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WHO WINS ON THE BLACK SEA? REGIONAL POWER COMPETITION AND THE ROLE OF TÜRKİYE

ABSTRACT: *The Black Sea region has emerged as a critical geopolitical hotspot, shaped by the intersection of great power competition, regional rivalries, and transnational security challenges. This paper examines Türkiye's evolving strategic role in the Black Sea, emphasizing its position as a key actor in the contest for influence among NATO, the European Union, and Russia. Türkiye's historical ties, geostrategic location, and military modernization have positioned it as both a regional stabilizer and a challenger to external influences. Drawing on the interplay between Türkiye's balancing diplomacy and its assertive foreign policy, the paper assesses how Ankara navigates its dual role as a NATO ally and a state with its own regional ambitions.*

Through an analysis of Türkiye's maritime strategy, economic interests, and security policies, the research explores its pivotal contributions to the regional security architecture, including its leadership in initiatives such as the Montreux Convention and the Black Sea Harmony operations. Additionally, the study evaluates Türkiye's relationships with key Black Sea stakeholders, including Ukraine, Russia, and Romania, and highlights the implications of its actions for broader Euro-Atlantic security. The paper concludes by reflecting on whether Türkiye's current trajectory enhances its ability to shape outcomes in the Black Sea or risks undermining its strategic autonomy amid intensifying global tensions. The study is based on qualitative analysis of primary sources, policy documents, and expert interviews, offering insights into Türkiye's potential to act as a regional powerbroker in a contested and rapidly transforming geopolitical landscape.

KEYWORDS: Black Sea Security; Geopolitical Competition; Türkiye.

1. Introduction

Türkiye has a strategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia by controlling the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, having the longest continuous stretch of the Black Sea, and being a NATO member with the second-largest land forces. (The Military Balance, 2023) Based on the Montreux Convention (1936), it has special jurisdiction—or, to quote Turkish experts, "sovereignty" (Bağcı, 2025)—to decide who may pass through these straits and holds the right to intercept foreign military powers entering the Black Sea. In this context, foreign refers to any state that does not have direct access to the Black Sea. The deep-rooted historical connection of Türkiye to the region, especially to the Crimea, and the gatekeeper position at the straits give a key player status for Ankara. This position has been further strengthened since the Russian Federation's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and more recently during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war since 2022. With the Black Sea now being referred to as a geopolitical hotspot, and the war providing an opportunity for external actors such as the United States and China to become involved, further questions are arising.

1. Does Türkiye have the potential to influence the security balance in the Black Sea?
2. What type of security threats can be identified in the Black Sea region, and how can Türkiye contribute to shaping regional stability?
3. How do these threats influence the European security landscape?
4. Where can we identify misunderstandings between the Turkish and other NATO perspectives?
5. Does Ankara need to constantly balance between being a NATO member or following its ambitions as a regional actor?

For the analytical framework of this paper, I will use a combined approach. To understand the regional interactions and security discourse, I will apply the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which provides a comprehensive understanding and is excellent for illustrating the security dilemmas in the Black Sea region. Additionally, I'll incorporate the neorealist approach to reflect on balancing power in the area, which is a key element of Turkish foreign policy as well.

This analysis is primarily conducted through document analysis and interviews with experts throughout Türkiye. In April 2025, I had the opportunity to meet with Prof. Dr. Giray SADIK, who is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at the Faculty of Political Science, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University (AYBU), Mehmet Oğuzhan TULUN and Teoman Ertuğrul TULUN, who are working as analysts at the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) in Ankara, Dr. Murat DEMIREL at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, and with Professor Huseyin Bağcı and İlber Coban at the Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ). All of their insights were incredibly helpful for my research project.

As regards of the main lines of the literature, there is now a growing body of analysis on Black Sea, but this was not always the case. From the end of the Cold War until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but most notably until the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war that has been raging since 2022, the region has not received sufficient attention. Since then, more research on the topic has been published. According to Stefan Meister (2019), the security dynamics in the region are fundamentally rooted in the conflict between Russian geopolitical ambitions and Western security policies. James Sherr's (2013) research highlights how Russia is using hybrid warfare and soft power pressure to advance its interests. According to Mustafa Aydın and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou (2010), the lack of regional cooperation further reinforces security dilemmas, as security is often used as a political tool for the domestic political goals of regional states. This perception is strongly influenced by the fact that in the region, there is still an active conflict between NATO member states, such as Türkiye and Greece, over the unresolved Cyprus issue. And last but not least, Elkhan Nuriyev (2015) shows how geopolitical competition and the intertwining of economic interests contribute to regional instability by analysing regional power structures.

My primary focus is directed at examining whether Türkiye is capable of influencing the regional security balance, and to what extent it is compelled to balance between competition and cooperation in order to achieve this.

2. A theoretical perspective

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), introduced by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, contends that international security is predominantly structured on a regional basis. (Buzan and Wæver 2003) States do not exist in isolation; rather, they form regional clusters wherein their security concerns are so intertwined that they must be analyzed together. Buzan (1983) originally defined a security complex as “*a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.*” (Buzan, 1983 p. 106) In other words, the security of each state in a region is deeply interdependent with the security of its neighbors.

In such a complex environment like the Black Sea, security interactions are high among the states. Buzan and Wæver also argue that the geographical closeness of states poses immediate threats or security concerns to each other, since over short distances threats are traveling faster. For example, during the Cold War, in fear of the aggressive expansion of the Soviet Union, Türkiye joined NATO in 1952. Then, right after the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008, where the opportunity for Georgia's future enlargement was discussed alongside that of other states, Russia initiated an attack against it. Now that Ukraine has expressed its desire to join the EU and NATO, this poses a threat to Russian interests and motivates Moscow to thwart any such attempts. Based on RSCT, patterns of alliance formations or rivalries can help to better understand their security behaviors and also to analyze Türkiye's regional interactions and balancing behaviour in the Black Sea.

Located on the Southeastern part of Europe, the Black Sea is enclosed and relatively small compared to other seas, also collects the water of surrounding countries: Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia. By geopolitical interpretation and classification of the Black Sea, the region is divided into three rings: an inner core with coastal states; outer core with the wider region (the Balkans, the Caucasus etc.) and a broader region (MENA, Central Asia, Southeast Europe) (Maisaia and Beselia, 2020, pp. 67).

Based on Ilter Turan's argument, we have to decide whether the Black Sea is viewed as an inland sea, or part of the global seas? Turan argues that if we define the Black Sea as an inland one, then this option gives primary responsibility for the littoral states to ensure its security. Whereas if we define it as part of the global seas, it may invite parties outside of the region to keep or counterbalance security (Turan, 2024, pp. 49).

From a neorealist perspective, where the international system is anarchic and no power controls or commands how states behave, security dilemmas arise due to a lack of trust in each other, and other states'

real or perceived ambitions. NATO enlargement - especially the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2004 - was seen by Moscow as an imbalance in the Black Sea, which it countered with offensive defense strategies. Since then, the region has been affected by asymmetrical threats such as terrorist groups like DAESH or Al-Kaida (Lesser, 2016), or by hybrid operations like the occupation of South-Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 or the occupation of the Crimea in 2014.

Alongside Russia, being a dominant power, Türkiye is directly affected by the actions of other littoral states of the Black Sea, but it has the potential to influence the regional security balance by the combination of diplomatic, military and economic tools as well. For instance, in the military sphere Ankara has pursued ambitious naval modernization through the MILGEM program (producing 31 new warships) and the deployment of cutting-edge assets like the TCG Anadolu—an amphibious assault ship designed as a “drone carrier” for unmanned combat aerial vehicles. (Trendsresearch.org, 2025) This naval buildup, driven by domestically built corvettes and frigates, has markedly improved Türkiye’s naval capabilities, narrowing the gap with Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. This enhancement is a clear sign of that Türkiye wants to project power in its surrounding waters. (Atlantic Council, 2024)

Concerning Russia, the Turkish standpoint means a sophisticated balance of power, but also a sophisticated regional cooperation. Türkiye’s maritime strategy (Blue Homeland – Mavi Vatan) clearly reflects this regional focus, which is focusing on expanding and securing Turkish rights in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the East Mediterranean region. It emphasizes the maritime role and power, that Türkiye need to protect its exclusive economic zones, continental shelf and maritime security. Ankara must constantly balance between cooperation and competition, therefore, it seeks to deter or offset Russian power in the Black Sea while avoiding direct confrontation, and it encourages NATO involvement in regional security but on terms that do not provoke excessive backlash or undermine Türkiye’s own influence (Aydin&Aydintasbas, 2025).

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War Türkiye has pursued a nuanced balancing act – described as a “triangular balance” by some analysts – wherein it strengthens its own naval capabilities and regional partnerships (e.g. with Ukraine and Georgia) to check Russia’s dominance, even as it maintains diplomatic and economic ties with Moscow, and meanwhile emphasizing its position within NATO. That is why Ankara supports Ukrainian sovereignty, but contrary to many NATO allies, doesn’t seek the total defeat of Russia. (Outzen, 2024) This behavior exemplifies the RSCT principle that Türkiye’s security policies are driven by regional threat perceptions and power dynamics. Rather than viewing its Black Sea strategy as a simple extension of global alliances, RSCT suggests Türkiye is responding to the regional security complex: navigating local rivalries and alignments to preserve stability and its own strategic autonomy. In sum, it contextualizes Türkiye’s actions within the Black Sea’s regional security architecture, characterized by interdependent security concerns and a constant balancing of relations to address proximate threats and power shifts.

3. Historical perspective of Türkiye's role at the Black Sea

The Black Sea has long been a theater of contest between Turkish (Ottoman) and Russian powers. After World War I and the Turkish War of Independence, Türkiye secured sovereign control over the straits through the Montreux Convention of 1936 and restored Türkiye's right to fortify and manage the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and imposed strict rules on military vessels transiting to the Black Sea. Under Montreux, non-Black Sea states' warships face limits on tonnage and duration of stay, effectively preventing any great power navy from dominating the Black Sea without Black Sea littoral status. (Isachenko and Swistek, 2023) This framework shaped the Cold War balance in the region. It meant that the Soviet Union enjoyed naval dominance in the Black Sea, but was limited to navigating outside the sea, while Türkiye, as the southern littoral gatekeeper, in response to Soviet pressures on the straits, aligned with NATO in 1952. The Montreux treaty's constraints meant the Black Sea remained a largely closed sea to outside navies, ensuring a delicate balance between Türkiye and the USSR (Colibasanu, 2024).

With the end of the Cold War, Türkiye championed regional cooperation to maintain Black Sea stability. It spearheaded the creation of BLACKSEAFOR (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group) in 2001, uniting all six littoral states' navies for search-and-rescue, humanitarian, and security exercises. The underlying principle was that Black Sea security is primarily the responsibility of coastal states themselves. (mfa.gov.tr (1)) In a 2004 joint communiqué, Black Sea countries affirmed that peace and stability in the area should be maintained through their own assets and cooperation, and that littoral states must jointly counter common threats such as terrorism, trafficking, and proliferation of WMDs. In the same year, Türkiye launched Operation Black Sea Harmony as a national naval operation that aimed to deter terrorism and illicit trafficking, parallel to NATO's post 9/11 maritime security efforts. It is worth mentioning that both Ukraine and Russia have taken part of these initiatives since 2006 and 2007. (mfa.gov.tr (2)) They reflected Ankara's preference for regional ownership of security, limiting external (non-Black Sea) military involvement in line with the Montreux regime. According to İlder Turan, the entry of global powers into the Black Sea risks triggering competition or direct confrontation with littoral states, thereby altering the regional balance of power and introducing new sources of tension. Consequently, despite subsequent strains—most notably following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which severely undermined regional trust—historical patterns reveal Türkiye's consistent efforts to preserve the Black Sea as a zone of cooperation governed primarily by littoral actors. Türkiye has also demonstrated support for initiatives led by other coastal states aimed at maintaining regional equilibrium.

4. Geopolitical Tensions and Military Conflicts

Mistrust is a fundamental determinant of security perceptions and policy choices between states (Meister, 2019). Russia consistently interprets NATO's enlargement to the East as an existential threat to its own security, legitimizing its military actions, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or its acts of war against Ukraine. These actions have also generated security responses from NATO, for example, in the form of an increased military presence in the Black Sea (Sherr, 2013; Aydın & Triantaphyllou, 2010).

As a NATO member, Türkiye is formally aligned with Western security interests, yet in the Black Sea it has often exercised strategic caution. Ankara's policy emphasizes that Black Sea security should be maintained primarily by its littoral states, in line with the principle of "regional ownership" (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024). Turkish officials have long been wary of turning the Black Sea into an arena of great-power naval competition between NATO and Russia. For instance, Türkiye was wary of proposals in the 2000s for a stronger NATO naval presence in the Black Sea, viewing them as potentially provocative and at odds with the Montreux limitations. This wariness persisted even after Russia's aggression against Ukraine; Türkiye prefers a calibrated NATO footprint that doesn't upset the regional balance. Defense Minister Hulusi Akar's admonition in 2022 also highlighted that it was "better" for NATO warships to stay out of the Black Sea during the Ukraine conflict to avoid escalation (Gunduz, 2022).

Nonetheless, Türkiye does cooperate closely with NATO allies on Black Sea security within those legal confines. It participates in periodic NATO exercises and patrols (e.g. the annual Sea Breeze exercise led by the U.S. and Ukraine, and drills with Romania and Bulgaria). Notably, in 2023–2024 Türkiye took part in establishing a trilateral Mine Countermeasures Task Force with fellow NATO members Romania and Bulgaria. (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024) This task force, activated in 2024, is aimed at clearing drifting mines and ensuring safe navigation amid the Ukraine war's spillover risks. (Colibasanu, 2024) Because mine threats in the Black Sea endanger all coastal states' shipping, Türkiye's leadership in this NATO-aligned initiative demonstrates how it can bolster collective security without inviting large foreign armadas. In essence, Ankara seeks a balance: it fulfills its NATO obligations by enhancing Black Sea security cooperation, but it also communicates to allies that such actions must respect Montreux rules and Türkiye's desire to avoid direct military confrontation with Russia on its maritime flank. (Gunduz, 2022) This careful calibration allows Türkiye to benefit from NATO's support (e.g. intelligence sharing, capacity building) while retaining a degree of autonomy in how Black Sea security is managed.

A key element of this strategic autonomy and also a powerful driver of Türkiye's Black Sea strategy is energy exploration and exploitation, the security of trade routes and port developments. Hydrocarbon exploration in the Black Sea has been a recent strategic priority. In 2020, Türkiye's state oil company TPAO

made a massive natural gas discovery at the Sakarya gas field, in Türkiye's exclusive economic zone off the Black Sea coast. Initial finds of about 405 billion cubic meters were later upgraded to 540 bcm and beyond, making it the country's largest gas reserve (Gunduz, 2022). Turkish authorities heralded this discovery as a milestone toward energy independence, given Türkiye's heavy reliance on imported gas (historically ~45% from Russia) (Gunduz, 2022) Ankara rapidly deployed drilling vessels to develop Sakarya; by early 2023, the first gas was brought ashore via subsea pipeline to the new Filyos processing plant in Zonguldak. Once fully onstream, the Black Sea gas is expected to meet about 25–30% of Türkiye's annual domestic demand, significantly reducing the need for Russian gas imports (Daily Sabah, 2025).

This not only has economic benefits (improving Türkiye's trade balance and energy security) but also geopolitical implications, giving Türkiye slightly more leeway in its relations with Moscow. In addition to Sakarya, Türkiye continues exploratory surveys in the Black Sea for more oil and gas deposits. The government has invested in modern drillships and a supportive infrastructure at Filyos Port, which is being developed into an energy hub and Black Sea port complex. (Ports Europe, 2024) Filyos serves as the landing site for Black Sea gas and is poised to become a major terminal for processing and possibly exporting gas in the future. (Ports Europe, 2024) This bolstering of port infrastructure also enhances Türkiye's capacity for trade: a larger, modern port on the Black Sea can facilitate increased cargo throughput and integrate into new trade corridors. Since the Bosphorus is one of the busiest chokepoints in the world, carrying not only Turkish coastal shipping but also international commerce (including Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian grain and energy exports), it will remain crucial security and economic issue. Ensuring safe navigation is thus a national interest. Türkiye derives revenue from transit fees (for example, it has implemented a new pricing scheme for ships transiting the straits) and has a vital interest in preventing accidents or blockages that could disrupt trade and threaten Istanbul. The Black Sea also figures in China's Belt and Road Initiative as part of the "Middle Corridor" linking Asia to Europe via Türkiye, raising Ankara's stake in facilitating secure passage (Isachenko and Swistek, 2023).

Ankara's handling of the Black Sea Grain Initiative in 2022–2023 showcased its strategic economic and diplomatic role. As war risked strangling Ukraine's grain exports (critical to global food markets), Türkiye brokered, alongside the UN, an agreement between Ukraine and Russia to allow safe shipment of grain from Ukrainian Black Sea ports. The deal demonstrated Türkiye's ability to leverage its naval and diplomatic influence to keep trade flowing amid conflict. By providing naval coordination and inspection teams in Istanbul, Türkiye helped reopen a humanitarian and commercial lifeline while maintaining neutrality. This not only benefited global markets but also reinforced Türkiye's image as an indispensable player in Black Sea commerce and conflict mediation (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024). Although Russia later suspended participation,

Türkiye's initiative underscored how economic security (food supply chains) and maritime strategy intersect for Ankara.

5. Relations with Russia: Cooperation and Competition

Türkiye's relationship with Russia in the Black Sea is complex, defined by a mix of cooperation, rivalry, and mutual dependence. On one hand, the two countries have developed significant cooperation in recent years. Energy ties are substantial: Russia has been a top supplier of natural gas to Türkiye (via pipelines like Blue Stream and TurkStream under the Black Sea), and Russia's Rosatom is building Türkiye's first nuclear power plant. Ankara did not join Western sanctions on Russia after the 2014 Crimea annexation or the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024), and it has maintained open dialogue with Moscow. This pragmatic stance stems partly from economic interests (trade, tourism, energy) and a desire to keep Russia engaged diplomatically. Indeed, Türkiye has positioned itself as a mediator in conflicts involving Russia – highlighted by its role hosting peace talks and brokering the grain corridor during the Ukraine war. (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024)

On the other hand, Türkiye and Russia remain historical competitors for influence around the Black Sea and adjacent regions. Ankara was outspoken in rejecting Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, citing its commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and its cultural affinity with the Crimean Tatar community. (Coli-basanu, 2024) Türkiye has supplied Ukraine with armed Bayraktar TB2 drones and other military support, especially before and early in the 2022 war, signaling that it does not acquiesce to Russian hegemony in the Black Sea. Additionally, Turkish ambitions in the Caucasus and Central Asia often rub against Russian interests – for example, Türkiye backed Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, counter to Russia's Armenian alignment. In the Black Sea itself, competition for naval dominance has sharpened. Russia's militarization of Crimea (with new submarines, frigates, and anti-access missiles) initially tilted the balance in Moscow's favor after 2014. (Aydin and Aydintasbas, 2025) However, Ukrainian resistance and Western aid have since degraded Russian naval assets (e.g. the sinking of Moskva in 2022), and some analysts argue that the balance of power is shifting in Türkiye's favor as Russia's Black Sea Fleet suffers losses. (Aydin and Aydintasbas, 2025) Türkiye, with a modernizing navy largely intact and home-field advantage at the straits, stands to gain relative strength if Russia's fleet remains constrained by war damage and Montreux. Türkiye manages this delicate relationship by compartmentalizing issues. It continues collaboration with Russia in areas like energy and avoids direct military confrontation, yet it quietly reinforces regional partners (Ukraine, Georgia) and upholds Montreux to limit Russian expansion. Ankara's decision to close the straits to Russian warships in 2022 – effectively trapping certain Russian naval units – was a bold implementation of international law that

checked Russia's freedom of action. (Gunduz, 2022) Moscow, for its part, has accepted Türkiye's Montreux decision with some grumbling, as it benefits from Montreux in other ways (preventing US warships from easily entering Black Sea). The two states thus maintain a wary *modus vivendi*. Observers sometimes describe the Turkish-Russian dynamic as "cooperative rivalry": they coordinate when interests align (as in avoiding direct NATO-Russia naval clashes), but each seeks to maximize its influence in the Black Sea region at the other's expense when possible (Colibasanu, 2024). Türkiye's ultimate goal is to avoid being dominated by Russia while also avoiding outright hostility – a challenging balancing act that requires constant diplomatic finesse.

6. Relations with the European Union

The period from 2014 to 2025 saw significant evolution in relations between the European Union (EU) and Türkiye. The Black Sea's strategic importance for European security and for Türkiye's regional role emerged during this period, however, within the EU, there are still numerous issues that hinder the possibility of a deeper commitment with Türkiye, for example the country's accession to the EU or visa liberalization. The EU and Türkiye share an interest in countering threats like Russia's naval build-up and hybrid tactics in the area, countering terrorism and illegal traffic, though their approaches have sometimes differed.

Türkiye's involvement with European integration dates back to 1959, but accession negotiations started only in 2005 and after more than a ten-year period, the Council decided to suspend the negotiations on Türkiye's accession in 2018, since the expected reforms were not implemented. (European Commission, 2025) Taking into account the current global political processes, these steps could cause strategic disadvantages for the European Union. During the interview with Professor Dr. Giray SADIK in April 2025, he emphasized that "*while security initiatives and actions are welcomed by the EU, it doesn't want to share the burdens and the Turkish side is often excluded from the decision-making process that addresses common regional security issues.*" It happened in the case of Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2020 where Türkiye was left out from the cooperation, then in 2025 when the EU created its own strategy for a secure, prosperous and resilient Black Sea region, but treats Türkiye as a peripheral actor not as a core negotiator. (European External Action Service, 2025)

Experts from the AVIM noted that "*The European Union's closed-off attitude and irrational expectations towards Turkey push it away from Europe rather than bringing it closer, even though the European Union, due to its lack of capabilities, actually needs it.*" "*Unintentionally, but it pushes Türkiye towards China and Russia for cooperation*".

Despite political strains, Türkiye and some EU members have found common ground in practical maritime cooperation. Notably, in July 2023 the three Black Sea NATO allies (Türkiye, Romania, Bulgaria) activated a Mine Countermeasures Task Group (MCM Black Sea) based in Istanbul. The task force focuses on neutralizing drifting mines and ensuring safe navigation, which is especially vital after Russia's withdrawal from the UN-brokered grain corridor in 2023 (Güvenc, 2024).

7. NATO perspective

One of the major mistakes that the European Union and NATO have made, especially after 2008 is that the Black Sea region has been heavily neglected. This strategic mistake of the West provided room for competing powers to emerge. Control over these waters still plays a strategic role, not only for regional powers, but for great powers as well, especially in the current Russian-Ukrainian war (Flint, 2024). However, when analysing the security of the region, it is not only necessary to analyse the coastal states, but also the wider region and group of international players, such as the EU and NATO. The lack of taking seriously major conflicts in the region that appeared since 1990 (e.g., Transnistria 1992, Georgia 2008) unwillingly showed weakness, and left the region as a blind spot for the West (Minzarari, 2024). This situation has changed only after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, which was an eye-opening event in the eve of the 21st century, that there are still territorial claims of Russia. For the Europeans it was a weakening sign that they must take responsibility for their own defense, but on the other hand the Obama administration at that time didn't step up decisively enough regarding the incident (Camut, 2023).

Since then, the Black Sea region has emerged as a critical geostrategic zone, marked by a complex interplay of geopolitical, military, and economic interests. The confluence of major powers, unresolved conflicts, and resource competition underscores the persistent security dilemmas in the area. A key actor of the region is Türkiye, which has an exceptional role not only to guarantee the stability and security of the Black Sea, but in wider terms, to protect the Southeast-European region.

In its 2022 Strategic Concept, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) designated the Black Sea Region (BSR) as strategically significant for the Alliance, primarily due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite this recognition, NATO has not yet developed a comprehensive strategy for its critical south-eastern flank (Joja, 2024).

Türkiye's ties with other littoral NATO allies, like Romania and Bulgaria, are strong and rooted in alliance cooperation. All three coordinate within NATO's Black Sea initiatives, such as the joint mine-countermeasures task force, which is a concrete product of their cooperation (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024). Türkiye also often joins Black Sea exercises hosted by these countries. Moreover, as EU members, Romania and

Bulgaria are part of regional infrastructure and energy projects that Türkiye is involved in (for instance, gas interconnectors). Ankara views a stable and NATO-integrated western Black Sea (with Romania and Bulgaria) as a counterweight to Russian pressure in the eastern Black Sea. Albeit, some experts in Türkiye think that the US military presence, and naval operations might diminish the opportunities towards cooperation and balance. Also, as a regional power, Ankara emphasizes its own role in securing the Black Sea straits and the wider sea area.

Finally, Türkiye's regional posture involves presenting itself as a mediator and peace-broker when possible. Ankara's initial mediation efforts between Russia and Ukraine in early 2022 (hosting talks in Istanbul) and its role in the Black Sea Grain Deal are examples (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024). These efforts were welcomed by both West and East, elevating Türkiye's stature. By carving out a role as a facilitator, Türkiye reinforces its strategic autonomy – it neither fully joins Western sanctions nor endorses Russian aggression but rather tries to occupy a middle ground that can talk to both sides. This is in line with President Erdoğan's broader policy of making Türkiye a standalone regional power, one that is "*present both on the ground and at the table,*" to use his phrase (Isachenko and Kaymak, 2024). In the Black Sea, that means having the naval presence and military strength to secure its interests, while also being diplomatically agile to influence outcomes.

8. Turkish Naval Modernization

In response to regional conflicts and instabilities, Türkiye has significantly modernized its naval forces in the past two decades, bolstering its posture in the Black Sea and surrounding waters. A cornerstone is the "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) doctrine, which defines Türkiye's maritime sphere of interest across the Black Sea, Aegean, and Eastern Mediterranean. Introduced by naval strategists in the mid-2000s, Blue Homeland reflects Ankara's resolve to defend and assert its sovereignty in maritime domains, from the waters around Cyprus to the Black Sea shores (Trendsresearch, 2025) It serves as both a strategic vision and a rallying symbol for Turkish maritime ambitions, supported by robust naval exercises. For example, in 2022, the Turkish Navy conducted the Blue Homeland exercise simultaneously in the Black Sea, Aegean, and Mediterranean, showcasing its growing naval power. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared during these drills that "*we will continue to work until we become the strongest army in the region with our ships, submarines and weapon systems*" underlining Türkiye's intent to build the most formidable navy in its neighborhood (Gunduz, 2022).

To realize these ambitions, Ankara has invested heavily in domestic naval production and procurement. Through the National Warship project, it aims to design and build advanced corvettes and frigates, replacing older vessels with modern, multi-role warships. By now several *Ada*-class corvettes are in service, and the first *Istanbul*-class frigate (an enlarged MILGEM design) has been launched, enhancing anti-submarine and air defense capabilities in littoral waters. (Trendsresearch, 2025) Türkiye is also acquiring its third *Reis*-class submarines (TCG Muratreis) which was initiated through a contract signed on 22 June 2011 between Türkiye's Defence Industry Agency (SSB) and German shipbuilder Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) (Ekşi, 2025) and commissioned a light aircraft carrier, to serve as a drone carrier and amphibious assault platform. The planned modernization process includes anti-ship missiles like *Atmaca* as well, which gives modern sensors and air defense opportunities in naval operations (Ozberk, 2025).

9. Conclusions

Türkiye's maritime strategy in the Black Sea is characterized by a careful blend of military strength, legal authority, economic initiative, and diplomatic balancing. Historically, the Montreux Convention has provided the legal shield for Türkiye to assert control over the straits and manage the Black Sea as a semi-closed sea – a role that Ankara continues to uphold firmly as fundamental to regional security. Contemporary developments have tested this strategy: Russia's war in Ukraine, evolving NATO dynamics, and newfound energy resources all pose both challenges and opportunities. Türkiye has responded by modernizing its navy and embracing doctrines like *Blue Homeland* to project confidence, even as it avoids overtly antagonizing either NATO or Russia. The country's investments in Black Sea gas and port infrastructure signal that economic leverage is now part and parcel of maritime strategy, potentially reducing dependence on Russia and boosting Ankara's regional influence. At the geopolitical level, Türkiye performs a high-wire balancing act – one that prioritizes regional ownership and autonomy. Ankara's approach in the Black Sea exemplifies what Turkish policymakers call "strategic autonomy": the ability to make independent choices in line with national interests, sometimes frustrating its NATO allies but also earning respect for its local savvy. By leveraging legal frameworks like Montreux, Türkiye manages to keep both Russian and Western naval ambitions in check. By strengthening ties with neighbors and engaging in multilateral initiatives, it mitigates conflicts through cooperation. And by maintaining open dialogue with all sides, Türkiye maximizes its diplomatic flexibility as a mediator. In sum, Türkiye's Black Sea maritime strategy today is one of dynamic equilibrium – reinforcing its military and economic capabilities while carefully balancing between great powers. This strategy has thus far allowed Türkiye to navigate the turbulent waters of Black Sea geopolitics, preserving stability and securing its national interests. The coming years will likely demand continued agility from Ankara, as the outcomes of

the Ukraine war and shifting global alignments could redefine Black Sea security. Nonetheless, anchored by Montreux and empowered by its growing naval and economic clout, Türkiye is poised to remain a central actor in the Black Sea, deftly managing the interplay of cooperation and competition on its own terms.

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