

Türkiye and the European Security Architecture in the Black Sea

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Policy Brief Series no. 82 / 2025

Published by: Romanian Diplomatic Institute

ISSN: 2066-5989

Abstract

Amid the Russian Federation's illegal and unprovoked war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and has continued with the invasion of February 2022, the Black Sea has become the scene of direct armed confrontations between the two belligerent parties. One question, however, stands out for its importance and for the frequency with which it is raised in analytical circles: why does Türkiye still lack a clearly defined role in the south-eastern sector of NATO's eastern flank with regard to Black Sea security? A close examination of the situation reveals three relevant aspects, which will be addressed below: (1) Türkiye as guardian of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles; (2) NATO's failure to articulate a strategy specifically dedicated to the Black Sea and (3) Türkiye's stance on the involvement of Western actors, including NATO, in Black Sea security matters.

Keywords: Türkiye, European security, Black Sea, NATO, Eastern Flank.

¹ This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Russian Federation's illegal and unprovoked war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and has continued with the invasion on February 2022, the Black Sea has become the scene of direct military clashes between the two belligerent parties. These confrontations also threaten other countries in the region, including Romania and Bulgaria as NATO and EU member states, as well as the logistical and commercial links that traverse the Black Sea. Given that the Republic of Türkiye is an important NATO member, and that the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits lie within its territory, several questions arise regarding this country's role in the current context. One question, however, stands out for its importance and for the frequency with which it is raised in analytical circles: why does Türkiye still lack a clearly defined role in the south-eastern sector of NATO's eastern flank with regard to Black Sea security?

Although this question has been intensely debated since the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, when examined from the perspective of a Romanian analyst, it warrants close attention to matters of interpretation, as well as to the meaning of the terms and aspects involved. Answers such as the claim that NATO does not yet have a clear strategy for the Black Sea region, and that Türkiye is therefore not allocated any specific responsibility for it, are highly tempting and indeed appear frequently in the public sphere. Such an answer is superficial and insufficient. The question deserves serious treatment, given its importance for Romania's security as a member state of the EU and NATO, with access to the Black Sea and, through the Straits, to world trade. A close examination of the situation reveals three relevant aspects, which will be addressed below: (1) Türkiye as guardian of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles; (2) the absence of a dedicated NATO strategy for the Black Sea; and (3) Türkiye's stance on the involvement of Western actors, including NATO, in Black Sea security dynamics. The conclusions will draw together these three aspects, returning to the question raised above.

TÜRKIYE AND ITS ROLE AS CUSTODIAN OF THE STRAITS

The main question advanced here is not merely one of security for Romania (and Bulgaria) in the Black Sea, but for Europe as a whole, since it concerns the security of the continent's logistical, energy and commercial links with the world through the Black Sea.

Türkiye's importance in this context derives directly from the responsibility conferred upon it for the security of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits by the Montreux Convention of 1936.³ The manner in which Ankara has chosen to interpret and apply the provisions of this instrument of international law in the context of the war launched by Russia is instructive. Article 19 of the Convention lays down rules governing the regime of the Straits in the event of a war to which Türkiye is not a belligerent party. On 27 February 2022, five days after the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ankara decided to classify the Russian aggression as a "war". This allowed it to invoke Article 19, on the basis of which it blocked the relocation of Russian warships from other areas into the Black Sea through the Straits, thereby contributing to Ukraine's protection.⁴

However, further measures followed which suggest that the application of the Montreux Convention is subordinated to Ankara's foreign policy agenda rather than to the needs of the other Black Sea states, including Türkiye's NATO allies. In addition to the decision described above, Ankara also barred NATO allied warships from entering the Black Sea. This prohibition prevented support for Ukraine's resistance through the presence of warships that might have deterred the aggressor, and Ankara's position on this grave matter has drawn considerable criticism.

Under the second paragraph of Article 19 of the Convention, warships may be permitted to enter the Black Sea through the Straits "in the case of assistance rendered to a state victim of aggression in virtue of a treaty of mutual assistance binding Türkiye". Türkiye is "bound" in its relations with Ukraine by a treaty of friendship and cooperation (1992), while NATO has maintained cooperative relations with Ukraine since 1994 under the Partnership for Peace. These and other treaties concluded over the years with Kyiv permitted, and indeed encouraged, Ukraine's allies to provide support, and the presence of warships in the Black Sea would have served this purpose. Their absence weakened the effort to deter Russia, which has continued to strike Ukraine, including from positions in the Black Sea. It has also given rise to situations, already too numerous, in which Russian drones have entered the territory of Romania or the Republic of Moldova, endangering the lives and property of our citizens.

³ Convention regarding the regime of the Straits 1936", United Nations Treaty Series, <https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280166981>

⁴ „Türkiye to implement pact limiting Russian warships to Black Sea”, Reuters, 27 february 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/Türkiye-implement-international-pact-access-shipping-straits-dueukraine-war-2022-02-27/>

TÜRKIYE AND NATO IN THE BLACK SEA WITHOUT A STRATEGY

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) does not have a strategy that identifies the security of the Black Sea region as an explicit objective of the organisation on its eastern flank. This matter is addressed only as part of the broader security strategy, and following the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO allocated additional forces across the entire eastern flank within the framework of this strategy. Specifically, four new multinational battlegroups were established in Hungary, Slovakia, and, of particular relevance to the Black Sea region, in Romania and Bulgaria. Elsewhere on the eastern flank, multinational battlegroups are also present in Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in the Baltic Sea region. All eight groups are currently integrated into NATO's command and control structures, under three regional plans for the northeastern, central eastern and southeastern flanks of the Alliance in Europe.⁵

In addition, the organisation has already established a mechanism for the rapid reinforcement of its eastern flank posture. Despite certain shortcomings identified during Steadfast Defender 2024, the largest exercise conducted since the end of the Cold War, the same exercise also demonstrated the alliance's overall capacity to conduct complex operations in reinforcing the eastern flank, both operationally and logistically. This includes the successful use of the Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) system, as well as round-the-clock air policing missions. The concentration of forces is, however, markedly greater in the Baltic Sea than in the Black Sea.

Türkiye is a participating nation in the battlegroups deployed in Hungary and Bulgaria, and has also taken part in Enhanced Air Policing missions in Romanian airspace between December 2023 and March 2024.⁶ Furthermore, under the memorandum signed by Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye in January 2024, forces from the Turkish Navy are active within the Mine

⁵ The regional plans were adopted at the 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius. See the press release NATO, „Deterrence and Defence”, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/deterrence-and-defence>

⁶ „Strengthening NATO's eastern flank”, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 23 October 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/strengthening-natos-eastern-flank>; Meeting of the Minister of National Defence with the President of the Defence Industry of the Republic of Türkiye, "Ministry of National Defence, Public Information and Relations Directorate, 19 February 2025, https://www.mapn.ro/cpresa/18771_intrevederea-ministrului-apararii-na%C8%9Bionale-cupre%C8%99edintele-industriei-de-aparare-a-republicii-turcia

Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group (MCM BS TG).⁷ The group continues its mission, which has also been expanded at the 2026 Ankara summit of the Alliance.⁸

The Black Sea might plausibly become explicitly a region of major interest on NATO's security agenda were the organisation's undisputed leader, the United States, to bring such a focus through its own approach. A strategy has already been proposed in the Congress under the title of the Black Sea Security Act. The document takes into account Türkiye's undeniable and unavoidable role in the Black Sea security architecture, while at the same time noting (Section 2, point 9) that country's occasionally counterproductive conduct towards certain regional allies, from the standpoint of regional security, without naming those allies.

Unfortunately, although the Black Sea Security Act was introduced in the US Senate in March 2023, gaining support in the House of Representatives only a week later, it remains outside the American legislature's agenda and has yet to be adopted for subsequent submission to the US President for signature.⁹ Given these details, it is difficult to believe that the United States will support according greater importance to the Black Sea within NATO's security strategy. It seems more likely that Washington will devote increasing attention to investment in actors such as Poland, Greece and Cyprus along a north–south corridor that will also include the Black Sea, but only because geography makes this necessary.¹⁰

TÜRKIYE'S RELUCTANCE TOWARDS WESTERN INVOLVEMENT IN THE BLACK SEA

Beyond the absence of an explicit NATO strategy and the delayed adoption of the American strategy on Black Sea security, Türkiye itself already has a longstanding tradition of resistance to the involvement of Western actors in this matter. This resistance has become

⁷ "The Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the Naval Mine Countermeasures Task Group in the Black Sea," Romanian Armed Forces General Staff, Public Affairs and Information Section, 11 January 2024, <https://www.defense.ro/semnarea-memorandumului-de-intelegere-privind-constituirea-grupului-operativ-pentru-combaterea-minelor-marine-in-marea-neagra>

⁸ At NATO's 2026 Ankara summit, the three countries signed a memorandum expanding the mission of the group to include the protection of critical undersea infrastructure. See "Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye expand the MCM Black Sea TG Missions", Romanian Ministry of Defense, press release no. 138/2026, July 8, 2026, https://english.mapn.ro/event/1890_ankara-nato-summit

⁹ The bill, bearing the same title and identical content, was introduced in both the Senate (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/804/text?s=1&r=57>) and at the Camera Reprezentanților (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1680/text>).

¹⁰ For further details on this perspective, see inter alia Dragoș C. Mateescu, „De ce disputele strategice Europa vs. Rusia și SUA vs. China trec prin Mediterana de Est”, Veridica, 21 November 2025, <https://www.veridica.ro/opinii/de-ce-disputele-strategice-europa-vs-rusia-si-sua-vs-china-trec-prin-mediteranade-est>; Dragoș C. Mateescu, „Trump la Casa Albă: ce ar putea însemna asta pentru zona lărgită a Orientului Mijlociu”, Veridica, 18 noiembrie 2024, <https://www.veridica.ro/opinii/trump-la-casa-alba-ce-ar-putea-insemna-asta-pentru-zona-largita-a-orientului-mijlociu>

particularly explicit over the more than two decades of governance under the current regime. The reason most frequently cited by Ankara to justify this position is that a NATO presence would increase the risk of confrontation with Russia. It should not be forgotten, however, that Türkiye is itself a NATO member state, and indeed the second most significant one after the United States, while also possessing by far the strongest naval force in the Black Sea. It has been suggested that the exclusion of meaningful participation by NATO allies from the regional security architecture forms part of Ankara's strategic calculus, reflecting its reluctance to see its role in the region overshadowed by any other actor.

The persistence and substance of this strategy are evident. Türkiye excluded powerful Alliance partners from outside the Black Sea region from BLACKSEAFOR (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group), established in 2001 at Turkish initiative and under Turkish command, with the participation of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Georgia.¹¹ This exclusion continued with another Turkish initiative, Black Sea Harmony, established by Ankara in 2004 precisely as an alternative to NATO's Active Endeavour mission, with the aim of countering cross-border terrorism in the region.¹² Türkiye also blocked the access of two American hospital ships tasked with providing humanitarian assistance to Georgia in 2008, at a time when that country was under attack from Russia.¹³

Such episodes confirm the general impression that Ankara's principal aim in the Black Sea is to remain the region's foremost actor. This impression has also been reinforced by numerous statements from senior Turkish officials, both civilian and military, who have repeatedly emphasised Türkiye's preference for strategic autonomy in the Black Sea. The most recent such statement came from Admiral Ercüment Tatlıoğlu, currently the Commander of the Turkish Navy and, notably, formerly responsible for the security of the Dardanelles (2010–2011) and the Bosphorus (2013–2016) Straits. In a public address delivered on 17 November 2023 during a military ceremony, the admiral commanding Türkiye's naval arsenal stated explicitly that, although NATO was at the time seeking to take certain measures concerning

¹¹ For further details, see „BLACKSEAFOR”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>

¹² „Russia and Türkiye in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus”, International Crisis Group, Report N° 250, 28 June 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/turkiye-russia-internal-armenian-azerbaijaniconflict-ukraine/250-russia-and-turkiye-black-sea-and-south-caucasus>

¹³ Dimitar Bechev, „Türkiye and Black Sea Security: Ten Years After the War in Georgia”, Atlantic Council, 8 August 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/Turkiye-and-black-sea-security-ten-years-after-the-war-in-georgia/>

security in the region, "we [the Turks] will take these measures ourselves, and we do not want NATO or America in the Black Sea."¹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The elements above suggests that the answer to the question with which this analysis began may be as simple as it is significant: Türkiye does not have a clearly defined role on NATO's south-eastern flank in the Black Sea because it has not been asked to assume one, and because it will not accept a role assigned by its allies, in keeping with the logic of how NATO functions. Ankara will instead seek to impose its own foreign policy agenda, grounded in its own perceptions, and has no wish to see actors from outside the region become involved.

The aspects examined here support this view, and others may be added to them, such as the various regional integration projects launched over the years, none of which has fulfilled its formal objectives. Neither the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), nor any other initiative coordinated by Ankara has succeeded in producing deep regional integration, and Türkiye continues to pursue a protectionist policy, imposing significant tariffs on imports, including from Romania, Bulgaria and Greece.

In an excellent academic study published this year by Daria Isachenko, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, the author offers a precise analysis that leads to the same conclusion. Türkiye has its own foreign policy agenda, one that does not align with the shared agenda of its allies, and reflects a self-perception closer to that of an "owner of the Straits" than that of a custodian or guardian of the passage between the Black Sea and the world's seas and oceans.¹⁵ A trustee, or guardian would be expected to take into account the wishes of its regional allies with regard to, for instance, the Kanal Istanbul project, which would significantly alter the geography, geopolitics and ecology of the link between the Black Sea and the wider world. In reality, Ankara pays no heed to its Black Sea neighbours, either with regard to Kanal Istanbul, or in its interpretation of the Montreux Convention, which it consistently shapes according to its own political agenda of the moment.

¹⁴ „Türkiye does not want US or NATO presence in the Black Sea: navy commander”, Turkish Minute, 18 November 2023, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2023/11/18/Türkiye-does-want-us-nato-presence-the-black-sea-navy-commander/>

¹⁵ Daria Isachenko, „The riparian logic of the Montreux Convention in Türkiye's Black Sea policy”, Naval War College Review, nr. 78, vol. 1-2, 2025, p. 79



All these ambiguities may also explain why Türkiye has not been assigned a clearly defined responsibility for European security within NATO's eastern flank. The absence of the Black Sea from the Alliance's security strategy may well be the effect of this ambiguity, rather than its cause. Ultimately, the control exercised by Ankara over the Straits, together with its history of interpreting the Montreux Convention, does not lend itself to the assignment of security responsibilities clearly grounded in the precise language of international law. Türkiye has its own agenda in the Black Sea, and this appears to be the sole principle guiding its policy, including within the regional security dynamics.



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RDI Policy Brief Series
ISSN 2066-5989
ISSN-L 2066-5989

Editing, layout, and graphics: Claudiu Codreanu

Cover photo: <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-large-military-ship-in-the-middle-of-a-body-of-water-eJ6UdgMMpO8>

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