Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region

By Fatih Ulger

Terrorism has pushed the Black Sea from the periphery to the center of Western attention and underscored the lack of a coherent Euro-Atlantic strategy for the region. During the Cold War, the Black Sea region marked one stretch of the frontline between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and was dominated by an uneasy peace. Today, this region is a major crossroads for energy and commerce, as well as criminal and terrorist activity. Yet strategic gaps in the Balkans and the Black Sea region threaten to perpetuate instability because of problems of separatism and potential state failure. This situation, coupled with lingering questions regarding the EU’s and NATO’s geographic scopes, has challenged the international institutional frameworks in which the Black Sea will ultimately be anchored.

Today, three out of six littoral states—Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania—are members of NATO. Ukraine and Georgia are active participants in NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, and they have at different times declared their interest in joining the alliance. Russia, while opposed to further NATO expansion in the region, is developing its own security relationship with the organization. The enlargement of NATO and the EU raises serious questions regarding Euro-Atlantic strategy toward the Black Sea region. However, opening Europe’s eastern doors brings the problems of the Black Sea area to the fore in Europe and challenges the Euro-Atlantic goals of a free, prosperous, and secure continent. A clear signal from Brussels is needed in order to maintain confidence in the Black Sea states’ future within these structures.

This paper takes a closer look at this region’s geopolitical dynamics and explores the competing interests and roles of important actors. After discussing the major security frameworks in operation, this article proposes some possible alternatives for a Euro-Atlantic Strategy that would facilitate greater stability in the Black Sea region.

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The Black Sea Security Environment

The end of the Cold War has brought some positive changes to the security environment of the Black Sea region. The prominent trends in the region include a decrease in the level of militarization, the development of military confidence-building measures, improved trust, and joint initiatives aimed at enhancing regional stability and security. Economic growth and increased economic cooperation among states in the region have curbed military rivalries and improved the overall regional security situation. With economic transition and economic growth throughout the former Soviet bloc, commercial traffic across, in, and out of the Black Sea has increased dramatically. Two pipelines built in the 1990s—one from Baku, Azerbaijan, and another from Northern Kazakhstan—pump Caspian oil to Black Sea ports in Georgia and Russia, where it is carried by tankers to markets in Europe and elsewhere; and the Blue Stream underwater gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey opened officially in November 2005.

Despite these developments, the Black Sea region still contains potential security threats. Growing Russian ambitions, unresolved regional conflicts, proliferation of new security threats, lack of security for energy transportation, and the internal weakness of the Black Sea states are of prime concern inside and outside the region. Yet the Black Sea zone has more unresolved armed conflicts than any other region in the new Euro-Atlantic perimeter. The tenuous relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a result of the unsettled conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh continue to pose a threat to the stability of the area. Georgia’s struggle with the secessionist movements of Abkhazia and South Ossetia renders Tbilisi unable to control nearly 18 percent of the country. Russia’s enduring tension with Chechnya and the North Caucasus threatens stability in the Russian Federation. Finally, the territorial integrity of Moldova is still being challenged by the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Republic.

These conflicts continue to pose the biggest threat to security and stability in the Black Sea region and have multiple negative effects. First, they create unrecognized territorial entities that are unaccountable to any nation or international authority. Second, they facilitate the proliferation of further security threats, such as organized crime, arms and human trafficking, and terrorism. Furthermore, the region’s geographic location at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and the inability of the Black Sea states to govern their territories and borders effectively make the Black Sea a conduit for security threats coming from adjacent regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The region is at the crossroads of all the main routes in terms of traffic flows of persons, drugs, and conventional arms.
Simultaneously, since the Black Sea region connects the energy demand of the European market to the oil and gas-producing regions of Central Asia and Russia, it is one of the most desirable transit routes for the transportation of hydrocarbon resources. However, the existence of unresolved conflicts, the risk of terrorist attacks, and the potential instability in the region raise doubts about the safety of energy supplies and transportation routes throughout the region. The hijacking of the Russia-bound Turkish ferry *Avrasya* by Chechens in 1996 highlighted the security vacuum in the Black Sea basin. Meanwhile, Russia itself poses another major threat to the security of Western-oriented countries, such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Russian efforts to influence the outcomes of elections in these countries are not welcomed, and they are perceived as part of a Russian goal to thwart their plans for Euro-Atlantic integration and to keep these Western-oriented countries in the Russian sphere of influence.

The aforementioned security risks and challenges are significantly amplified by weak governance in the states of the Black Sea region. The general reliance on natural resources and widespread domestic unrest hamper democratic transition and economic development. Unresolved conflicts also present major obstacles to regional cooperation, as they entrench negative attitudes and counteract efforts to develop mutually advantageous relations such as cooperation on energy, transportation, and trade. As a result, national efforts to combat new security threats in the Black Sea zone have been hampered by ineffective governments, porous borders, lack of political will, weak civil society, and the difficulties of combating transnational crime.

Such sources of instability have appeared because of the number of weak states that have incomplete control over their populations and territories. Since the end of the Cold War, most Black Sea states have been going through complex and still unfinished transitions and geopolitical reorientations. The slow implementation of reforms, the spread of opaque administrative and business cultures, and the dominance of shadow institutions have characterized their development for the past decade. In addition, all have suffered from the sharp economic decline that took place in the region throughout the 1990s. Because of their lack of economic power, none of the Black Sea states, despite their ambitions for and visions of a regional role, have succeeded in taking the economic lead in regional development and stability. The largest and most ambitious regional actors—Russia and Turkey—also lack sufficient resources to finance serious programs. Underdevelopment and ineffective governance, often aggravated by widespread corruption and the self-serving interests of irresponsible elites and unaccountable authorities, have brought about economic disparities, gross inequalities,
and social polarization, undermining sociopolitical cohesion and raising the potential for internal instability. Moreover, many of the Black Sea states have had problems establishing viable democracies and the rule of law. The ineffectiveness of state institutions and the weakness of civil societies remain characteristic features. These three weaknesses—economic, political, and social—provide a breeding ground for the spread of a wide range of security threats.

**Actors and Competing Interests**

Due to the presence of both natural resources and transport corridors, the control of which will determine the shape of the strategic landscape in Eurasia, the Black Sea region has become a focal point for the political, military, and economic interests of powerful states and non-state actors. The actors on the region’s geopolitical stage may be divided into three main groups: the first group represents the major global powers, the United States and Russia; the second group comprises the regional powers, Turkey and Ukraine; and the third group is composed of supranational entities and regional and international organizations.

The variety of actors with conflicting interests involved in the Black Sea region make the formation of a coherent regional policy more difficult. The Black Sea is an area in which the EU, the United States, and Russia are butting heads. From the time of Peter the Great, Russia has considered access to the “warm seas” of the region to be the most important factor in its national security equation. Today the region’s place near the top of the country’s economic, foreign, and security agenda is still clear, and Russia is becoming increasingly active in the Black Sea area. The significant growth in Russian-Turkish commerce and the critical role of energy exports from Russia’s oil export facilities in Novorossiysk in its economic recovery further underscore the importance of the region to Russia. Russia is simultaneously becoming increasingly frustrated about U.S. “interference” in its immediate neighborhood. The Kremlin bristled at criticisms that the 2006 elections in Belarus were rigged in favor of Moscow-friendly candidate Alexander Lukashenka and has defended Russia’s close relationship with a country that the Western media derisively calls “the last dictatorship in Europe.” Russia also remains on the defensive concerning suggestions that it is backing away from democracy. Vice President Dick
Cheney, speaking at a conference of leaders from the Baltic and Black Sea nations in Vilnius, Lithuania in May 2006, criticized Russia for backsliding on human rights and suggested that Moscow is interfering with democratic movements among its neighbours and using its oil and gas as “tools of intimidation or blackmail.”

Russia’s drive to maintain its regional influence is on a collision course with the efforts of Western-oriented states to consolidate their independence and sovereignty. Disturbed by its loss of power in the Eastern European and Baltic states, Russia is trying to prevent Ukraine from moving closer to Europe. The increasingly active role of the United States in the region, demonstrated by NATO enlargements and PfP programs, is also inimical to Russia’s own ambitions. Russia unsuccessfully tried to create the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) collective security system on the basis of the Tashkent Pact (CST) and is now trying to intensify the military and political elements of CST to create a Common Economic Space. The goal of these initiatives is to gain influence over countries in the Black Sea region. In addition, Russia is taking active steps to extend its control over the energy resources of Central Asia, thereby creating new levers of influence, although rapprochement rather than confrontation has been the modus operandi until recent years.

The events of September 11, 2001, and their repercussions in such places as Afghanistan and Iraq, drastically changed the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea region, resulting in the emergence of the United States as the principal actor in the local geopolitics. Now the United States considers the region to be closely linked to its own security. According to the 2002 American National Security Strategy (NSS), the United States considers the Black Sea and Caspian region as not only vitally important to its oil supply, but also critical to potentially serving as a bridge to other markets such as Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia. As a result, the United States has increased its military presence in this part of Eurasia, from Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf to Uzbekistan and Georgia. The increasingly competing interests of global actors could be a cause for concern in the Black Sea region.

In contrast to the global actors, the local powers have a common interest in regional stability, sustainable development, and the secure functioning of transport corridors. Therefore, more possibilities for cooperation may exist among the regional actors, such as potential development of alternative security programs, which are anchored in cooperation among regional powers.
Among the regional actors, Turkey has had the most profound influence within the area. Based on its geographic location, historic influence, and military capabilities, Turkey has played a leadership role. It is the gatekeeper to the Black Sea and controls the strategic gateway between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. In addition, maritime traffic through the Turkish Straits is regulated by the 1936 Montreux Convention, which further empowers Turkey.9 Vis-à-vis the other Black Sea littorals Turkey seems to enjoy the best relations with Russia. Russian-Turkish trade is worth billions of dollars and includes construction, tourism, and natural gas—imports from Russia account for close to 70 percent of Turkish gas consumption.10 Russia currently ranks as Turkey’s third largest source of imports, ahead of the United States, and Turkey’s growing economic and political relations with Russia have created a powerful pro-Russia constituency inside Turkey.11

Greater U.S. influence in the region runs the risk of strangling the improving Turkish-Russian relations. Turkey must work to protect its relations with Russia on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is under pressure to promote its NATO commitments and interests in the Black Sea region. Russia is clearly opposed to extending the NATO-led Operation Active Endeavour (OAE) in the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, and Ankara does not want Black Sea security to be a barrier to Turkish-U.S. relations, which have been improving since the invasion of Iraq.12 Ankara believes that Black Sea security should be based on the consent of the littorals, keeping lines of coordination and cooperation open with NATO and the transatlantic security structure.

Yet other Black Sea littorals would welcome a wider NATO/EU role in the region. Romania and Bulgaria see themselves as a bridge for trade and energy cooperation and as a barrier to terrorist threats from the Black Sea region. As such, they seek to take part in the security planning of the region.13 For Ukraine and Georgia on the other side of the Black Sea, Euro-Atlantic orientations have been crucial for their foreign and security policies as they aim to secure their independence from Russia.

Security Organizations in the Region

Meanwhile, existing regional cooperative ventures include efforts such as the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), BLACKSEAFOR, the Community of Democratic Choice (CDC), and the GUUAM initiative (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova). Ankara launched BSEC in 1992 and BLACKSEAFOR in 2001 in order to promote stability in the region. BSEC is the first full-fledged regional cooperation organization, incorporating all six Black Sea littorals and other regional states (Albania,
Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldavia, Serbia, and Greece). BSEC, as the most inclusive and institutionalized cooperative structure in the Black Sea region, has proved to be a useful tool for promoting trade and economic integration among Black Sea states. It recently expanded its fields of activity beyond economic cooperation to tackle issues such as organized crime, transport networks, and security. In 1998 and 2002, the BSEC established working groups not only to combat crime and deal with natural disasters but also to address border controls, crisis management, and counterterrorism. In early December 2004, its ministers agreed to create a network of liaison offices. BSEC also provides a forum for the twelve Black Sea foreign ministers to discuss security issues. In 2005, the United States applied for, and was granted, observer status at the BSEC. Even though BSEC has not yet reached its full economic and political potential, it promises strength in each area.

BLACKSEAFOR, which is the first operation in which Russia and NATO countries have worked together toward the same objective, has successfully provided a security system in the Black Sea basin and has the potential to cope better with asymmetric risks and other illegal activities in the region. Turkey also conducts a national maritime operation, Black Sea Harmony, securing sea lanes in the Black Sea in line with UN Security Council resolutions to provide support in the global war on terrorism. This operation is affiliated with the NATO-led OAE in the Mediterranean. Russia has expressed its desire to participate in Operation Black Sea Harmony, and Turkey hopes to see other littorals join the initiative, turning it into a more inclusive multinational effort.

With its nine member countries from the Balkan, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, CDC—established at the initiative of the Ukrainian and Georgian presidents in December 2005—focuses on the promotion of democratic values, regional stability, and economic prosperity. GUUAM, which was established in October 1997 with Uzbekistan joining in April 1999, gathers nations that share a range of similar difficulties in their development and face the same basic threats to their national sovereignty, the effective functioning of their political systems, and their economic independence. Even though economic progress has been defined as the major field of cooperation within GUUAM, trade and economic ties among participating states still remain limited and are dominated by Russia. Still, these less-inclusive frameworks for regional cooperation—BLACKSEAFOR, GUUAM, CDC—can also serve as valuable assets for strengthening security in the region as long as they help address and resolve specific regional problems.

Resolving the region’s many security problems requires substantial international involvement from actors outside the region. In this respect,
NATO and the EU have become the most important actors in the region. Most Black Sea states aspire for closer ties with, or even membership in, the EU and NATO. Moscow, under Russian President Vladimir Putin’s leadership, has also begun developing strategic partnerships with both NATO and the EU, thereby providing these organizations and their member states powerful political leverage to encourage desired changes and manage the regional states’ transitions to democratic societies and market economies. The recent accession of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU indicates strong motivation for democratic and economic reforms at home and for improving bilateral relations with their neighbors. Consequently, further NATO and EU involvement and support can serve to overcome democratic deficits and encourage overall progressive development. In contrast, their failure to actively engage the region could be a barrier to further progress.

With regards to the EU, an intensified engagement represents a desirable policy orientation toward the current challenges in the Black Sea region. The European Security Strategy lists five key threats that confront Europe in the twenty-first century: terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime. Significantly, all of these threats remain problems in the Black Sea region. This overlap between Europe’s perceived risks and their preponderance in the Black Sea zone make it essential for the EU to strengthen its relations with the Black Sea region. Moreover, both NATO and the EU bring distinct and critically needed technological and institutional resources to the region, which will be indispensable in the region’s quest for stability and security. In this regard, the Black Sea region is well positioned to benefit from coordinated efforts by the EU and NATO to enlarge themselves.

**Building a Strategy for Stability**

The complexity and multiplicity of security threats in the Black Sea region require a multifaceted approach that should embrace cooperative efforts at the national, regional, and international levels in order to develop economic, social, and financial relations. Adopted principles of “democracy, good governance, and the rule of law” for global security must serve as a guideline for maintaining stability in the region. These principles require that, within the framework of international relations, states must be able to acknowledge the existence of diverging interests without recourse to the use of force as a method of solving conflicts. Counteracting threats in the region requires that all the states of the Black Sea region work together by establishing frameworks for joint action in which all nations sharing common interests and values can contribute.
Overcoming the existing weaknesses of Black Sea states and securing their sustainable economic and democratic development are of prime importance for regional security and stability. While overcoming internal weaknesses is mainly a task for the Black Sea countries themselves, many other broad security problems require joint regional and international coordination. In an age of interdependence, regional cooperation becomes an essential element of any larger strategy to address security problems and the root causes of violence and instability. Creating a genuine Black Sea identity through promotion of a spirit of inclusiveness and shared thoughts and ideas could be the surest way to regional security and stability, since common perceptions and understandings of security issues can provide the basis for a comprehensive approach to security and stability in the Black Sea area. The inclusive and bottom-up approaches of BSEC, CDC, and BLACKSEAFOR under a strategic umbrella have the potential to consolidate efforts against festering conflicts, organized crime, terrorist activity, weapons proliferation, and state fragility.

Yet the region’s ongoing conflicts continue to hinder the development and evolution of regional cooperation; these conflicts require the continued involvement of international actors such as NATO and the EU. In the last two decades, the EU and NATO have succeeded in extending a zone of security and stability across much of the European continent and, to a certain degree, have fulfilled the vision of a unified and democratic Europe. The process of Euro-Atlantic integration and enlargement has exerted, directly and indirectly, the strongest influence on the nature and development of regional cooperation in various parts of greater Europe. The Black Sea region, though, is not yet fully incorporated into this vision, and the lack of coherent strategies addressing the region threatens to undermine the security and stability of both this region and Europe. The Black Sea zone is a testing ground for the effectiveness of a new Euro-Atlantic security order. Although NATO and the EU remain wary of committing themselves to an explicit Black Sea policy, the region’s patchwork quilt of simmering conflicts requires the well-calibrated strategy and resources that NATO and the EU can employ. Whether the EU and NATO rise to these challenges depends on the extent of their political will and strategic vision. To date, their efforts in the area have been limited and ad hoc.

**RUSSIA’S DRIVE TO MAINTAIN INFLUENCE IS ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH THE POLICIES OF WESTERN-ORIENTED STATES.**
NATO and the EU should design a more flexible strategy for these countries since they have different levels of development and security problems. An alternative to full accession should be tailored to non-member Black Sea countries to keep them in close cooperation with the EU and NATO. A Euro-Atlantic strategy should also bolster institutions and activities initiated by Black Sea littoral states as a means to temper regional suspicion and rivalries inimical to stability and broader mutual interests. To this end, NATO can develop PfP programs with a regional focus in order to facilitate cooperation and its own involvement in the Black Sea zone. The alliance could also use a trust fund to support regional cooperation and PfP activities focused on the Black Sea region. In addition, improved intelligence sharing with NATO can augment the effectiveness of BLACKSEAFOR and Operation Black Sea Harmony and help combat illegal maritime activities in the region as well as contribute to the global war on terrorism.

Furthermore, the Southeast European Cooperation Initiative (SECI), which was launched in 1996 with U.S. support, can be extended to the Black Sea region; an alternative would be to implement a similar law enforcement organism to combat trans-border crime involving money laundering and the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and human beings. NATO and the EU can encourage and support the GUUAM or CDC members to this end and share their experience in border control with these regional initiatives. Meanwhile, the Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Centre (BBCIC), which brings together the six regional coast guards, has great potential for maritime border protection.

The EU should also revamp its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) towards the region by providing tangible “carrots” for progress in political and economic reforms. The implementation of an enriched ENP, including the enhancement of EU political dialogue with the ENP countries will offer support for building the institutions of democratic states in the region. The EU can also assist the reform process in the Black Sea region by providing financial resources, training, and technical support.

It is in the EU’s own self-interest to address the Black Sea region more effectively in its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Designing a more comprehensive CFSP to deal with Black Sea security problems will be crucial to fending off their potential repercussions in Europe. The EU can play a vital role in fostering regional cooperation by promoting important regional initiatives such as CDC and BSEC. European experiences gained through other regional frameworks such as the Northern Dimension and the
Barcelona Process can be valuable in this process as well. In short, the Black Sea region needs urgent attention from all major actors so that a coherent policy can be developed. The Black Sea policy must be preventive, inclusive, non-threatening, and multi-dimensional. The involvement of the major players is central to the success of the policy, and it would be an unprecedented opportunity for the EU, NATO, Russia, and the United States to pool resources and develop a solution to meet common interests and objectives. Failure to implement an effective policy could exacerbate the already complex security environment that characterizes the Black Sea region, especially as frozen conflicts remain unresolved. In this context, Western interests advocate a stable and secure Black Sea region. To this end, only decisive and constructive cooperation among global and regional actors can consummate a Euro-Atlantic strategy to help transform the Black Sea region from a source of new security threats into a stronghold against them.

NOTES

2 The term “Black Sea region” in this paper refers to the area that includes Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey on the western and southern shores, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia along the north and east, and Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the three southern Caucasian states.
4 The Turkish Straits are one of the world’s busiest waterways, with traffic volume of 50,000 vessels annually, including 5,500 oil tankers. Oil flows in 2004 represented 3.1 million bbl/d. United States Department of Energy, Energy Information Agency, “World Oil Transit Chokepoints: Bosphorus,” Country Analysis Briefs, November 2005.
6 In recent years, littoral countries have taken initiatives to fix this problem. Ongoing U.S. involvement in projects to secure energy via the Black Sea region were bolstered by the EU’s commitment to this objective through the EU Green Paper on Energy, which was issued on March 8, 2006.
9 The Montreux Convention regarding the regime of the Turkish Straits was a 1936 agreement that gave Turkey control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The straits are considered international waterways, and Turkey is prohibited from restricting their use in peacetime. However, the convention restricts the passage of warships from non-Black Sea littoral countries in their number, tonnage, and also in their duration of stay in the Black Sea. Also according to the convention, Turkey reserves the right to close the Turkish Straits to warships of all countries when it is at war or threatened by aggression.
11 Operation Active Endeavour is a naval operation of NATO. The operation began as one of the eight NATO responses to the September 11, 2001 attacks. It operates in the Mediterranean Sea and is designed to prevent the movement of terrorists or weapons of mass destruction as well as to enhance the security of shipping in general.
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