

# The Future of United States Black Sea Strategy

PREPARED STATEMENT BY

**Matthew Boyse**

Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

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HEARING ON

**The Future of U.S. Black Sea Strategy**

Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Murphy, distinguished members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Before I joined the Hudson Institute, I served in the Foreign Service for 35 years and spent much time dealing with the post-Soviet / Warsaw Pact space, including as Deputy Assistant Secretary overseeing U.S. policy towards Central Europe during most of the first Trump Administration and early months of the Biden Administration. During that time, I was also the Sherpa for the Three Seas Initiative and served briefly as Charge d’Affaires in Romania in the Fall of 2021. I was a Fulbright Scholar in Bulgaria in summer 2024 researching Black Sea security.

## **THE NATIONAL INTEREST**

The Black Sea and the broader Black Sea Region (BSR) are more important to the U.S. national interest than is often appreciated. This hearing adds impetus to important work the SFRC has done on this issue in recent years, including by pressing the State Department to develop a Black Sea strategy, by holding hearings, as well as by traveling to, and shining light on, a critical region that needs more U.S. attention.

The BSR is also important in the context of the ongoing debate about U.S. foreign policy priorities and where policy attention and resources should be focused. Given

the centrality of the BSR to the balance of power in Europe and Eurasia, and trends there that are not advantageous to the United States, the region should remain a major focus of U.S. foreign policy, even as the Administration prioritizes the threat from Communist China, as well as challenges in the Western Hemisphere and other regions.

## **STRATEGIC BACKDROP**

When I was responsible for policy towards Central Europe at the State Department 2018-2021, USG policy regarding the Eastern Flank of NATO tended to focus more on its NE than the SE sector; the latter of course includes the Black Sea as an area of major geopolitical importance. While the USG has in recent years assigned substantial resources to the SE sector and thus the BSR, the historically heavy concentration of Russian forces in the NE and extraordinary importance of our Polish, Baltic and Nordic allies tended to produce more focus there. Persistent and increasing Russian violations of Baltic, Polish, and Nordic sovereignty in recent months and days continue to highlight the ongoing Russian threat to this region. So a strong focus on that is totally logical.

The NATO Summits after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 upgraded the attention to the SE region according to the general idea of "one flank, one threat, one presence," a phrase I coined that became the title of an excellent [study](#) led by LTG (ret) Ben Hodges, former Commanding General, US Army Europe. NATO fixed this anomaly after February 2022, deploying more forces in the SE and investing more in Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, but also supporting Ukraine in its titanic struggle against Kremlin efforts to wipe it off the map. This increase in USG attention has been welcome, but there appears to be a lingering difference between how NATO and EU Member States look at the NE and SE regions, even as both institutions pay increasing attention to the BSR. SE Europe often remains in the lower right-hand corner of mental maps of Europe, away from the center of gravity, even as it is squarely in the center of current geopolitical struggles.

The SE, which for the sake of simplicity I will refer to as the BSR, is exceptionally important geopolitically, not only because it has been the only region in the European theater that has seen major kinetic activity in the last several decades - mostly since the 2008 Georgia War and in Ukraine, but before that as well. Some [10 conflicts](#) have played out in the BSR in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, security trends in the BSR have been trending negatively for many years, and it is high time to devote more USG attention to it. In 2020, my team in the Bureau of Europe and

Eurasia at the State Department was drafting a Black Sea strategy to address this state of affairs when the clock ran out on the first Trump Administration. It took some time for the Biden Administration to collect its thoughts and draft one, which was an important improvement, if ultimately insufficient.

Putin's war against Ukraine has higher stakes than his stated goal of reincorporating the country into the Russian Federation. Ukraine is also at the center of Kremlin efforts to dominate the Black Sea and the broader BSR, a strategy that Putin considers [indispensable](#) to his efforts to restore Russian status and project power into adjacent theaters and onto the world stage. Ukraine and the BSR are also the [primary battlefield](#) in his efforts to shape a [new international order](#), together with Communist China, Iran – another potentially larger player in the BSR -- and others. Russia sees the BSR as the most strategic and vulnerable region on its borders, and thus a particularly valuable and promising “zone of privileged interest,” as it calls its “near abroad.” The BSR has been contested space for some three decades, but particularly since 2014, and it remains the most important laboratory for the Kremlin to practice its hybrid war against NATO and the West.

The Kremlin started to challenge the post-Soviet order in the BSR in the 1990s, even as it also concluded agreements with Ukraine and other former Soviet “republics” and did not pursue an aggressive policy towards other neighbors, including in the BSR. Western statesmen, experts, and commentators tended to ignore or play down those signs until Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and even then many did not react robustly until Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. It is unrealistic to expect the United States to care more about Black Sea security than European countries, but Putin upended the European security order and what happens in the BSR does not stay in the BSR -- and matters to the United States.

In recent years, Russia has been scoring successes on the eastern littoral of the Black Sea via its creeping state capture of Georgia. On the northern littoral, *how* Russia's war ends will have a major effect on the BSR and the Kremlin has been in full court press mode in Moldova, even if on Sunday voters dodged a bullet and chose the West. Moscow is using its many assets in Bulgaria to turn that critical country away from the West and has been exploiting societal discontent in Romania, long a bulwark of Atlanticism. Russian efforts in these states via state capture, weakening key institutions, or supporting pro-Moscow forces could create an arc or corridor of instability from SE Europe / the Balkans into the heart of

Europe – from Northern Macedonia and Serbia into Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria – with governments amenable to Moscow. Of course, this may not happen and should be strongly opposed, but it shows that negative trends in the BSR could ease Kremlin inroads into what Putin no doubt sees as a potential soft underbelly of NATO. The southern littoral is a separate case, as Türkiye is open to some, and opposed to other, Russian interests.

In the last several weeks alone, a Russian [Geran-2 drone](#) breached Romanian airspace September 14, the 11th such case since February 2022. The [MoD noted](#) that Russian drones have conducted about 50 strikes near the Ukrainian border since 2022, including 30 in which drone debris fell on Romanian territory. On August 28, a [Russian naval drone](#) struck a Ukrainian vessel on the Danube River, on the Romanian-Ukrainian border. These incidents receive much less attention than Russian provocations against Polish, Baltic, and Nordic sovereignty, but they are no less concerning – however serious the other cases are.

### **A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY AND FURTHERING AMERICAN INTERESTS**

A comprehensive Black Sea strategy has the potential to advance U.S. security interests and counter malign influence from Russia in BSR energy markets. Such a strategy is a necessary element in the U.S. policy toolbox, but it is insufficient to move the needle significantly without other political, diplomatic, military, or economic tools. The USG should continue to support BSR states as they diversify away from Russian energy, such as by supporting LNG sales and ramping up already good cooperation on nuclear energy, including SMRs, by reengaging in the Three Seas Initiative, and by countering the malign influence that accompanies heavy dependence on Russian energy. There is room for growth in this sector even as recent U.S. administrations have prioritized it because results have not been quick to materialize. Some EU member states have taken the goal of energy diversification very seriously, but others have not, and the USG has also faced resistance from the EU Commission, individual member states, and market realities, which have slowed results.

The reasons for this vary from country to country, but the unfortunate fact is that it took most EU member states too much time, even after Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to prioritize energy diversification and weaning themselves from their addiction to Russian fossil fuels. Gas and oil imports are down considerably, but it has taken blunt language from President Trump to accelerate the cut-off of oil and gas imports that have pumped billions of Euros into Putin’s war machine since 2022. The Commission’s proposal in the recent 19th sanctions

package to move up the deadline for cutting off Russian gas by one year, to the end of 2026, is a major step forward but some member states have stated they will not abide by it. Hungary and Slovakia have both pushed back on the Commission's recent proposal to incentivize a decoupling from Russian sources. President Trump's recent pressure on PM Erdogan in the White House may bear some fruit but Turkish firms earn so much from their refining business and the world market demands its products that it is difficult to imagine how that relationship will end.

While the State Department strategy, which Assistant Secretary Robert O'Brien presented to this committee in October 2023, was a start, it was: 1) not a whole-of-government; 2) not a roadmap but rather more of a laundry list of intentions; 3) not focused on energy, whose section was relatively modest and linked to climate, which the Trump Administration will not support; and 4) not resourced. A greater energy focus in a whole-of-government strategy that addresses weaknesses in the 2023 paper has the potential to advance U.S. energy goals in the BSR, but at times blunt language as we recently saw from President Trump that our European friends need to do even more care necessary to generate results.

## **ENERGY AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONNECTIVITY**

It is in the U.S. interest that the [large natural gas reserves](#) in the Black Sea be developed – in Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish waters -- because they will grow their economies, reduce their reliance on Russian sources, and strengthen European energy security. The Black Sea is also the central transit region through which Russian gas and oil reach Europe, the Mediterranean, and beyond and needs to remain peaceful. Romania will become the largest gas producer in the EU in 2027 when it starts to exploit the 7,500 square km Neptun Deep field, which contains an estimated 100 bcm, for yields of 7-8 bcm per year. Romania has been producing gas from the Midea project (with U.S. investment) for several years. When Bulgaria begins to exploit the estimated 60 bcm in its Khan Tervel and Khan Asparuh fields, it will be able to cover its entire domestic production and export to the region. The Sakarya field in Turkiye contains an estimated 540 bcm, the largest of the Black Sea gas reserves. Turkiye also serves as a transit route for Russian gas and oil, which it refines at three locations. It is an open secret that these molecules are Russian, but the fact that they continue reflects market forces while European consumers have generally not cared where their oil products originate. Russia controls much of Ukraine's huge gas reserves, which Ukraine cannot exploit, and uses the drilling platforms it has seized as much for military as energy purposes. Georgian Black Sea reserves are unknown.

Romanian and Bulgarian officials expect the Kremlin to use [hybrid measures](#) to interfere with exploitation of their reserves, as many are located in their EEZs, and are thus not subject to NATO Article 5 and easier to disrupt. Russia has intruded into drilling perimeters in the past, and neither country has the naval forces to prevent interference in the development of these resources, which are very expensive to exploit and especially vulnerable when drilling and other infrastructure is being built. Moscow is less likely to interfere with the exploitation of Turkish Black Sea energy resources because of that special relationship.

The Black Sea also can support European energy security via the submarine electricity cable to be laid with participation by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, and Romania. Two Turkstream gas pipelines and several data cables cross the Black Sea and strengthen connectivity. Bulgaria's recent decision to end Russian gas transit contracts on January 1, 2026, to fully exit the Russian gas market by 2028, and to switch to LNG imports is a major step forward in reducing Moscow's ability to blackmail Sofia.

## **U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE BSR TO PROMOTE TRADE AND ENHANCE SECURITY**

For trade and commerce to flourish and contribute to prosperity in the BSR, the Black Sea must remain free and open. Freedom of navigation is essential. That is not currently the case, as it is negatively affected by Russia's war against Ukraine. Of course, ships ply the waters and trade takes place, but Russia's hot war and creeping takeover of Georgia and hybrid measures against other littoral states have dampened the enormous potential the region has as a crossroads and center of trade and exchange through the millenia.

Commentators have asserted in recent years that Russia has [lost the battle](#) of the Black Sea, citing Ukraine's extraordinary success in sinking, disabling, or damaging some one-third of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), forcing the rest from Crimea to Novorossiysk and elsewhere, and largely preventing it from interfering too directly in the larger Black Sea. This not incorrect, but it is [premature](#) to conclude that the battle for the Black Sea is over. Crimea bristles with offensive systems and continues to be a platform for attacking Ukraine and threatening the Black Sea, and missile and other attacks against Ukraine regularly originate from Crimea and the Black Sea itself. [Hundreds of naval mines](#) are a factor in maritime commerce and keep insurance rates higher than they should be while Russia regularly interferes with GPS signals and has used the pretext of naval exercises to close large parts of the Black Sea even in NATO member state EEZs.

Russian rhetoric has become so shrill that it is easy to imagine that the Kremlin will continue to interfere with trade and other economic activity on the Black Sea after the guns fall silent. Locations such as Snake Island and drilling towers can also affect economic development and secure trade lines. Romanian experts consider Snake Island as important to Black Sea security as Gotland is to the Baltic Sea. A Russian reoccupation of Snake Island would have negative consequences for navigation on the Danube and sea lanes along the Istanbul-Odesa corridor. The BSF could deploy ISR and Electronic Warfare systems to monitor and disrupt communications along the Romanian coast, including where U.S. forces are deployed. NATO member states would not welcome Iranian vessels traversing the Caspian Sea, the Volga-Don Canal, and the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea for joint naval exercises with Russia – a scenario that is not impossible to imagine. The Kremlin has been using Crimea as a platform, an unsinkable aircraft carrier, to launch attacks against Ukraine and to project power.

Russian control of the northern littoral, which is part of what Putin calls “[Novorossiia](#),” must be prevented, as it would strangle Ukraine’s maritime access to global markets, making it difficult for the country to survive, let alone thrive economically and function as an independent, sovereign state -- even if, for now, Moscow has been unable to subjugate and occupy the country. It is not well known that Moldova’s southernmost tip is located just miles from the Black Sea, so Moldova is also a Black Sea state. The optimum outcome for trade, growth, and prosperity in the BSR is a demilitarized Black Sea, as was the case for a number of years after the Crimean War.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE THE U.S. STRATEGIC POSTURE IN THE BSR**

The United States has a wide variety of concrete political, diplomatic, military, and economic options that can advance its strategic posture in the BSR. A few recommendations:

### **CONCEPTUAL / POLITICAL / DIPLOMATIC**

The USG national security bureaucracy should look at the BSR wholistically as a geopolitical region of major importance to NATO and the Global West. Most agencies divide the region into as many as four or more parts, creating policy silos and stove piping that complicates efforts to treat the region in a comprehensive manner.

**Urge the EU to focus much more on the BSR, now that the Commission in May**



**finally adopted a [Black Sea strategy](#)**, in order to improve regional resilience against Russian and Chinese malign influence. The USG should pay closer attention to the correlation of forces and security-related trends and developments in the BSR, but the USG also cannot care about them more than our European Allies.

**Press Allies to further reduce the flow of funds to the Russian war machine.** If the outcome of the war is as important to European security as European leaders say it is, they should be doing even more.

**Ensure that NATO is seized with the BSR. NATO is unlikely to adopt a BSR strategy, but the recommendations in the NATO October 2023 [“Troubled Waters” Black Sea report](#) should be implemented**, especially following Allies’ formal recognition of the importance of the region at the July 2023 Vilnius Summit. More robust efforts by NATO member states will demonstrate to the Trump Administration that European Allies take Black Sea security seriously.

**A whole-of-government USG BSR Strategy is needed.** The paper that State Department EUR Assistant Secretary Robert O’Brien [presented to the SFRC](#) in October 2023 was a start and overcame years of mixed messaging and what might be considered benign neglect, but it offered rather modest goals, was declarative in tone, only covered the State Department, and did not advocate for additional resources. The Biden Administration did not present a government-wide strategy before the end of its term, as Congress had requested.

**Revisit S.804, the [Black Sea Security Act of 2023](#), and pass an updated version in 2026.** The Senate showed strategic leadership by advocating for this legislation. The recent introduction of the Eastern Flank Strategic Partnership Act is another excellent Senate initiative, but separate Black Sea-focused legislation is desirable.

**Congress should appropriate funds explicitly for efforts related to the BSR.** A strategy that sets forth additional requirements without resources will not succeed.

**USG strategic interest in Black Sea security should be reflected in the Trump Administration’s National Security Strategy.** The Department of War’s annual report to Congress on Freedom of Navigation (FON) should also include language on Russia restricting FON in the Black Sea.

**The USG must not recognize Crimea as Russian territory.** The consequences of such a decision would go far beyond the BSR and encourage further Russian aggression, as well as aggression from other states that might see border changes by force as possible. The 1940 [Welles Declaration](#) regarding the three Baltic states



can serve as a guide, and former Secretary [Pompeo's statement](#) in 2020 should remain operative.

**Prioritize relations with Romania among U.S. Black Sea Allies.** Türkiye and Bulgaria are also critical Allies, but Romania is the most active on BSR issues.

**Engage vigorously with Türkiye as steward of the Montreux Convention to prevent Russia from returning its BSF to pre-war status after hostilities end.**

The Kremlin will likely attempt to restore the BSF to its former size and composition as it has been so significantly weakened. With Ankara, pursue a “[free and open](#)” strategy for the Black Sea as the best long-term model for this strategic crossroads (“[Middle Corridor](#)”) between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe, while ensuring FONOPs can be conducted, as necessary. Russia can be expected to condition a ceasefire or end to the war on a return to the status quo ante, but a demilitarized Black Sea, as was the case for a number of years after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, remains the optimum end state.

**Revitalize USG engagement with the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)** as a vehicle to support Eastern Flank countries politically, strengthen them economically, and improve their resilience. During his first term, President Trump visibly supported 3SI, but momentum slowed after he left office. The USG should increase its attention to the 3SI, provided 3SI countries themselves participate at significant levels. The United States is the strongest non-member 3SI supporter, but it can also not want 3SI more than the member states.

## MILITARY

**Greater military engagement with the three NATO littoral states can strengthen deterrence and “sea denial” strategy**, including air defense, mine sweepers, uncrewed surface vehicles, ISR, mobility, Anti-Submarine Warfare infrastructure, and long-range anti-ship missiles that can hold the BSF at risk should Russia behave aggressively on the Black Sea itself.

**The BSR theater will become more difficult if Putin's war ends favorably for him.** Russia will interpret any reduction in U.S. forces in the BSR as a strategic retreat and increase its probes of NATO territory via its toolbox of hybrid measures such as drones, electronic warfare, GPS interference (jamming and spoofing), infrastructure sabotage, etc.

**Resource exportable defense packages for Black Sea littoral harbors** (e.g. radar, jammers, hard-kill defensive systems). Enable NATO/USN to rotate mobile harbor-defense detachments. Work with NATO member states to ensure that

A2AD can protect coastlines, commercial assets, and infrastructure arteries.

**Respond more resolutely to Russian provocations** against sovereign NATO territory. NATO policy has tended to prioritize “escalation avoidance,” which has emboldened Russia to test NATO territory repeatedly without sanction. This includes using NATO assets to down air and sea drones and other provocations.

**U.S. investment in Mihail Kogălniceanu air base** in Constanta, Romania is a strategic use of U.S. taxpayer funds. It should be increased to the extent that Allies participate similarly and budgets allow.

**Greater USG focus on the military relationship with Bulgaria** would also help strengthen resilience against further Russian inroads into that key ally.

**Continue military support for Kyiv** via the Administration’s Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List mechanism so that Ukraine can better defend itself and put Russian military assets on Crimea and elsewhere at risk.

**Support the NATO Mine Measures Group**, including via Countermeasure Vessels as urged by some littoral state Defense Ministers to remove floating mines and enhance a collaborative intervention force that would also safeguard energy infrastructure and trade routes.

**Improve “unblinking eye” assets such as the Varna Black Sea Regional Naval Coordination Center to enhance maritime domain awareness, develop a better Common Operating Picture**, and NATO’s Maritime Situational Awareness platform. Urge NATO to review the division of labor between Varna and NATO Maritime Command (Northwood, UK).

**Direct DHS / Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to deepen partnerships with Romania and Bulgaria’s cyber centers.** Fund joint “red team” exercises on ports and rail IT infrastructure.

**Consider conveying smaller ships to Romania that can traverse the Danube and to Bulgaria that can bolster its coastal forces.**

**Support Ukraine in ensuring it retains control of major strategic territory such as Odesa, the northern littoral, as well as Snake Island** near the mouth of the Danube and drilling platforms in the Black Sea.

## **ECONOMIC**

**Implement economic and energy measures** in the State Department’s 2023 Black Sea Strategy and other strategies that are compatible with the Trump Administration’s approach to the region.

**Engage Turkiye regarding reciprocity for Russian shipping.** Russia should not receive free passage for ships carrying oil and grain if it restricts the freedom of navigation of commercial vessels from other nations.

**Assist Romania in expanding the Danube as a transport corridor,** for example via the Three Seas Initiative infrastructure program.

**Engage more robustly on the Middle Corridor** to diversify trade Europe-Asia trade routes further away from Russia.

**Encourage DFC and/or EXIM to finance hardened grain silos, backup power for port IT, and digital customs systems.** Encourage World Bank co-financing on Danube logistics resilience.

### **ADDITIONAL U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS IN THE BLACK SEA**

It would be a much better outcome for the United States if Putin were to fail in Ukraine. If he ends the war on his terms, the consequences will be very negative not only for Ukraine but are also likely to seep into the other three NATO littoral states as well as the arc or corridor stretching from North Macedonia, Serbia, into Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. This would continue to erode U.S. influence in the region and demonstrate to adversaries that Russia can challenge NATO interests and get away with it. This would also send a clear signal to Communist China, our most important adversary that is also increasingly active in the BSR.

In S. 804 from 2023, the Senate set forth its sense of the Congress regarding national interests connected with the BSR. These tended to focus on security, but economic issues were also a part, and they remain as valid today as when the legislation was introduced. The United States has an interest that the BSR be a benign, free and open, positive, and stable security environment. A free and open Black Sea will foster economic and other connectivity between Europe, Central Asia, Asia Minor, and the Eastern Med and assure global food security, which is seriously affected by grain and other food shipments via the Black Sea.

The Kremlin has made it very clear that it will continue to treat the Black Sea as a region of special and preponderant interest after the guns fall silent, and Crimea will remain a platform from which Moscow conducts hybrid war, interferes in the region, and projects power beyond it. In other words, the BSR is unlikely to not return to anything like its pre-2014 state. All Allies must do more to ensure that Putin does not end the war on his terms. It is positive that President Trump has spoken forthrightly on Ukraine recently, even if the BSR itself has not figured directly in his public statements. As Ukraine goes, so goes the Black Sea region.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to your questions.