeze” and “Cooperative Partner.” This cooperation has been paralleled by a more active NATO mission in the region. Indeed, the consolidation of the southeastern flank of NATO is not yet complete and will be possible only through the alliance’s involvement in the Black Sea region. This does not mean simply admitting new members such as Bulgaria and Romania, but would also require actively engaging other powers such as Ukraine and Russia.

The Black Sea region holds practical importance for the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, considering the fact that the southern flank is the largest concern of this treaty. It should be noted that the Black Sea area is a convenient base for the United States and/or NATO forces in their projection of power in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans. It plays an even more significant role in the plans for countering the possibility of aggressive behavior by the Russian Federation. This may appear quite a remote possibility, but should not be excluded as a worst-case scenario for which the military must always be prepared.

Political Leverage

Working in the political sphere with the countries of the Black Sea region has become another promising method for the United States to remain involved, allowing the United States to maintain influence in the area without maintaining a physical presence. This strategy might require more money in some cases, but at the same time, offers fewer risks and agrees with U.S. interests as the United States is dedicated to aiding countries in their development of democracy.

U.S. interests require that the United States continue to seek out partners in the Black Sea region, especially those who desire to work with the United States. A diverse group of regional allies should be carefully constructed. The recent Iraqi crisis shows that one of the major U.S. allies in the region, Turkey, can no longer be viewed as a completely loyal and reliable ally and cannot be the sole U.S. partner in the region. In addition, Romania and Bulgaria, as 2004 NATO aspirants, and Georgia cannot serve this role for the United States. Ukraine, on the other hand, although currently preoccupied with various domestic and international problems, is the only country in the region that possesses the potential to become a major channel of U.S. influence.

It is significant that many countries of the region desire a closer relationship with the United States. They are looking for many benefits from the United States, including financial assistance, security guarantees and, often, U.S. assistance in easing their dependence on Russia, hence ensuring that Russia will not return to being the dominant power in the area.

Economic Leverage

The economic interests of large U.S. corporations are not to be forgotten as one of the driving forces behind U.S. policy toward the Black Sea region. U.S. policy is certainly not dependent on the big business interests, but an undeniable link between the two does exist. The U.S. government not only serves the interests of corporations, corporations also promote U.S. interests in the region. This is in part because U.S. businesses are interested in regional stability because it provides them with new markets and allows them to utilize additional means of transferring energy supplies to the West. The diversification of energy supply sources could be seen as one of the main U.S. goals in the region, because the United States desperately wants to end its reliance on the Middle East and Russia for energy.

The Crimea

The issue of Crimea retains its significance for regional security and, as such, should not be neglected by the United States in constructing its regional policy. In the past, Washington has dealt with this region in a delicate manner. It has properly assumed that the solution to the “Crimean issue” is directly linked to the overall security of the region and, indirectly, to U.S. interests there. Crimea still has the potential to become a very unstable area, and thus the Crimean issue has not yet been resolved. The United States greatly desires to prevent a worst possible scenario from coming to fruition there. A conflict in Crimea would have a tremendous impact on surrounding areas and would undoubtedly endanger U.S. interests in the region

First, the status of Crimea and inter-ethnic relations there are of pivotal importance, given that many in the peninsula and around the region would use any change in Crimea’s status and orientation as a model for a solution to their own disputes. Second, the fact that both the Russian and Ukrainian navies are located in Crimea has a clear impact on the military situation in the region. Third, the future of Crimea is closely related to the future of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Clearly, the United States very much desires that these relations are constructive and peaceful.

Balance of Power, Collective Security, or Something Else?

Choices for the United States

There is always a broad spectrum of conceptual approaches toward forming regional security structures. This is true in the case of the security of the Black Sea region. There are, in fact, certain difficulties associated with constructing a regional security mechanism. These problems could be attributed to the lack of a coherent theoretical approach in the region, which has caused the actors to move in contradictory directions and to have conflicting goals. From this point of view, the approach in the Black Sea region much more closely resembles a system of collective security than one of balance of power. The prospect of having a collective security system in place in the region is a favorable development, and the BSEC has been working to try to aid and expedite its creation. However, the region is not yet at the point where this system can be successful, and thus, this should be a goal for the future instead.

Under current circumstances, a balance of power system would work much more effectively. The region has experienced many changes in the past century, and hence efforts to view regional developments in the context of outdated assumptions must be avoided. The situation in the region is much more complicated than when it was simply dominated by power struggles between Russia and Turkey. Today, Russian-Turkish relations are still significant for the region, but are only one of many important factors. One of these many additional factors to consider is the growing impact of other outside powers. Among these, the United States occupies a special role.

The U.S. government must take a position vis-à-vis the contemporary power struggle between Russia and Turkey. It could limit its role to working with both of these regional superpowers while keeping its distance from the region, thus choosing not to actively intervene. Another possibility is that the United States could realize the benefits of two competing regional blocs within the region, keeping each other's power in check, and thus allowing the United States to play the role of the honest power broker. However, there is one more option that would better serve both U.S. interests and regional security. This would be for the United States to prevent a rigid division of spheres of influence from taking place, and instead to promote a more even distribution of power. This approach would naturally require a more active role for the United States.

U.S. policy in the region could also be performed on a bilateral or multilateral level. One approach would be to reach out to the most significant states in the region. Using multilateral avenues, such as U.S.-Russia-Ukraine or U.S.-Russia-Turkey cooperation, is another promising possibility. Whichever scheme is chosen, there will be a strong need for Washington to have a comprehensive, all-embracing, and integrated regional policy in place. Such a policy would require coordination with U.S. allies in Europe. The Iraqi crisis has shown that the U.S. government's interests and approaches could differ from those of even its closest allies in Europe. A lack of coordination would likely lead to the failure of attempts to construct a viable security regime in the Black Sea region.

The current debate in the United States on U.S. foreign policy is far from over. Disputes are continuing between the hawks and moderates, isolationists and interventionists, proponents of unilateral approaches and those who favor multilateral

approaches, and adherents of selective commitment and those who support U.S. action throughout the globe. The current U.S. administration is comprised of individuals who defend the ideas of democratic imperialism and traditional conservatism. Choosing its own foreign policy path is obviously the United States' right. Whichever path is chosen, however, the United States must pay more attention to strengthening security in the Black Sea region and hence must work more closely with the countries in the area. Neglecting to do so would hurt both the United States and the people of the region significantly.

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