



ALTERNATIVE FUTURES FOR THE BLACK SEA REGION

March 2021



Frontier Europe Initiative

Frontier Europe Initiative explores interactions between Middle East countries and their Frontier Europe neighbors – the parts of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus which form a frontier between Western Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. The program examines the growing energy, trade, security, and political relationships with the aim of developing greater understanding of the interplay between these strategically important regions.

About the author

Steven Kenney is the founder and principal of Foresight Vector LLC, an advisory firm he created to help organizations develop the strategies they need to achieve their greatest success. He is widely recognized for his expertise and more than twenty-five years' experience in the methods of strategic foresight and their application.

He has advised a wide variety of government, corporate, and non-profit sector organizations on how to create their future. Steven's work includes advisory engagements for top executives in Fortune 500 and other leading corporations. He has also designed and led engagements for top leaders in Cabinet-level departments of the U.S. government, and for dozens of U.S. and other nations' government agencies.



Photo by Sergei Malgavko \TASS via Getty Images

Contributors

PHILIP BREEDLOVE (GENERAL USAF RET)

Distinguished Chair, Frontier Europe Initiative

Philip Breedlove is a retired General of the United States Air Force. Highly decorated, he reached the pinnacle of the United States Military as one of six geographic Combatant Commanders and as Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. During 39 years of service, he held a variety of demanding command and staff positions: Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), Commander of US European Command; Commander, US Air Forces Europe and Air Forces Africa; Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force; and Assistant Chief of Staff for Air Operations, Plans and Requirements.

ANDREI COVATARIU

Non-Resident Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative

Andrei Covatariu is a senior research associate at Energy Policy Group, a Bucharest-based non-profit, independent think tank specializing in energy and climate policy, with a regional focus on Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Basin. Andrei is also a Member of the Board of the FEL-100, the community that gathers the most promising 100 young professionals in the energy sector worldwide, a program designed and coordinated by the World Energy Council in London.

ROSS HARRISON

Senior Fellow and Director of Research

Ross Harrison is a senior fellow and director of research at the Middle East Institute. He is also on the faculty of the Political Science Department at the University of Pittsburgh, where he teaches courses in “Middle East Politics” as well as “U.S. Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East.” He was on the faculty of the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University from 2004-2020, where he held the title of Professor in the Practice of International Affairs. He annually teaches a course on strategy and international security to senior Georgian government officials at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Tbilisi, Georgia, funded by the U.S. Department of State.

IULIA-SABINA JOJA, PH.D.

Senior Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative

Iulia-Sabina Joja is a senior fellow for the Frontier Europe Initiative and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. Iulia’s research and teachings focus primarily on European and Black Sea security. Prior to this, Iulia served as an adviser to the Romanian president and as a deputy project manager at NATO Allied Command Transformation in Virginia. She has worked with the Romanian delegation to the United Nations, the European Parliament, and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign

Affairs. Iulia was also a visiting scholar at the Center of Military History and Social Sciences of the German Armed Forces in Potsdam/Berlin and a DAAD post-doctoral fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

TAMARA KALANDIYA

Chief Financial and Operating Officer, MEI; Director, Frontier Europe Initiative

Tamara Kalandiya is director of the Frontier Europe Initiative and CFO and COO for MEI. In 2013, Tamara founded the Academy of Georgian Heritage, a non-profit organization bringing together the Georgian diaspora community in the U.S. and helping Georgian youth connect with their heritage. Prior to joining MEI, Tamara was based in Amman where she served as Regional Finance and Administrative Director for a global emergency response organization. In this role, she was responsible for the management and coordination of the organization's offices in Jordan, Syria, Israel, Palestine and Iraq. She also led the organization's emergency response program in Gaza. Between 2000 and 2005, Tamara was based in the Russian Federation as Head of Finance for a humanitarian mission in the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Ossetia).

ANA KHIZANISHVILI

Senior Fellow and Director of Policy and Research, Frontier Europe Initiative

Ana Khizanishvili is a senior fellow and director of policy and research for the Frontier Europe Initiative. Prior to joining MEI, Ana worked as a human rights expert at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for South Caucasus. She previously served as an advisor to the Administration of the Government of Georgia, developing cross-government human rights mechanisms and policies. She also has experience running a non-government organization focused on youth education. Ana has extensive experience advising governments in Eastern Europe on democratic reform, particularly around establishing policies on good governance, transparency, and human rights.

RYAN OLSON

Ryan Olson was a senior fellow for Frontier Europe Initiative where he focused on macroeconomics, trade and investment in the Black Sea region. Before joining MEI, Ryan led export market development activities for the North American grain industry, including participation and promotion of industry priorities related to negotiations of the USMCA, TPP and TTIP agreements. He also worked as a research associate at The Heritage Foundation's Center for Trade and Economics where he researched and wrote on issues including international political economy, economic development and trade.

GÖNÜL TOL, PH.D.

Director of Turkey Program; Senior Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative

Gönül Tol is the founding director of MEI's Turkey program and a senior fellow for the Frontier Europe Initiative. She is also an adjunct professor at George Washington University's Institute for Middle East Studies. After three years of field research in Germany and the Netherlands, she wrote her dissertation on the radicalization of the Turkish Islamist movement Millî Görüş in Western Europe. She was also an

adjunct professor at the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University. Gönül has taught courses on Islamist movements in Western Europe, Turkey, world politics, and the Middle East. She has written extensively on Turkey-U.S. relations, Turkish domestic politics, and foreign policy and the Kurdish issue. She is a frequent media commentator.

MAMUKA TSERETELI, PH.D.

Non-Resident Scholar, Frontier Europe Initiative

Mamuka Tsereteli is a senior fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at American Foreign Policy Council, based in Washington, DC. He has more than thirty years' experience in academia, diplomacy and business development. Mamuka's expertise includes economic and energy security in Europe and Eurasia, political and economic risk analysis and mitigation strategies, and business development in the Black Sea-Caspian region. Mamuka serves as President of the America-Georgia Business Council. He is a member of the part time faculty at Johns Hopkins SAIS and American University in Washington, DC.

ALEX VATANKA

Director of Iran Program; Senior Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative

Alex Vatanka specializes in Middle Eastern regional security affairs with a particular focus on Iran. Before joining MEI in 2009, he was a Senior Analyst at *Jane's* Information Group in London. Alex is also a Senior Fellow in Middle East Studies at the US Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) at Hurlburt Field and teaches as an Adjunct Professor at DISAS at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. His focus includes modern history of Iran; factional politics in the Islamic Republic; political-military relations in Iran; Iranian regional policies (with a particular South Caucasus, Central, Asia, the Gulf States, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan); and Iran's relations with countries such as the US, China, Russia and the EU states.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

METHODOLOGY

DRIVERS FOR BLACK SEA REGION ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

ALLIANCE EFFICACY

INFRASTRUCTURE TECH-NOMICS

SOCIETAL ACCORD

THE SCENARIOS

SCENARIO 1: MUDDY WATERS

SCENARIO 2: COMPASS UNMOORED

SCENARIO 3: MORE WALK, LESS TALK

SCENARIO 4: LET NO FLOWERS BLOOM

STRATEGIC THEMES

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS ON THE STRATEGIC THEMES

INTEGRATING ACTIONS ACROSS POLICY DOMAINS

SECOND ORDER THINKING IN SIGNALING

RAISING THE STAKES

Introduction

The last decade has seen significant growth in the strategic importance of the Black Sea and the nations bordering it. Shifting global and regional trade, energy, and geopolitical competition dynamics will only accelerate over the next ten years, and beyond. For the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union (EU), the Black Sea region is a potential lynchpin in advancing interests in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Of course, Black Sea nations pursue their own intentions and objectives with respect to these geographies, and with the “great powers” they collaborate and compete with.

There are no givens as to how these dynamics will play out over the next decade. Rather, there are many possible alternative futures for the Black Sea region and regional stakeholders. These futures will depend on a range of factors, including economics, politics, energy, alliances, and other regional dynamics.

The aim of this report is to inform the development of a U.S. Black Sea strategy by considering some of these alternative futures. Any strategy based on a single set of assumptions about the future is a strategy vulnerable to disruption. In the pages that follow, we paint pictures of the region from the vantage points of four different sets of assumptions. Our objective is to provide a richer basis for developing a more robust strategy for U.S. engagement in the region.

Methodology

Our process for developing our four scenarios builds from an initial research phase comprising environmental and horizon scanning. The scanning involves data collection on trends across the social, political, economic, military/security, technological and other spheres that have bearing on the future of the Black Sea region. We also collected data on early signs of newly emerging developments in these same spheres that analysis suggests are potentially important for the future of the region.

Every scenario development methodology uses a set of variables or dimensions as a framework representing defining parameters of the future scenarios. Our approach uses three variables. We refer to these as “drivers of change,” and we derive them from the data collected in the environmental and horizon scanning. The process of deriving the drivers involves an affinity grouping exercise that associates data points from the scanning into three categories that, in our assessment, represent particularly important causes of, or contributors to, change for the emerging future of the Black Sea region.

Each driver is defined by two obverse values or “poles” – materially different conditions at either end of the spectrum of possibility for that driver. Collectively, the combinations of the driver poles are the bounds of a set of alternative futures. As the maximum number of combinations of two poles of three drivers is eight, we consider the alternative future scenarios that “reside” at the eight corners of a three-dimensional strategic planning space (Figure 1). We describe the drivers and the poles identified for the Black Sea region future scenarios in the next section.

The scenarios are the narratives of the alternative futures. We examine the plausible “reality” of a number of issues and factors for the region in each narrative. Each combination of the driver poles suggests that each issue and factor logically “must be” one way in one scenario, and of a different nature in others. This enables insights into opportunities and threats that are characteristic of each scenario. It also creates awareness that current or planned behaviors on the part of actors with interests in the region could lead to risk or surprise if they were pursued in a given scenario. Finally, looking across the set of scenarios enables us to identify strategic decisions and actions that are vital to success in all or most of them because they address challenges and opportunities present in multiple alternative futures.



Photo by Maksym Voytenko/ Anadolu Agency/ Getty Images

Drivers for Black Sea Region Alternative Futures

We constructed our scenarios employing three drivers derived from our scanning: Alliance Efficacy, Infrastructure Tech-Nomics, and Societal Accord.

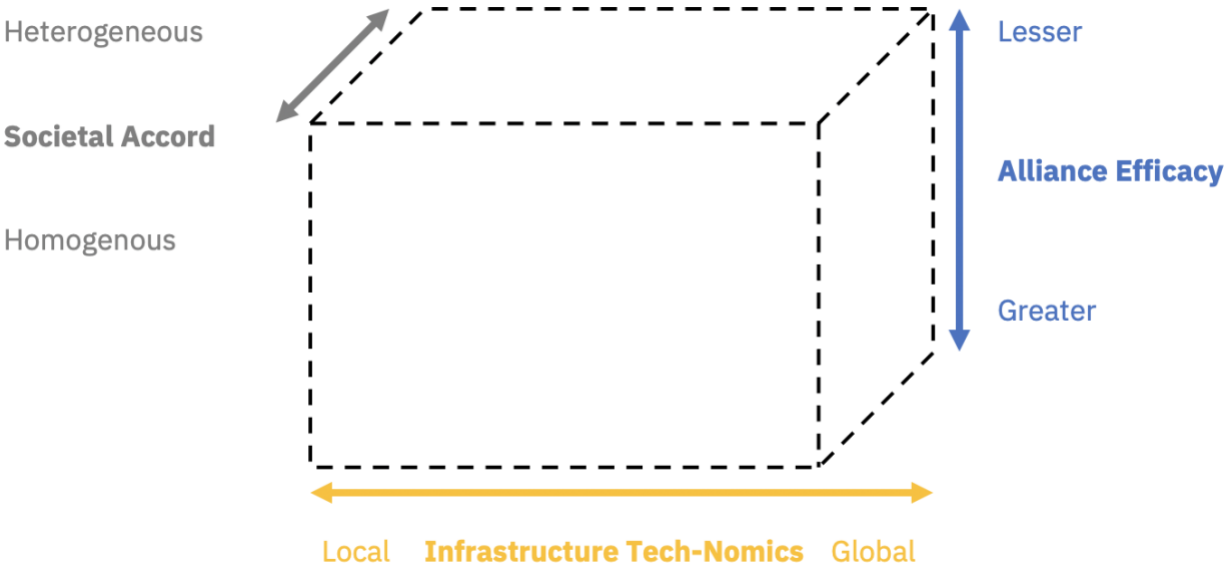


Figure 1: Three Drivers and their Poles in a Three-Dimensional Strategic Planning Space for Black Sea Region Alternative Future Scenarios

Alliance Efficacy



The Alliance Efficacy driver is determined by the effects that NATO and European Union (EU) structures and internal dynamics have on fostering alignment among the member states and the Black Sea littoral nations. Both NATO and the EU seek to create and deepen that alignment and have unquestionably had significant success in doing so. At the same time, bureaucratic politics and other dynamics of participation in NATO and the EU create frictions. These internal politics and dynamics include, but are

not limited to, the ongoing membership accession processes for Georgia and Ukraine (to both organizations), and for Turkey (to the EU).

The spectrum of possibility with regard to this driver considers the efficacy of NATO and the EU in promoting the fundamental objective of alignment. The pole at one end of that spectrum is **Greater Alliance Efficacy**. Here, NATO and the EU have the impact of strengthening alignment and unity of purpose among member states and the Black Sea states and are a stabilizing influence on relations. Other forms of alliance (bilateral, trilateral, region-centric, etc.) are viewed as complementary to NATO and EU ties. The pole at the other end of the spectrum is **Lesser Alliance Efficacy**. Here, the dynamics of NATO and the EU have the impact of undermining alignment or subjecting it to stresses, resulting in sometimes contentious relations. Other forms of alliance (bilateral, trilateral, region-centric) are viewed as orthogonal to increasingly contend with NATO and EU ties.

Greater or Lesser Alliance Efficacy will influence a wide range of issues in the region in the future. These include relations with Russia; implementing reforms in economic and governmental structures and processes; the pace and equity of economic development; burden sharing in defense; the policies and actions of intergovernmental and international organizations (World Trade Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc.); relations with China and other nations outside the region; and others.

Infrastructure Tech-Nomics



The Infrastructure Tech-Nomics driver is determined by the how the development of advanced infrastructure shapes and defines economic growth and geopolitical identity for the Black Sea region and its nations. For a variety of reasons, infrastructure in the region has historically been underdeveloped, but this stands to change significantly over the next decade. Infrastructure development will be pivotal to accelerating economic growth – growth that will in turn have implications for domestic political and social dynamics, alliance relations, and much more. Infrastructure development will also be also critical to connecting nations of the region with one another and with nations outside the immediate region (Western and Northern Europe, the U.S., China, and the Middle East).

This driver considers infrastructure for energy security and diversification (pipelines, ports, interconnectors, etc.) and transportation and logistics (ports, rail lines, roads, bridges, etc.). It also encompasses infrastructure for quality of life and business enablement (digital information and communication technology (ICT) networks; smart cities, etc.); food and water security; social welfare

(public health facilities, education facilities, emergency services, etc.); climate change adaptation and sustainability; and more.

The spectrum of possibility with regard to this driver considers the nature of the economic growth, social development, and geopolitical objectives that infrastructure development serves for the states of the region.

The pole at one end of the spectrum for Infrastructure Tech-Nomics is a **Local Focus**. Infrastructure investments are prioritized based on the contributions they make to the economic and social advancement of individual countries in the region and the region as a whole. The objectives are to lift standards of living across the board, benefiting all sectors of the economies and segments of the societies, while also trying to sustain the natural environments of the littoral nations.

The pole at the other end of the spectrum is a **Global Focus**. Infrastructure development projects and investments are prioritized based on their ability to solidify the Black Sea region's role and success in the global economy and global geopolitics. Infrastructure that benefits sectors of the economy more central to international trade and involvement of foreign partners receives disproportionate investment relative to other types of infrastructure.

Societal Accord



The Societal Accord driver focuses on the nature of internal political and social consensus across constituencies in the nations of the region. It considers how that consensus is reflected in governance effectiveness and stability, the conduct of domestic policy affairs, and the public's outlook on international partnerships. The spectrum of possibility with regard to this driver considers the degree of alignment around shared priorities, and around the societal institutions possessing the authority and resources to effectuate those priorities.

The pole at one end of this driver characterizes Societal Accord as **Homogeneous**. Civil society organizations and movements, business and entrepreneurial interests, and other types of communities have become more developed and progressive. They feel their equities are generally well represented by their governments, the business sector, and other institutions. Popular sentiment is generally attuned with how and where those institutions are leading the society. Trust across constituencies is high and trade-offs are constructive.

The pole at the other end characterizes Societal Accord as **Heterogeneous**. While institutions are respected and by and large supported by their citizens, a wide variety of constituencies exert considerable influence in the social order. Heterogeneous does not imply discord, but rather a diversity of priorities that impacts agreement on societal policies and objectives. The influence of different

constituencies is constructive in many ways, but some contexts create tensions and pressures on the overall social order. These constituencies encompass civil society and faith-based organizations and movements, entrepreneurial businesses, transnational institutions, multinational corporations, digital communities of interest, and others. Most are constructive in their impact, but some are malign influences such as organized crime, oligarchs, hacker communities, and others.

One dimension of the Societal Accord driver's impact is how the countries of the region are oriented geopolitically. At the homogeneous pole, there is a stronger, though by no means unitary, look to the West as a strategic orientation. At the heterogeneous pole, constituencies are more open to pursuing self-interests and to viewing national interests, with an eye to the East as well as to the West.



Photo by Vyacheslav Argenberg

The Scenarios

The scenarios that follow (Figure 2) are set in January 2027. The U.S. Presidential Administration that came into power on Inauguration Day in 2025 is at its halfway mark. Teams comprising members of the National Security Council, National Economic Council, and others are conducting strategy reviews on a range of key policy areas. One of the reviews concerns U.S. strategy for the Black Sea region. The scenarios represent four alternative backgrounders for the regional strategy review.

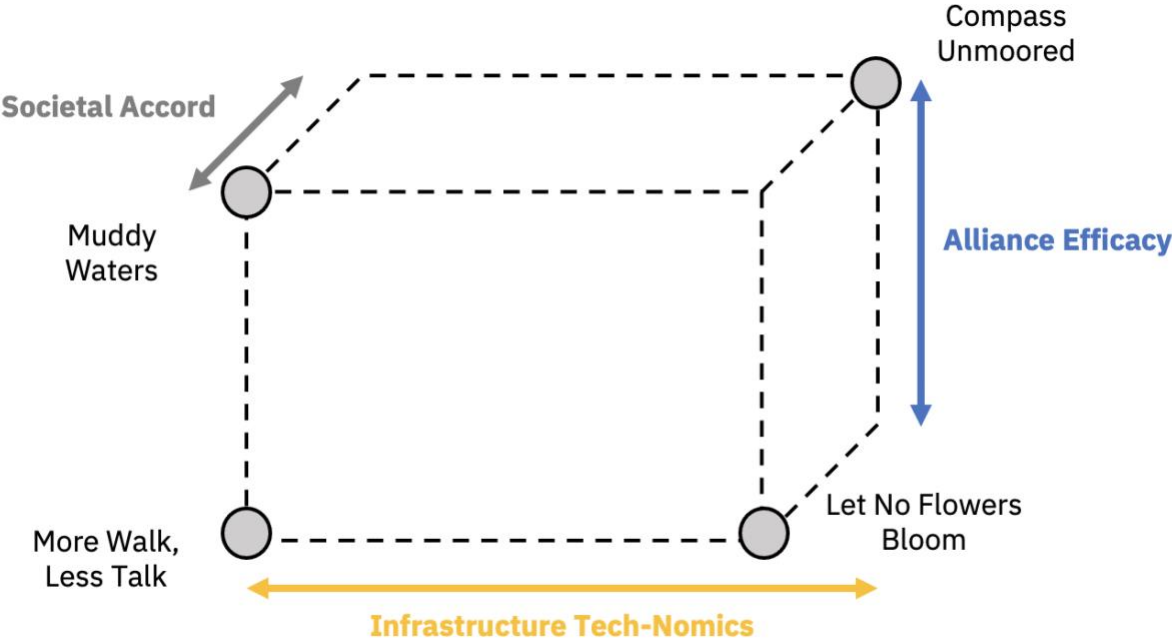


Figure 2: Four Alternative Future Scenarios (Year 2027) for the Black Sea Region

Scenario 1: Muddy Waters

Alliance Efficacy – Lesser

Infrastructure Tech-Nomics – Local Focus

Societal Accord – Homogenous

At their inaugural “Littoral Summit” meeting in 2023, the Bulgarian, Georgian, Romanian, Turkish, and Ukrainian heads of state described their transition to green energy as “committed but cautious.” Now four years later, the description remains apt – and it stands as a watchword phrase regarding much else in the region as well. NATO continues to voice support for Georgia and Ukraine, and the EU for both those states and Turkey, but their membership processes have not moved forward. U.S. and Western European private sector investment in the region has grown since 2022, but only modestly. Progress has been made toward better functioning and stronger democratic institutions but has been marked by occasional setbacks and reversals. Russia is a notable exception to the watchword. Moscow’s actions have indeed demonstrated commitment to a longstanding agenda in the region, but little caution.

Economies in the region have seen a slow rebound from COVID-19. Annual GDP growth has averaged only 2.5 percent since 2022 vs. IMF projections of nearly 4 percent. Ukraine and Russia have struggled the most. All the Black Sea countries have been affected by the slower than expected recovery also seen across the EU, which remains their largest trading partner.

On the whole, the Western orientation of the Black Sea states is stronger than ever. Governance and economic reforms have advanced everywhere other than Turkey and Russia. This reflects popular sentiment as well as governments’ efforts to align with EU and NATO principles and membership requirements. A confluence of factors nonetheless still stymies further expansion of the alliances. Continued Western European reliance on Russian energy is one, alongside years of questioning European solidarity and integration after Britain’s exit from the Union. The strongest force is persistent differences among members over how to contend with Russian aggression and the region’s no longer “frozen” conflicts.

The eagerness of the Black Sea states to align with the West is being demonstrated and rewarded more fruitfully in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). Membership in the 3SI forum and fund was opened to all Black Sea states (except Russia) in early 2022. They have leveraged it to bring the benefits of increased connectivity with Northern European neighbors to all segments of the populations. Greater availability of goods, job creation in 3SI projects, critical infrastructure, and digitalization of their economies are key results. Brussels has encouraged these activities as important boosts to Ukraine’s and Georgia’s “readiness” for EU membership. The United States also strongly supports the 3SI efforts in the Black Sea states. Washington has urged a particular focus on transportation infrastructure, highlighting the benefits of such projects for security. For example, new road and rail infrastructure would facilitate troop and equipment movements in the event of military conflict. Some bristle that U.S. messaging muddies the water about an intended commercially driven effort to build prosperity.

Across the region, industry leaders, social movement leaders, and other constituencies are aligned in their support of their governments' approach to infrastructure and economic development. It is reflective of a consensus that their countries' historical underdevelopment requires broad participation from all sectors and communities in underwriting the social contract. Between this and the deepened western orientation that 3SI membership has fostered, there is a greater sense of shared regional identity than since their emergence as independent nations.

3SI is also helping enable the transition to renewable and clean energy. Projects funded under the initiative are building, for example, offshore wind infrastructure and concentrated solar power (CSP) plants in Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine. The pace is modest, with the intent of protecting citizens from a too-rapid transition that could make energy for their homes unaffordable in the near term. The often cited "committed but cautious" quote has recently fanned EU friction with its current and aspirant Black Sea members. Brussels wants to see faster progress by Romania and Bulgaria in contributing to the European Green Deal goals. It has also called on Georgia, Ukraine, and Turkey for greater demonstrations of how they intend to meet membership obligations.

The EU carbon border tax, passed in 2023, is exacerbating frictions. Ukraine and Bulgaria rely on Chinese-made solar panels, the least expensive available. China has retaliated by diverting export of their panels to other markets not subject to the tax, further slowing the regional energy transition. Aspiring members Georgia and Ukraine are deeply concerned about this EU policy decision given their carbon intensive export sectors like steel and iron ore processing. The carbon tax also is hurting Russian exports to the region and to the rest of the EU. Moscow's retaliations have been more aggressive than Beijing's, including cyber incursions into EU power grid infrastructure and pipelines carrying non-Russian oil and gas, as well as disinformation campaigns, sanctions, raised energy prices, and blocked trade. These actions have been particularly disruptive for the poorer EU member states including Bulgaria and Romania and have extended to Ukraine and Georgia as well.

Russia's growing aggression in the region is in part an attempt to distract a restive domestic public from its own economic difficulties. Their actions span the spectrum of soft and hard power. In 2021, after renewed public entreaties to NATO by Georgia to accelerate its membership accession, Russia moved barbed wire and fences to further cut villagers off from farmland, water sources, and places of worship in the disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Military leaders in Moscow increased anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) capability deployments in Crimea in 2022, and in 2024 instituted a naval blockade of the Kerch Strait that remains in place now almost three years later. In early 2024, President Alexander Lukashenko relented to intense political and soft power manipulation and agreed to the Kremlin's pressure for a confederation with Belarus. The agreement included permanent Russian military basing in Babruysk, and in Grodno near the Polish border.

American and other NATO military presence and engagement in the region has remained stable, with little apparent impact on Russian behavior. For the U.S., this includes rotational fighter aircraft presence and regular airlift and tanker throughput at airbases in Turkey (Incirlik) and Romania (Mihail Kogălniceanu and Cămpia Turzii). Missile defense capabilities remain in Turkey and Romania (the "European Phased Adaptive Approach" radars). Periodic training force deployments also continue in both countries, as well as in Bulgaria, Georgia, and Ukraine.

After the imposition of the Kerch Strait blockade, all the other Black Sea states, joined by several NATO and EU member neighbors, argued for a strong stand against Russia. Both organizations have repeatedly denounced Russian actions and reiterated their support to security and stability in the region. They also increased economic aid to the Kyiv government and issued calls for a de-occupation of Crimea, the South Ossetia / Tskhinvali region, and Abkhazia, as well as negotiated settlements to the conflicts in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh. But they have stopped short of sanctions or increased military presence and countermoves. Russia has maintained a steady drumbeat on a narrative that such mixed signals from the West are anything but. President Vladimir Putin encapsulated that narrative in a speech in Kerch in 2024: “It is actually very clear,” he said, “The Black Sea states will never truly be accepted as true and equal members of these cynical alliances.”

While its littoral neighbors have increased their alignment with one another and with the west, Turkey has followed a bumpier path. The parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023 saw a fierce fight between the opposition parties and the Erdogan-led coalition made up of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the even more right-wing ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The opposition prevailed, but barely. The new President and Grand National Assembly moved quickly to begin reversing some of the Erdogan-era repression and unpopular economic and domestic policies. One prominent example is the abandonment of the Canal Istanbul project in early 2024.

Due to the sharp divisions in the country that have lasted beyond the election, the new Turkish government faces pressure to continue some policies that distract from its desired inward and reform focus. In the foreign policy sphere, Ankara is still engaged throughout the Middle East, and vocal with denunciations of Armenian actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Syrian refugees in the country have become an even more volatile issue. One reason Turkey is expanding its role in Syria is to force a resolution to the conflict so that refugees can be repatriated.

Like its neighbors, Turkey is moving forward with greater adoption of clean and renewable energy sources. This is in part out of necessity, as their Black Sea natural gas discovery in 2020 proved far less substantial than was first announced. At the same time, Turkey is partnered with Russia on the development of their nuclear power industry and remain a major importer of Russian natural gas. Turkey has been in an increasingly vulnerable position since 2024, with Ankara still reliant on Moscow for energy and trade, even as the two sides increasingly clash over Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh.

A growing “frenemies” dynamic has also marked relations between Turkey and the U.S. and Western Europe. On the one hand, the three-plus years since Erdogan’s defeat have seen increased cooperation in regional freedom of navigation and in the 3SI framework. At the same time, conflict over Turkey’s foreign policy, U.S. support to the Syrian Kurds, and other issues has grown.

When the Nagorno-Karabakh war exploded again in late 2026, the levels of violence this time were worse than in 2020. So too were the levels of distrust among interested external parties. Russia was first to intervene with combat forces. Under pressure from hardline domestic voices, Turkey was pulled into supporting Baku with drones and fighter aircraft, as well as facilitating the transit of Syrian mercenaries. Iran’s government denied providing any arms or other support to more than a thousand of its ethnic-Azeri citizens crossing the border to join the fight.

The situation brought into stark relief many of the uncertainties that the countries of the region and their western partners hold about what intentions and actions to expect of one another. In the lead up to the 2027 Littoral Summit – the first held in conjunction with the EU Summit – clarity about shared interests and commitments seems less than it was four years ago. As the five heads of state prepare, some in the press have jokingly called it the “Muddy Waters” summit, asking if cautious and committed realistically can co-exist.

Scenario 2: Compass Unmoored

Alliance Efficacy – Lesser

Infrastructure Tech-Nomics – Global Focus

Societal Accord – Heterogenous

As 2026 drew to a close last month, Ukraine's Minister of Infrastructure signed her country's third project agreement with the Chinese government, and seventh since 2023. Her counterparts in Georgia, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, and trade ministers throughout the region, have been equally busy over the last five years. Deals have also been signed with governments and corporate interests in the Middle East, Russia, the U.S., and Western Europe. The vibrance of the region's economies is a testament to their follow-through on a message sent as the pandemic began subsiding in autumn 2021: to all points on the compass, Black Sea states are open for business.

More than 50 percent of the region's trade and infrastructure development investment since 2023 has been with non-Western partners. China leads the way in terms of trade volume rise and FDI. But economic and investment activity has also increased with other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The Eurasian Customs Union has included all the littoral Black Sea states since 2025 (except Turkey and Georgia, both of which elected to maintain their arrangements with the EU).

The politics and obligations of NATO and the EU are a factor considered in these ventures, but only one factor among many. Turkey, Georgia, and Ukraine have made clear they have no intent or desire to withdraw from their ongoing accession processes, nor Romania or Bulgaria from their memberships. At the same time, they show little interest in advancing these largely stagnant processes. A variety of constituencies within these states argue against letting the alliances be impediments to other global economic and political dealings. Others are concerned about the risks this stance poses if the result is never gaining membership in valuable alliances.

Differing viewpoints on Western alliances are not the only sources of friction in the diminished societal consensus that characterizes each of the Black Sea states. Divergent interests also span issues of economic and social development, political reforms, energy policies and their impacts on people, and others. Intense focus on increasing the region's engagement in the global economy has led to laws and policies prioritizing the competitiveness and growth opportunities of selected key industry sectors, one of which is the tech sector. While a "digitalization flow down" to other domestic economy sectors has been a welcome side effect, the focus is on boosting the region's role in global software development and IT services commerce. Western European nations are among the growing customer base, but they are also concerned about the security of the technology given the Black Sea states' business relationships with China and Russia.

Government support to small business growth and family agricultural operations has declined. This has deepened divides between smaller cities and rural areas on the one hand and the urban centers where global-facing industries are largely centered. Authoritarian and oligarchic factions have taken advantage of divides to strengthen their political and social influence, as well as benefit economically.

Looking across the littoral nations (other than Russia), domestic discord is greatest in Turkey. The eastward orientation of the economy and the slide toward authoritarianism are among the strongest in the region, but these trends are just as strongly resisted by a sizable subset of the populace. President Erdogan remains in power after a two-term limit was deemed not applicable to him. Partnerships with China are numerous, with bilateral agreements in the energy, banking, automotive, and communications sectors and major “Belt and Road” infrastructure projects. China has overtaken Russia as Turkey’s largest trading partner. Huawei now has 70 percent market share in Turkey. Other Chinese tech companies now are controlling-share owners in several of the country’s key telecom and tech companies.

The energy picture in the region is markedly different than it was in 2020. Many of the infrastructure projects developed over the last six years focused on diversifying energy suppliers and transport routes. The focus has been more on natural gas – pipelines, LNG ports, etc. – than on wind, solar, and other renewables. Turkey is at the center of this, with projects to increase the country’s role as a gas transit hub for the region, and to get the gas it is extracting from its Black Sea fields to customers. The reserves they discovered in 2020 and 2021 turned out to be even greater than initial pronouncements. Turkey has become a significant supplier to states throughout the region as well as becoming more capable of meeting more of its own energy demand.

For all China’s successes in the region, the U.S. has been the primary external investor in developing Turkey’s gas fields. They have also invested in offshore exploration and development in Romania and Georgia, helping enable the former become a regional supplier and the latter decrease its dependence on external sources. Black Sea states’ openness to partners anywhere in the world emboldened U.S. investors to also bid on a number of energy, transportation, and digital infrastructure projects. Throughout the region, American companies won projects that might have otherwise gone to Western European or Chinese competitors.

Russia’s actions in the Black Sea have shifted to a lesser reliance on hard power over the last five years. Their two-pronged strategy involves stepped-up deal-making in energy markets and infrastructure development with economic and other soft power aggression in cases where deal-making fails. While it is not yet completely self-sufficient itself in natural gas, Turkey’s gas exports have reduced the region’s reliance on Russian gas, but the two countries’ relationship resides in the first prong of Russia’s strategy. Turkey has deepened its reliance on Russia in its nuclear power sector, and they are collaborating in manipulating the regional natural gas market. The latter is seen for example in the waiver of transit fees for LNG tankers of littoral states through Canal Istanbul, completed in 2025. Russia is also leveraging its nuclear power industry as a tool for both prongs of its strategy. That became clear when Bulgaria

withdrew from its MOU with the U.S. after Russia's offer in 2022 of a plant development and operation package significantly besting America's terms.

The security situation in the region is less volatile and conflictual since 2022. The increased global (including eastward-looking) economic engagement of the Black Sea states and the all-but-halted NATO and EU accession processes have diminished Moscow's threat perception. In addition, growth in corruption and authoritarianism, frustration with accelerating societal inequities, and other domestic factors have accelerated the Black Sea states' substantial brain drain. As younger and more democratically-minded people emigrated from the region, the potential for "color revolutions" declined. The unintended consequence has been to further reduce Russia's hard power incentives.

U.S. military force exercises and training in the region have been scaled back since 2023. One exception is U.S. Navy and Air Force freedom of navigation (FON) and freedom of airspace operations, which continue essentially as they have for many years. American airlift and tanker aircraft continue a steady but reduced throughput at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and MK Air Base in Romania. Rotational presence and training/exercise activities by other NATO member states have also been reduced. Some view the military force posture as an appropriate and successful reflection of the reduced level and risk of conflict. Others believe that Western military forces had only modest influence on the region's conflict dynamics even when their presence was higher. They attribute today's low levels of conflict more to the Black Sea states deemphasizing NATO and decoupling economic development aims from the EU. Few hold any illusion that Russia's fundamental objectives in the region have changed.

"But much else certainly has changed," Ukraine's Infrastructure Minister reflected as she boarded the aircraft to Dubai for her next round of negotiations on a new port project. The states of the region have acted more vigorously and independently in their economic and security interests over the last five years than ever before. All the external actors with stakes in the region have seen benefits to their interests in some ways, and seen those interests challenged in others. The door is open for any of them to further their position as strategic partners of even greater significance. Of course, the risks have changed as well, no longer as unitary as the threat of Russian aggression. Any one of these actors, with stakes deepened, have the potential to disrupt the ambitions of their Black Sea partners

Scenario 3: More Walk, Less Talk

Alliance Efficacy – Greater

Infrastructure Tech-Nomics – Local Focus

Societal Accord – Homogenous

Looking back, the COVID-19 pandemic, in all its tragedy, was also a turning point in the relationships between the nations of the Black Sea region, the U.S., and Western Europe.

In the spring of 2022, even with vaccines in wide distribution, an unexpected and severe new spike of the virus spread through the region. Responding to a viral disinformation campaign of its own design, Russia accused Ukraine's government of withholding care from ethnic Russians throughout the country. As protests erupted in Odessa, troops in unmarked uniforms (re)appeared, barricading roads and pledging to "restore order." The situation quickly escalated after Ukraine's outcry to the world against Russia's actions. When President Volodymyr Zelensky mobilized state armed forces, Russia redeployed forces from Crimea and seized control of sections of the city. Warships from Russia's Black Sea Fleet also moved to Odessa's shores. Georgia and Romania echoed Ukraine's call for a Western response. Reports (also fake) quickly spread on the internet of Tbilisi blocking WHO aid from reaching coronavirus victims in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Defused only after a months-long standoff, the situation gave new clarity of purpose to Western Europe and the U.S. with respect to the Black Sea region. In 2023, the EU launched a new line of effort integrating conflict transformation strategies and mediation in its agendas with Ukraine and Georgia (as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan). It was formalized as a fifth priority ("Stronger Security") of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), with funding equivalent to EaP's regional development and Comprehensive Institution Building programs combined.

America voiced strong support for the EaP effort, and seconded several top regional and conflict resolution experts to it from the State Department. But the U.S. has gone further. It called on NATO to open a formal dialogue on revising the Alliance rules that preclude membership for aspirant nations with unresolved territorial conflicts. In the meantime, America affirmed its bilateral security commitments to Ukraine and Georgia and stepped up its delivery of military capabilities and its training and exercising of their military forces.

Russia expectedly decried the move as a provocation. It followed with force deployment increases in Crimea, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia and "temporary" cutoffs of natural gas exports to all Black Sea littoral states. Three weeks later, the U.S. announced further boosts in military presence in the region. These include battalion-level rotations through Romania and prepositioning of Army equipment there at a level roughly equivalent to its Marine Corps equipment in Norway.

While these security tensions remain, the Black Sea region has advanced considerably in other ways over the last five years. The progress is a testament to the political unity and will and the economic enterprise of the governments and populations of the region.

Energy transition is one area of particular progress. The shift to clean and renewable sources is a priority and has progressed well since 2020. The pace is highest in Romania and Bulgaria among the Black Sea states. Both are now 30 percent more reliant than five years ago on renewables for electricity and in the transportation sector (electric vehicles). The EU has provided substantial European Green Deal financial support to boost renewables in Georgia, Ukraine, and Turkey, even in advance of their Alliance membership. In parallel, Russia is working to hobble the region's energy transition (Ukraine's in particular). Moscow is employing a variety of tactics to do so, including raising the price of natural gas, which much of the region is still reliant on.

A commitment to broad-based and locally focused economic and social development is shared throughout the region. Demographics are one driving force of this. Governments are mindful of caring for growing elderly populations and diminishing the inclination of younger generations to emigrate for better living conditions. Digitalization of every sector of all of the region's economies is seen as the primary fuel for an equitable rise in living standards. In collaboration with the increasingly flourishing local tech sector, governments have prioritized investments to modernize public health systems, education systems, rural broadband, and other types of infrastructure that are helping raise standards of living and create employment opportunities. The EU has supported these efforts with financial and other assistance. One major program is helping the agricultural and other industry sectors across the region improve their production processes to meet EU standards. This has already helped significantly increased their exports to Alliance member states. Reforms in judicial systems and private property laws and reductions in business regulation are boosting the opening and growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Turkey is aligned with its neighbors in the focus on democratization, energy transition, and betterment of quality of life for historically poorer segments of its population. The elections in 2023 yielded a new liberal government followed quickly by a move back to a parliamentary system. The new government is intent on rebuilding governmental institutions, reversing the brain drain, and reducing the politicization of the military. In the energy arena, Ankara is accelerating a shift to renewables. This is partly out of necessity, as the size of the natural gas discovery in the Black Sea in 2020 proved well less than originally thought. But the "greening" of the region is also helping Turkey's economic growth. For example, electric vehicle production in the country's automotive sector has skyrocketed to feed the strong demand of Southeastern, Central, and Eastern European states.

At the same time, Turkey remains more dependent than it would like on Russian gas exports and trade. Ankara is working to diversify its gas and oil suppliers, including increased collaboration with Azerbaijan and Iraq. The pipeline repeatedly attacked by ISIS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was repaired again in 2022 with new security and monitoring features, and a second was built in 2024. Russia is applying pressure against Turkey in retaliation, directly in the energy domain through price increases on

gas. Other forms of pressure include further buildup of its Black Sea Fleet assets and A2AD capabilities in Crimea, and repressive measures against the Crimean Tatar population.

For the U.S., engagement in the Black Sea is emblematic of the “pragmatic and principled” approach it has taken to its global role over the last five years. While occupied with domestic issues, America has worked to demonstrate that collaborating with allies not only strengthens its standing but also boosts prosperity at home. Its economic interests in the Black Sea region have grown, including a sizeable increase in Ford’s presence in Turkey, resulting in a larger market share in Europe’s electric vehicle market. U.S. companies have also benefited from their role in co-developing a solar industry centered in Romania, increased participation in offshore gas exploitation, a significant increase in its LNG exports, increased defense industry offsets with Romania, and other ventures in the region.

Collaboration with Black Sea partners and NATO is part of U.S. efforts to transform the conflicts that continue to roil the Middle East. Turkey is a key partner with the U.S. The focus for the two nations is promoting stability over any particular political solution or advantage in rivalries with MENA regional powers. Georgia, Ukraine, and the other Black Sea states are supporting these efforts with military and humanitarian forces. Their dedication is reinforced by new commitments they have seen from the U.S. and the EU to their security. All are also invested in ensuring the levels of refugee flows and other “overflow” impacts on the Black Sea states from the MENA conflicts do not resume.

Russia has played a relatively muted role in the Middle East and its conflicts in the last three years. This is partly a result of years of over-extension there, combined with a focus on their “near abroad.” Their priority is preventing further expansion of EU engagement in the Black Sea’s “frozen conflicts” or additional increases in U.S. military presence.

Efforts toward more “walking the walk” of U.S. and Western European security and economic engagement in the Black Sea has not been without conflict or cost. Investments in military force improvements and security sector reform in Georgia and Ukraine have diverted resources from economic development. While not derailed from its urgent domestic “post-Erdogan renaissance” agenda, Turkey’s role in supporting Middle East conflict resolution efforts has redirected some of the new Ankara government’s attention and resources. America’s security support for Ukraine and Georgia and advocacy of revising NATO accession terms has been met with incessant Russian harassment of NATO freedom of navigation and airspace operations. Following recent transits of U.S., German, and UK naval vessels through the Bosphorus under the Romanian flag, Moscow imposed economic sanctions against Turkey and Romania.

Some point to these challenges and question the stances that the U.S., Western Europe, and the Black Sea states have adopted in their partnerships. But the mutually beneficial economic growth of the partners has steadily grown. And there have been no shots fired in anger in the region since Russia’s move on Odessa back in 2022.

Scenario 4: Let No Flowers Bloom

Alliance Efficacy – Greater

Infrastructure Tech-Nomics – Global Focus

Societal Accord – Homogenous

The “worry list” in the Black Sea region for U.S. foreign policy leadership used to be dominated by Russia’s hard and soft power plays. While Putin’s successor has moved in some unexpected liberal and democratic directions since the 2024 election, worries about Moscow deservedly remain. But irrespective of anything Russia is or isn’t doing, today most of those in the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom with Black Sea portfolios are focused on China.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) made an impressive march across the world during its first decade. Since 2013 it has taken full advantage of the eagerness for economic and infrastructure development spanning East Asia to Europe. For Black Sea states, significant time and energy was invested in discussing possible BRI projects, but actual project starts were consistently delayed. Their push to jumpstart their post-COVID economy recovery created opportunities for China. In 2021, governments in the region were still on the margins of the priority projects in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). Their preference for 3SI was strong, but so was the motivation to rapidly enhance their role in global trade flows and energy markets. Between 2021 and 2023, China pushed hard to fill the void. New port and rail projects began in Georgia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

The U.S. embarked on a more nuanced approach to China in 2021. But competition has ratcheted up since 2023 after the surprise deal making China a strategic partner in Saudi Arabia’s revamped Vision 2030. A top priority today is countering China’s role in supply chains and the digitalization of economies in areas of the world important to American interests, including the Black Sea.

American economic, national security, and other policy makers are working in concert with their counterparts in Europe. The aim is a multi-dimensional partnership with the Black Sea states. A key dimension of the partnership is keeping national security risks out of high technology industries in the region, through pledges to review foreign investments in these industries by new agencies similar to America’s Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS). Another element is the set of strict EU policies against subsidies that benefit Chinese companies vying for projects. At the same time, the approach is not just to obstruct Chinese ventures. Even more important are U.S. and European efforts to make western alternatives attractive in the mutual benefits they offer. As a result, infrastructure development in the region is booming with American and Western European participation.

U.S. companies are working with partners from Dubai on key port projects including the revived Anaklia project in Georgia, Chornomorsk in Ukraine, and others. Nokia and Verizon teamed up in late 2023 to win bids throughout the region to build 5G networks, aided in the competitions by their openness to EU security certification. Pipelines and other infrastructure to develop the substantial Turkish and Romanian natural gas fields are helping transform the energy security picture. Several of these projects were

constructed and are now operated by a Turkish-Romanian-U.S. joint venture. Turkey has become a significant supplier of gas to other Black Sea states and elsewhere in Southern Europe, and Romania is a growing supplier to Central Europe. Rail links built under 3SI are moving growing volumes of trade through the region. U.S. investment in the 3SI Fund quadrupled in 2024 from the initial \$1 billion commitment made in 2020.

Black Sea states see their strategic significance more recognized than ever before as the nexus between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. They are working hard to leverage this position. They also recognize the vulnerabilities that remain as their value to the West rises. While Russia has been less disruptive, their military forces remain entrenched in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow also retains leverage with its energy exports, though that has diminished with Romania's and Turkey's emergence as gas suppliers, alongside Azerbaijan's significant exports. All agree that the prospect of any military conflict with China in the region is nil. But the exercise of Chinese soft power is a growing risk.

A magnified geostrategic role for the Black Sea states, alongside enduring security challenges, fueled a new outlook on inclusion in NATO and the EU. Nearly all members acknowledged the need and value of evolving the alliances, with a strong voice from the U.S. A "multi-speed" approach has emerged in both. Some had resisted this for years as divisive and discriminatory. Others had long said it was already de facto the reality. In 2025, all parties formalized the idea of no longer allowing the perfect to be the adversary of the good.

In the EU, the new dynamic is not one of "core" or "first tier" vs. "marginal" or "second tier" states, but of varied integration. A number of formalized internal groupings are based around the EU's different challenges and opportunities. The Customs Union was expanded in 2025 to include all the Black Sea states as well as the Western Balkans. Defense integration moved forward with some of the Eastern Partnership states. Particular focus is on support for Georgia and Ukraine in intelligence services, cyber security, and security sector reform.

The defense integration efforts dovetail with moves that began in 2024 among NATO members for a multi-speed approach there as well. One significant change was the approval of "coalitions" inside existing Alliance military structures, enabling sub-groups of member states to pursue specific objectives and operations using NATO decision-making processes when not all Allies wish to participate. A second important change entails allowing Alliance members a military force presence in aspirant member states. There is also an "opt in" pledge to defend aspirant states in the event of an attack, under a NATO flag rather than as an operation under a bilateral commitment. In 2025, the U.S., UK, Canada, Romania, Poland, and the three Baltic states declared that intent with respect to Georgia and Ukraine.

Russia's criticisms of these NATO members' decisions and actions were no surprise, but the Kremlin has stopped short of actions to challenge them. Chief among its motives for restraint is a sea change in its threat perception and relations with China. Over the last five years, a variety of factors made the unbalanced and unequal China-Russia partnership increasingly lopsided. Their trade imbalance has increased substantially, leaving China with considerably more power as a buyer than Russia has as a

supplier. The overall economic gap has widened to China standing today at more than ten times the size of Russia's economy. It has also increased its lead in a number of critical technology areas.

But more than the numbers, the geopolitics of China's economic expansion are what drives Russia's concern. China's dominant trade partner and investor role in Central Asia and the South Caucasus increasingly left Russia feeling as encircled as NATO and EU's expansion in the 1990s did. The indirect support Beijing provided to the revolution that finally toppled President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus in 2024 cemented Russia's view. There is now a shared interest with the U.S. and its European allies to counter China's presence in the Black Sea region.

Russia has another motive as well. Its collaboration with the west on China has helped Moscow secure renewals of long-term natural gas contracts with Germany, France, Austria, and the UK. These relationships are more critical than ever as Turkey, Romania, and Azerbaijan gain share in Southern and Central Europe's gas markets. That growing risk to Moscow's economy is undermining the support of key domestic political figures in working with the west with respect to China.

Turkey's growing role and ambitions in the regional energy economy are disrupting the pursuit of shared interests in the region in other ways as well. Since coming to power in 2023, the new government has done much to reverse the course charted by Erdogan for many years. It extricated the country from many economic, infrastructure, and other ties the former president had forged with China. Most of those infrastructure projects have moved forward instead under 3SI. A troublesome exception to Turkey's harmony with its allies is its increasing actions to claim and develop gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara has pushed back on every effort by the U.S. and others to intervene, secure in the leverage that comes with Turkey's pivotal role in the regional approach to containing China. Russia has applied pressure as well, as Turkey's course would give them even greater advantage in the gas competition.

Nagorno-Karabakh is another fissure in the unity of effort. Tensions have flared into violence twice since 2024 despite a near doubling of Russian peacekeeping forces there. With Armenia and Azerbaijan outside the "multi-speed" NATO and EU, this represents a vulnerability that China has worked to exploit. Beijing has voiced increasingly harsh criticisms of Russian and western inaction, putting Chinese investments in the two countries in jeopardy. At the same time, they have stepped up armed drone sales to both sides.

For all its efforts to counter the blocking moves of the U.S. and its allies, China's momentum in the Black Sea region is diminished compared to its peak in 2023. Rather than "a thousand flowers blooming" there through the BRI, the growth of its influence has seen more and more limits. At the same time, there is little doubt that Beijing will persist in its objectives. On the worry list of some is whether



Photo by Ozan Kose/AFP via Getty Images

Strategic Themes

Exploring alternative scenarios provides an opportunity to consider differences in perspective and behaviors by key actors in different futures. We also look for parallels that emerge, regardless of or even despite the different conditions and perspectives. Those parallels can point to strategic imperatives – actions and behaviors that are important for success not just in one or another future, but in multiple different futures.

Looking across the scenarios, one of the most important observations is how the four different combinations of drivers influence U.S. motivations for engagement in the Black Sea region. In “Muddy Waters,” the lens is one of necessity – economic as well as security investments are to protect America’s position in a Russia-centric great power competition. In “Compass Unmoored,” that competition recedes more to the background, in part by virtue of the Black Sea states’ “unaffiliated” economic and foreign policy orientation. Here America’s perspective on engagement in the region is one of opportunity – to advance its interests, primarily economically. In the “More Walk, Less Talk” and “Let No Flowers Bloom” scenarios, the U.S. perspective is more dual-lens. In both, engagement benefits America’s economic interests and advances (rather than defends) its position in a great power competition that is more multidimensional than in the first two scenarios.

While operating from different motivations in different scenarios, parallels in some of the outgrowths of U.S. actions and behaviors suggest **three themes** meriting exploration in future thinking about U.S. strategy in the region. One theme has to do with the amplifying effects that actions in one policy domain can have on others, suggesting the importance of purposefully **integrating actions across domains**. A second theme has to do with the messaging that policy actions can send about intentions and commitment, suggesting the need for **second-order thinking in signaling**. The third theme has to do with the level and nature of U.S. investment in regional engagement, suggesting the value of **raising the stakes** to scale the returns on those investments.

We can see these themes and their outgrowths in each of the scenarios. In “Muddy Waters,” reticence to deepen investment in security relationships with regional partners is mirrored in modest economic investment. Actions like investment in 3SI and economic aid to Ukraine demonstrate commitment in the eyes of some but give rise to doubt in others about the depth of that commitment. The aggregate effect contributes to an undermined stability in the region. In “Compass Unmoored,” U.S. actions across policy domains are aligned as competition in the energy, infrastructure, and other economic spheres unambiguously takes precedence over confrontation on security issues. One result – perhaps somewhat counterintuitively – is reduced Russian aggression, along with boosts to the U.S. and regional economies. In “More Walk, Less Talk,” the U.S. raises the stakes not only in terms of economic investment, but also in its rhetorical and material investment in security relationships. American

industry, stature on the global stage, and influence over regional stability all gain. In “Let No Flowers Bloom,” we see dynamics similar to the previous scenario. Well defined commitment and bold strokes in security, economic, and other domains reinforce one another. Collectively they contribute to a strong U.S. position in the global competition with China and strong economic growth rooted in the Black Sea region.

Concluding Observations on the Strategic Themes

We conclude our exploration of alternative futures for the Black Sea region with some observations about the strategic themes that emerge across the four scenarios.

Integrating Actions Across Policy Domains

It is a truism that geopolitics in every part of the world are complex. But our scenarios show the Black Sea as complex in ways that drive home the need for an integrated strategic outlook and associated actions. The grammar is meaningful here. The geopolitics of the region are not just complex in the sense of being difficult, as that word is most frequently used. They are complex because the elements are hard to separate or to analyze in isolation – a whole made up of complicated and increasingly interrelated parts. And they are complex in that they interact with dynamics in other regions (Western Europe, Asia, and the Middle East) where the U.S. has profound economic and security interests.

In each of the scenarios, there is a defense and deterrence element, as armed conflict involving some of the largest military forces in the world is a real possibility. There is an economic development element, comprising both what the region's states seek and what external powers can gain economically from supporting those aspirations. There is an energy security element, locally and more broadly as the region develops its potential to serve energy needs beyond its own. There are domestic political-social elements, encompassing risks from corruption, authoritarianism, sectarianism, and other disruptive forces. Other moving parts beyond these are all also salient to the region's future security.

Actions by the U.S. – or any actor – to create intended effects in any one of these areas have always had ripple effects. But our scenarios suggest that these ripples will be increasingly difficult to anticipate by those directing the actions that initiate them. It makes truly integrated strategy and action essential. Decisionmakers overseeing the defense, economic, development, governance reform, and other policy domains in the Black Sea region in the future must increase their dialogues with one another. At the same time, they must adjust the objectives of those dialogues beyond just recognizing interdependencies to also deliberating creating them. In our scenarios where this is the norm, outcomes prove better both for the U.S. and for the region. Business and industry leaders, social sector leaders, and other should be integral to this, to create synergies between public and private priorities and the means of pursuing them.

Second Order Thinking in Signaling

This range of futures for the Black Sea region demonstrates the importance of deeply considered signaling between stakeholders regarding intentions and objectives. The burgeoning interrelationships among actions in different policy domains, as seen in these future scenarios, suggest a growing potential for signals to become crossed, garbled, or muted. Economic ventures between governments and even businesses of different countries will convey political aims, and vice versa. In the real-world, as in these

future scenarios, there will be multiple layers of meaning in support for or opposition any number of policy and other actions. This will be especially true with regard to choices on alternative energy security options, institutional reform initiatives, alliance politics, and infrastructure development collaborations. Positions taken by governments and other actors in one sphere will be perceived – sometimes rightly, sometimes not – as also conveying intent in other spheres.

At the same time, perceptions on the part of leaders in every sector, as well as among publics, are increasingly subject and vulnerable to manipulation. Russia is noteworthy in its efforts and sophistication in weaponizing such perceptions, but they are hardly alone in doing so. This will make signaling and counter-signaling a multi-level chess game in all these areas in any future. What is interpreted, not just what is communicated, will be of critical importance among the Black Sea states and their allies, and to adversaries.

It will be increasingly critical in the future to think through second and third order consequences of the signals that policy actions in the region send. Decisionmakers will need to craft strategies that align signals with intentions rigorously as well as artfully. There will also be a need for greater focus on ensuring signals are mutually reinforcing. In different ways in each scenario, disconnects or doubts about the intentions of actions in one policy domain relative to intentions in other policy domains are consequential. The same will be true in real-world relations in the region if this theme is not considered in strategy-making.

One thing the scenarios suggest is that success in a future Black Sea regional strategy does not demand total transparency in signaling at all times – far from it. Ambiguity serves important purposes (when it is intentional). It can create uncertainty in adversaries, potentially causing them to be risk averse or even self-deterred in competitive choices relevant to U.S. choices. Ambiguity can accelerate movement toward desired policy outcomes, spurring allies to clarify and declare their own intentions in order to gain a clearer understanding of benefits and risks. But inadvertent ambiguity can undermine confidence among ambivalent or even strong Black Sea partners in the depth of commitments to shared interests. It can also embolden adversaries to assume lack of will or aid them in promoting false narratives of lack of will.

Raising the Stakes

There can be no true security in the Black Sea region without economic growth and prosperity. And prosperity is not realistically possible in the absence of security. This kind of virtuous circle has to be built through investment by all parties in both halves of the circle.

Our scenarios suggest that current levels of U.S. and Western European economic interests in the region won't create the momentum needed to advance mutual interests for the future. Increasing what's at stake economically would naturally increase the motivation to also deepen security commitments. And a more stable security environment will protect those investments and embolden additional investors to go bigger. Greater economic returns from engagement in the Black Sea region could be the difference for future U.S. administrations in making the case for defense and security investment.

It is just as important for the states of the region to raise the stakes in incentivizing Western commitments to the region's prosperity and security. They have done considerable work and had considerable success creating more stable investment environments through economic and governance reforms. The opportunities and risks across the range of future environments we considered in our scenarios demonstrate the importance of sustaining, and where possible boosting, that momentum. This means not only taking difficult actions against vested interests. It also means engaging populations on the importance of unified support for domestic political and other actions that would accelerate U.S. and European economic activity.

Finally, raising the stakes may also mean considering where "co-opetition" may make sense. Broadening participation in multilateral economic deals to include actors that are adversaries in the region in other domains (or even in other activities in the economic domain) can have benefits. It can have signaling benefits as well. It's a tactic that clearly bears risks and thus demands thoughtful safeguards and contingency plans. But it also raises the cost for all parties of disrupting the status quo, which could have outsized positive impacts on security in the region and the shared interests of the Black Sea states and the West.

