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Escalating rivalries and diverging interests: prospects for stability and security in the Black Sea region

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The Black Sea region is increasingly becoming a priority on the international agenda. In fact, a regional approach is emerging as actors understand that common problems need to be addressed jointly. Nevertheless, cooperation efforts are hampered by a number of factors, such as uneven economic and political development within and among countries, nationalist forces and longstanding animosities between regional players. In this context, it is imperative to foster sound policies aimed at strengthening dialogue and cooperation so as to contain and ultimately resolve conflicts with peaceful means. However, there is little policy-oriented research on the challenges and opportunities for cooperation in the Black Sea region. This study is primarily devoted to exploring and understanding the security environment and the main threats to security and stability in the Black Sea region.

Keywords: Black Sea region; European Union; Russia; security; Turkey; United States

Introduction

The Black Sea region transformed itself from a static border region to an active and central one connecting East and West, as the Cold War era ended and a new period began. Upon the demise of the Eastern Bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many new factors with divergent interest emerged in this new region. Ultimately, the number of different actors and interests are more numerous than their counterparts during the Cold War era. One, thus, encounters a whole new set of political, economic and social issues in this new era. Despite the importance of these new dynamics, the Black Sea region did not receive particular attention in the immediate aftermath of the post-Cold War years. Priority was given to Central and Eastern Europe by Western nations as well as by international institutions and organisations. From their perspective, the Black Sea was not perceived as a distinct and priority region. Consequently, it is difficult to find significant attempts to define and emphasise a distinct Black Sea region throughout the 1990s. As a result, the Black Sea area remained largely outside the radar screen of the reform and integration agenda of the transatlantic world.

This process began to change, as Eastern European countries were included into the European Union (EU) and NATO's security umbrella. Since 2000, the Black Sea

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region became an important factor in the make-up of security and stability in Europe and Asia. In strictly geographic terms, it is difficult to specify its boundaries, since there are numerous regional and sub-regional structures involved. During the post-Cold War period, there has been a policy of opening to several neighbouring areas, including the Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Caspian region. This kind of openness makes it difficult to define both the nature of the region as well as its borders. This expansiveness is reflected in terms such as 'Black-Caspian Seas Region' or 'Black-Mediterranean Seas Region'. Some analysts have even argued that the Black Sea region is simply an intellectual invention. However, despite the fact that the process of regional formation is incomplete and a consensual definition that satisfies all parties involved has not yet emerged, there exists a *de facto* Black Sea region.¹

Despite the confusion regarding its boundaries, the Black Sea region is gradually moving away from being a peripheral actor and is gaining a central status in political, economic and security terms. Its strategic location on the north-south and east-west axes improves the pivotal character of the Black Sea region in the geopolitical, commercial, energy and cultural spheres. On the other hand, this new status creates other complications and a chain of disputes over the definition of precise borders of the region. Among these debates, the issue of security carries significantly more importance and priority. Modern debates about the transformation from hard-security to soft-security matters all address this region and bring it under their lens. In addition to numerous other issues, ethnic conflicts, ongoing state building processes, the presence of vast natural resources and strategic transport and energy corridors mean that the region is an extremely important and sensitive one.

All of the aforementioned issues have drawn global actors into the process, alongside regional actors. In particular, the scale of competition and conflict among the regional actors and the widespread perception that the region cannot resolve its problems on its own were further compounded by the involvement of competing global stakeholders. All of these variables yield a complex network of security relations in the region. As a result, the regionalization process of the Black Sea area has evolved into a problem of not just regional, but global proportions. This was largely because the interests of the EU, USA, NATO and Russia collide over the Black Sea region. Consequently, the Black Sea region was transformed into one of strategic competition and rivalry in a 'soft war' between the USA and Russia (Jackson 2006, 101-11).

This study is primarily devoted to exploring and understanding the security environment and the main threats to security and stability in the region. Which actors have an influence on regional security or are affected by specific threats? Which factors create these threats, and for what reasons? Could it be possible to create stability and security in the region? Could it be possible to establish a permanent security regime that takes into account the interests of *all* the actors in the region? All of these questions will be looked into by taking global developments and their consequences into account.

The state of the game in the Black Sea region

At the end of the Cold War, the states around the Black Sea escaped from a bipolar conceptual straitjacket and regained their freedom. This historic event not only marked the start of a move towards independence, democracy and market economy; it also unleashed the hitherto suppressed ethnic, national and territorial conflicts and even terrorism.

Since the early 1990s, the region witnessed armed conflicts and an increase in political tension. Political and territorial disagreements such as border disputes and clashes between both peoples and states are the main reasons why the prospects for regional security cooperation are rather bleak. Moreover, there was a certain degree of neglect towards this region by the international community. The Black Sea basin was of secondary importance for the Euro-Atlantic community during the 1990s, as it focused on stabilizing and integrating Central and Eastern European countries from the Baltic to the Black Sea. This process led to the integration of Central and Eastern Europe to the Euro-Atlantic network, and at the same time included the issues of Balkans and the eastern side of the Black Sea, namely the Caucasus, into their agenda. It became rather difficult to ignore the relations among the nations that surrounded the Black Sea. Having access to the Black Sea coastline did not automatically connect the eastern and western parts of the Black Sea region. On the other hand, changes on one side inevitable created an impact for the other parties. It was during this period that many of the actors in the region began to ask questions regarding the interdependence between the eastern and western parts of the Black Sea, their shared concerns, and subsequently, inquired about the ties that connected the region as a whole to the Euro-Atlantic world. While the debates about the secondary status of the Black Sea continued, more importantly, it was this second group of discussions about interconnectedness that contributed to the regionalization debates. It is not impossible to claim that the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a region, which encompassed not just the immediate set of countries that bordered the Black Sea, but also those who have close links with the immediate circle. The most debated subject during this era was the 'regionality' of the Black Sea region. As a result, the Black Sea region gradually emerged as an important and unique region throughout the 1990s.²

The Black Sea region evolved from these regionalization debates, towards a geopolitical security zone since 2000 while during the current decade, the predominant discourse became one of securitization. Regions are also defined by shared security concerns and threats. Consequently, definitions of the security problems in the Black Sea region as shared problems also contributed to the emergence of this area as a distinct region.

The changes in the global and regional balances in the twenty-first century created new political and security dilemmas for the Black Sea region. The global and regional powers increasingly supported competing political and security agendas that were clearly interlinked, but at times were contradicting each other. Particularly after 11 September 2001, the EU and NATO expanded towards this region and the USA increasingly perceived it as some kind of 'security vacuum' and thus, turned it into a central locus for US security policies. Subsequent developments and the establishment of special programmes in Georgia and Ukraine increased the international visibility of the region and converted it into a focal point for security issues. This went hand in hand with the EU and NATO enlargement processes. Divergent approaches to establishing security and stability in the region led to tension and rivalry among the regional actors.

In the post-Cold War period, the Black Sea region failed to develop a cooperative security vision or structure in which the regional actors could have participated as principal stakeholders. When one looks at the history and social structures of the region, it becomes clear that nearly all of the existing sub-regional disagreements and conflicts across the geographical span of the Black Sea, which extends from Eastern Europe and the Balkans to the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, carry the potential to

erupt into both civil and conventional wars. The fact that no interregional tradition or mechanism of dialogue exists in order to resolve these conflicts turns the situation almost into a gridlock. Even though the mechanism that promoted the Black Sea as a coherent region, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), was established as early as June 1992, it failed to produce any viable structures to resolve the security problems in the region. This was largely because the region lacked a tradition of cooperation, as well as institutional and political dialogue. The Russian–Georgian War of August 2008 illustrated quite clearly that the initiatives designed to pacify the region had not produced a security system capable of preventing or containing internal and interstate conflicts. One lesson that can be drawn from the August 2008 crisis is that the interplay of regional and global forces will continue to dominate future political and military issues in the region.

Some of the most important threats that create insecurity and seriously undermine the stability of the region include: the protracted conflicts and the various separatist movements; the existence of weak states that are partially recognized by the international community, such as Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia; the security of vital oil and natural gas pipelines; organized crime and the trafficking of arms, drugs and people; ecological risks and environmental degradation; and massive economic underdevelopment. Furthermore, as Triantaphyllou states, ‘the region, at least for the time being, seems not to be influenced by the spirit of regional cooperation’ (2009, 228). As long as the competitiveness at both regional and global levels feeds an attitude of non-cooperation, the region will continue to be perceived as insecure and unstable.

Main actors, attitudes and challenges ahead

The most important and critical challenge that hinders regional coherence and security is the fact that there are too many actors with clashing interests in the Black Sea region. Moreover, the region also suffers from historical legacies of several troublesome eras, which continue to torment the public perceptions of security. Hitherto, it was treated as a ‘passive area’ that was analysed as the periphery of more significant actors. Thus, at various times the Black Sea basin had been described as the backyard of Ottoman and Russian empires, then as an extension of the Soviet sphere of influence, more recently as the frontier of Europe and finally, as the extension of the Mediterranean world. The existence of several distinct sub-regions within the Black Sea region, i.e., the Caucasus, the Balkans and to a certain extent the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, is another factor that destabilises the area. Time and again sub-regional identities have prevented the emergence of a Black Sea identity, created instability and impeded the establishment of a comprehensive regional security framework. In the post-Cold War era, the region operated as a testing ground in the global contest for hegemony. This process further triggered tensions and a sense of insecurity. When regional security is connected to the initiatives and policies of external powers, rather than regionally-based cooperative efforts, it ends up inflaming existing tensions. On the other hand, this situation diverts the attention and priorities of the regional actors to developments outside the region. As a result, regional rivalries shaped by global rivalries for influence result in diverging expectations and conflicting interests, rather than the establishment of inter-regional mechanisms for cooperation (Aydin 2009; Glebov 2009). In fact, this situation itself is an important threat for security.

There are both regional and non-regional actors in the Black Sea region, and three principal actors or set of actors exert varying degrees of influence on the available security policy options. The first one is the Euro-Atlantic or the Transatlantic world, which includes the EU, the USA and the NATO. Russia is another very important actor that shapes the debate around whether or not the Black Sea area will be a region, and if so, what kind of a regional identity it will attain. A third set of actors that should be taken into account when assessing the security concerns in the Black Sea includes the perceptions and attitudes of the regional stakeholders, including Turkey. The interactions and mutual interests of these actors, as well as their perceptions of security directly impact the state of security in the region. Consequently, the types of regional security problems could be assessed according to the ways in which each of the aforementioned actors perceive their interests with regards to the various threats, real and potential, emanating from the region.

The interests of the Euro-Atlantic community

The most important factor that contributed to the emergence of the Black Sea region as a distinct entity was the particular attention it received from the Euro-Atlantic community. In fact, it is this particular focus that makes the Euro-Atlantic community a crucial actor for the Black Sea region. The USA and the EU are both prioritised in this relationship. Even though they share certain policies towards the region, the two have slightly different approaches. While the USA develops a political perspective for a region that has security deficiencies, and tries to do this under the banner of 'the wider Black Sea region' (Asmus 2004, 2006; Bryza 2006), the EU prefers an economic and commercial type of relationship based on cooperation. Policies such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Black Sea Synergy and Eastern Partnership (EaP) are relevant examples.

The end of the Cold War enabled the Euro-Atlantic community to interact with the region directly and, thus, triggered a gradual shift towards the emergence of a pan-European political and economic area. Initially, the USA and the NATO adhered to the delicate balance of the Cold War era and refrained from playing an active role in the Black Sea region. In fact, during the first decade of the post-Cold War era, the USA maintained a rather low profile when it came to Black Sea issues. The priority in those days was dealing with post-Soviet Russia (Tsantoulis 2009, 249–51). This approach gradually changed in the late 1990s, when Caspian energy resources drew US attention to the region. Subsequently, it became a central concern for the US to bypass Russia and gain direct access to the energy resources of the Caspian and Central Asia through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. It was also believed that this new energy route would lessen the dependence of the newly independent republics on Russia, and contribute to their sense of security. If everything proceeded according to the US point of view, Russia would have eventually lost its leverage in the region. From the perspective of the regional actors, what this meant was that aside from the regional rivalries, they were part and parcel of a global power struggle. Even though the USA was a geographically distant actor, the importance of the Black Sea region from a global power balance perspective made the US involvement in the region inevitable. And this involvement was shaped largely by security concerns. As Ian Lesser emphasises, with the twenty-first century, 'the American strategy has entered a period of marked flux, with implications for US engagement and presence around the Black Sea' (2007, 43).

After the 9/11 attacks, the US security focus shifted from Central and Eastern Europe to what has been dubbed the 'Greater Middle East' and 'Wider Black Sea' regions. The USA reassessed its geostrategic interest in the area and added a military dimension to its strategy by enhancing the role of NATO. It sought to develop a more coherent and comprehensive strategy towards the Black Sea region. This led to a predictable response from Russia and resulted in a kind of new geopolitical rivalry centred on the region.

As a global actor, the priorities of the USA towards the region entailed geopolitical, security, economic, commercial and humanitarian aspects. The geopolitical aspects addressed the emergence of Russia as an 'assertive power' particularly since 2000. In terms of security, it included energy policies and the enlargement of the EU and NATO. Containing Russia was perceived both as a geopolitical priority and a necessity for sound security policy. Democratization and EU-NATO enlargement were endorsed as main policy tools for action.

US policies towards the region that were being shaped since 2000 had three main elements: democracy and market reform, energy and commerce and security (Bryza 2006, 37–42; Larrabee 2009, 302–3). First, successive US administrations paid special attention to the promotion of democracy and the market economy in the region. This approach focused on greater political freedoms as a result of free and fair elections, establishing the rule of law, respect for human rights and achieving transparent market economies. The USA sought to promote democracy both in the Black Sea region and in Russia's periphery. The aim here was to prevent Russia's re-emergence as a regional and even global superpower that would defy US power and influence in the region. Because of this, escalating conflict over Georgia and Ukraine since 2000 became examples of growing regional tension and mutual rivalry between the USA and Russia. If one puts aside the developments since August 2008, there was a constant emphasis on democratisation and the transformations that came with the waves of revolutionary changes during the years following 2000. These developments have given rise to a new debate over how best to consolidate democratic institutions (i.e. in Georgia and Ukraine) and promote security in the Black Sea region (Larrabee 2009, 305–7). This perspective can potentially contribute to finding solutions to the protracted and frozen conflicts in the region.

The second set of priorities for US foreign policy included the energy issue and the expansion of free trade. The goal was to increase the number of gas and oil pipelines; increase trade and economic development in the region; improve the transportation and communication infrastructure; and promote tourism, customs cooperation, environmental protection, etc. (Larrabee 2009, 302). From the perspective of the USA, the energy issue is intertwined with security, and therefore fundamental for the security of the European leg of the Trans-Atlantic alliance system. The emphasis is on the need of Europe to reduce its dependence on Russia.

The Black Sea region is significant in the east–west axis (from Central Asia to the Caspian, Caucasus, Turkey and the Balkans), and more recently in the north–south axis (from Russia through the Black Sea, Turkey and to the Mediterranean) as a crucial transit route for energy transfers. In this context, of particular relevance the debates over the BTC pipeline, the oil tanker traffic through the Turkish Straits, the Montreux Treaty and the security of the Black Sea, the US-proposed new pipelines and alternative energy routes. The US seems to undertake efforts to bypass Russia and Russian-led projects such as South Stream and Blue Stream II, by supporting projects similar to the BTC, such as Nabucco. It closely monitors which of these will actually

be implemented, in light of the changing global dynamics and shifting regional alliances. Generally, the expectations over Nabucco are to replicate the pro-European and pro-Western axis from Central Asia through the Caspian and the Balkans, much like the one that emerged after the BTC with the pro-US Georgia–Azerbaijan–Turkey axis. The objective was to establish a new energy and geopolitical route extending from Central Asia all the way to Europe. It is assumed that such a route would bypass not only Russia, but also other rogue elements, such as Iran, that conflict with the US interests in the region. This approach tries to appeal to the producers and consumers, as well as the transit countries with generous transit fees and other side benefits, but could well end up initiating a new rivalry with Russia.

Security is the third main pillar of the US approach to the region. Here, the emphasis has been on fighting terrorism, organised crime and the smuggling of weapons of mass destruction by means of an enhanced border security regime and a civil-military response (Larrabee 2009, 302). Maritime security is also an important issue that remains in the agenda of US officials since 2000. Aside from its existing alliance network, the US developed close bilateral security ties with regional actors such as Georgia, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania, in order to improve its profile in the region. Furthermore, successive US administrations have supported a greater role for the transatlantic alliance in the region. Indeed, the attempt to develop a broader strategy towards the ‘wider Black Sea’ region imparted a specific importance to NATO enlargement (Larrabee 2008, 277–92). The US also supported NATO membership for both Ukraine and Georgia. However, this policy made it impossible for NATO to provide security in the Black Sea region as a whole. Moreover, the Russian view that the US is pursuing a policy of deterrence designed to contain Russia has merely aggravated the tensions between Russia and other regional actors. The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia was very damaging to US credibility and had a negative effect on the security environment in the area. The USA failed to respond to Russia in an appropriate manner and thus its position as the security guarantor for Georgia has been called into question. The Obama administration’s policy of ‘pressing the reset button’ with regard to Russia in order to ensure the latter’s support for a number of key security issues makes it unlikely that the USA will seek to openly challenge Russian interests in the region. Plans for further NATO enlargement have been shelved, and this has had a negative impact on some of the regional actors. Divergent opinions between the US and its European allies over the expansion of NATO, and the NATO Bucharest Summit decision over the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia all signal that the expansion decisions are postponed for an indefinite future. This situation illustrates that for the moment, the US does not have urgent security concerns in the region.

The EU is the second important component that requires attention in the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Unlike the USA, the EU shares borders with the region since the 1990s, and has become a regional agent with Bulgaria and Romania’s membership to the Union in 2007. Furthermore, with the presence of Greece and Turkey as a candidate for accession, it is evident that the EU is an important player in the region.

Despite the EU’s distinct status as part of the regional actors, the Black Sea was not much of a priority during the 1990s, and the EU did not develop a coherent foreign policy approach towards it. The EU lacked a strategic vision and the necessary resources in order to pursue a foreign policy in the classical sense of the term. The priorities of the EU revolved around the question of membership, and thus, the region as a whole was of only marginal interest. However, it became more interested in the

area in the early 2000s. In 2003, the European Security Strategy (ESS) became the first official document to state that the South Caucasus was a part of the region that required further attention. In the wake of the ESS, the region was accorded greater importance in the European Security and Defence Policy. The enlargement process led to an increasing EU involvement in the area. This was based on the ENP, the EU's basic blueprint for what it does in the region, and on the Black Sea Synergy document, which in 2007 became the most concrete indication of the EU's interest towards the area. As the then Commissioner for External Relations and Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner said: 'with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania the EU has become part of the Black Sea region'.³

The Black Sea Synergy could be regarded as an intermediate step leading to a strategic vision of the EU for the region. It complemented the ENP, the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia, and the negotiation package with Turkey. The significance of the Black Sea Synergy was twofold: on the one hand, it pinpointed the key areas where it might be possible to promote regional cooperation. On the other hand, it has attempted to stimulate reform in various policy areas and economic sectors of the countries in the region, to support stability, foster growth and to single out feasible regional projects that would require practical work and thus create an atmosphere conducive to the resolution of the ongoing conflicts. In March 2009, the EU launched the EaP on the heels of the August 2008 war. The EaP focuses on deepening bilateral cooperation and a greater degree of alignment with the EU.

A careful look at all these documents and practices shows certain similarities as well as differences between the policies of the EU and the USA. From a security perspective, protracted conflicts, energy and energy-security concerns, newly independent *de facto* states and the overall stability of the region are the main concerns. Unlike the USA, the EU also pays particular attention to immigration and human trafficking issues because of their demographic, social and political consequences. Russia and the state of EU–Russian relations are also prioritised within the EU foreign policy agenda. Russian attempts to establish a separate sphere of influence impacts the EU and it could potentially threaten to split Europe and impair regional security (Wilson and Popescu 2009).

Despite this sense of threat, however, there are still variations in the attitudes of the USA and the EU towards Russia. In the case of the EU, there is a certain attempt to increase collaboration with Russia and emphasise on mutual security and stability both before and after the August 2008 war. This attitude clearly signals a divergent trend between the EU and the USA. Increasing tension and geopolitical rivalry between the US and Russia pose a threat for the EU. The unstable environment created as a result of this rivalry hinders the EU's capabilities to develop a comprehensive Black Sea policy. For example, while the USA prefers security matters and the primacy of NATO, the EU emphasises joint projects in the region, which could establish a sense of mutual security and guaranteed long-term collaboration. Part of the reason for this divergent attitudes lies in the fact that the EU is more of a 'soft power' than the USA. The EU perceives itself as 'a model of peace, democracy and prosperity in the region – and takes this power for granted' (Wilson and Popescu 2009, 323). Nevertheless, the EU is still unable to formulate a coherent and widely accepted regional policy towards the Black Sea. While Germany and some other large EU member states play a more active role towards the region, the explicit apathy of the others, and anti-Russian sentiments among some former Eastern Bloc countries end up further complicating the issues at hand.

Energy and energy security are critical security concerns for the EU. When the US–Russian rivalry peaked in the region between 2004 and 2008, the energy crises in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia had a negative impact on many EU member states and on European energy policies. Unlike the USA, the EU considers the energy issue as one that necessitates collaboration with Russia. Consequently, ‘the regional interests of the EU and Russia coincide: both sides want a stable wider Black Sea region’ (Glebov 2009, 357–9). From this perspective, EU member states take initiatives for the construction of alternative pipelines with Russia and welcome opportunities for collaboration. In contrast to the USA, the EU treats Russia not as the locus of trouble and rivalry, but as a feasible partner for regional collaboration.

Another area wherein the EU emerges as a viable actor in the region concerns the issue of frozen conflicts. These conflicts and their destructive effects gradually transform the EU into a regional actor. It tries to resolve such conflicts with its soft power, through initiatives like the Black Sea Synergy. Even though it was not a dominant player in the Nagorno–Karabakh issue, the EU’s role in brokering the ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Russia, in deploying observers in Georgia and its involvement in Geneva peace process further enhanced its profile in the region. Comparatively speaking, regional actors began to perceive the EU-based initiatives more positively than the US-based ones.

Despite the existence of all these initiatives, which are designed to increase the presence of the EU in the region, the international community (including Russia) tended to treat the EU as an actor with a limited ability to reach collective decisions and with little impact on the region’s security structure (Wilson and Popescu 2009, 323).

Russia’s interests

There is little doubt that Russia is one of the principal actors when it comes to defining regional stability and security. Russia’s main concern in its ‘near abroad’ is to maintain and consolidate its power and restrict the presence of other powers. Historically, Russia considered the Black Sea region to be a crucial component of its national security and for this reason, protection of the Russian sphere of influence is deemed to be fundamentally in its national interest. Therefore, Russia aspires to keep other balancing actors, i.e., the USA, NATO or other western security organisations, out of the region. While some countries such as Ukraine and Georgia feel at times that Russia constitutes a threat, the Russian Federation in turn considers itself encircled and contained by the West.

Since the USA has simultaneously exerted military and political influence over the Black Sea region through NATO enlargement, bilateral defence agreements, support for pro-Western élite, and opposition to pro-Russian governments, the Russian Federation thinks that it is being hemmed in. The intensity of the Russian fear of encirclement was clearly discernible during the August 2008 crisis. Since the ‘coloured revolutions’ of 2003–2004, Russia began developing proactive policies in order to enhance its sphere of influence in the region. Establishing a strong sphere of influence in its new ‘near abroad’ has been Russia’s aim ever since 1991; but since then, it has achieved the means to pursue this aim more effectively.

Russia’s current interests in the Black Sea region could be defined as follows: (1) to retain its position as one of the key actors in the region in light of the increasing influence of both regional and global actors; (2) to prevent the emergence of energy-related actors or projects which are not under Russian control; (3) to prevent any

divisive anti-Russian military coalitions; (4) to curb the further expansion of NATO; and (5) to suppress and eliminate separatism, fundamentalism and terrorism (Arbatova-Alexandrova 2008, 25–8; Celikpala 2010, 9; Tsantoulis 2009, 251–2).

Over time, Russia developed more comprehensive and coordinated policies towards realising these goals and began to pursue a well-resourced geopolitical neighbourhood policy that touches raw nerves throughout the region. This wider policy scope is interpreted as Russia's attempt to use the hard power and soft power tools simultaneously, and thereby leading to a type of 'Russian neighbourhood policy' (Wilson and Popescu 2009, 318–23).

Compared to others, what makes Russia more effective as a regional actor is the fact that, aside from historical, institutional and demographic advantages, Russia is situated at the heart of the region. The omnipresence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the widespread distribution of the Russian population in the region, close economic-commercial relations with Russia and the energy-dependent countries that surround the Black Sea are all factors that strengthen its hand. Moreover, Russia does not hesitate to use its hard power in a callous fashion, as illustrated by the 2008 Russian–Georgian war. The Russian–Georgian war deeply changed security perceptions in the Black Sea region. It became very clear that security was closely linked with the protracted regional conflicts. After the war ended, certain developments enhanced Russia's role as a regional actor. Russia established new military bases in the Caucasus, Western credibility began to disappear rapidly, and the regional threat perception reached peak levels.

Despite all these developments, it has also been observed that Russia is capable of acting based on the principles of soft power. There is increasing Russian support for NGOs, political parties, cultural foundations and local governments. The period of revolutions and the attitudes of the USA and the EU, which were at times perceived as hostile by Russia, have triggered a certain change towards implementing such 'modern' policies. The 'Russian foreign policy concept openly states that Russia will offer governmental support to "non-governmental organisations interested in promoting Russia's foreign policy interests" both at home and in the CIS' (Wilson and Popescu 2009, 319). In September 2008, Russia set up a Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, which is designed to operate like the United States Agency for International Development. All of the above are meant to be used as the vehicles for Russian pro-activism in the new era.

Diverging security preferences

The third factor that influences the regional security arrangements includes the state actors and their security priorities in the region. Most of these countries have endorsed divergent approaches. A critical concern for the regional actors is the antagonistic atmosphere as a result of the rivalry among non-regional actors. For instance Turkey, a staunch Euro-Atlantic partner, has gradually developed a separate set of policies towards Russia. The changing security environment after 11 September 2001, Turkey's disagreements with the USA over Iraq and growing tensions between Russia and NATO, all led to Turkey's pursuit of a policy of 'caution' with regard to the Black Sea region (Aydin 2009, 277–9).

At the centre of Turkey's policies is a deliberate effort to prevent the Black Sea region from becoming the new focal point of global rivalry and conflict. Consequently, establishing the security and stability of the region is perceived mainly

as the responsibility of the regional actors. Turkey's maritime security-based initiatives, energy collaboration, economic and commercial cooperation efforts are all parts of the basic security discourse that attempts to strengthen mutual trust. Turkey has also chosen to defend the status quo, in order not to harm the existing operational initiatives, such as the BSEC, Black Sea Naval Task Force (BLACKSEAFOR), and Operation Black Sea Harmony.⁴

Turkish activities in the Black Sea region in the wake of the Russian–Georgian war are rather striking. This vigorous role is generally perceived as Turkey's return to an active regional diplomacy, especially in the Caucasus. Turkish proposals for the establishment of a regional security initiative, the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which would include all the regional actors, have revived the ongoing debate about whether Turkey and Russia ought to establish a new regional security architecture. Despite the fact that these initiatives affected the discussion about the prospects of Turkey's membership in the EU and improved strategic relations with Russia, they may also help provide a platform for a more constructive Russian role in the Black Sea region. Moreover, Turkey is hoping to normalize relations with Armenia, and this could also help to change the regional security structure.

All of these approaches and discourses are a reflection of Turkey's self-perception as part and parcel of the Euro-Atlantic community and institutions. The fact that regional rivalries emerged without establishing globally competitive conditions had important consequences in terms of regional security. Turkey's aspiration is to be perceived as the defender and protector of regional interests of its allies in the region. Such an approach could establish the foundation of a political, economic and security framework that could satisfy Russia, the EU and the other regional actors.

On the other hand, other regional actors have developed their own sets of priorities. Romania and Bulgaria are currently NATO and EU member states, and are more interested in establishing closer relations with the USA. The US position in the region was promoted by Romania in particular, and supported by Bulgaria, Georgia and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine. The Romanian government would like Romania to be the main actor in the EU on Black Sea related issues. Without the support of Greece and Bulgaria, it may not be able to change a great deal, though it may obtain significant concessions from the EU in the course of bargaining.

The complex web of relationships among regional and non-regional actors and their foreign policy preferences are of decisive importance for the future of political and security arrangements in the Black Sea region. However, subsequent to the August 2008 developments and particularly in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, tensions within the Black Sea region seem to have subsided and most actors have retreated to a 'wait and see' policy choice.

The changing nature of actors and threats

The Black Sea region has to contend with numerous threats of both conventional and non-conventional nature. These hard and soft security problems make the region volatile, insecure and unstable.

Ongoing and potential military conflicts among regional states constitute the basic threats to regional stability and security. The highly disputed notion of neighbourliness is also an important source of instability and insecurity. Hard security issues in the form of border disputes or ethnic, religious or other forms of differences are still

not settled. Consequently, Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has disturbed both national borders and the regional power balance. It also has implications for political developments across the globe.

The role of non-state actors, frozen conflicts, unrecognized states and internally displaced persons are some of the key issues the region has to contend with. It remains to be seen what will become of the *de facto* states and other simmering conflicts. There is little doubt that the conflicts, which emerged at the end of the Soviet era in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, played a highly destructive role in the region over the last 20 years. They have hindered the development of certain states, made regional cooperation virtually impossible, and continue to create serious problems for the peace and security in the region. Despite Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the international community still attaches great importance to the principles of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states.

Some of the states in the Black Sea region are still weak and disorganized. Some could easily become failed states. Their weakness makes the region ripe as a global hot spot for certain threats, such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the trafficking of drugs, arms and human beings. Thus, these fragile states have the potential to undermine the security of other regional actors and the neighbouring EU member states. In some of the states of the region, there is a disturbing tendency to favour authoritarianism and glorify military power. This exacerbates the already existing threat perceptions and has an adverse effect on the overall regional security.

Related to the authoritarian and militarist attitudes in the region is the increase in military expenditures. Certainly more information is necessary on this subject, and thus, it would be valuable to develop a quantitative research project to substantiate, compare and contrast the military expenditures of various countries in the region. There is clearly a need for control mechanisms. Therefore, it is worth considering whether economic growth in the Black Sea region actually contributes to normalisation, or it encourages the resumption of hostilities.

Another very important issue that needs to be addressed is energy security. The necessity to achieve energy supply diversity on the one hand and the risks associated with energy dependency on Russia on the other illustrate the importance of alternative pipelines from the region to supply gas and oil to the European markets. The energy disputes between Russia and Ukraine in late 2008 and early 2009 clearly illustrated the importance of energy security for the region and the EU. In addition to exploration, production and transport-related problems, oil and natural gas have become one of the main security issues in the Black Sea region, which, as an important energy transit route, is also a testing ground for the interaction between producer, consumer and transit countries. This means that the region is not only a potential hub, but also the battleground for intense rivalries.

Finally, a number of problems associated with soft security issues, ranging from environmental concerns to possible social unrest and economic collapse, need to be further assessed, especially if there is a high chance that they will disrupt political stability and security in the region. Potentially destabilising threats such as the global financial crisis also need to be kept under review, as well as the impact of the crisis on regional states or on the redefinition of the roles of the regional powers. The opportunities arising from the emerging global economic environment should also be considered.

Different expectations and possible solutions

There are some basic differences when it comes to recounting and trying to offer certain solutions to the regional security problems that involve both regional and global actors. The inability of regional and global actors to develop a common regional security regime creates a 'security vacuum' that triggers rivalries regionally and globally. On the other hand, the presence of state and non-state actors, numerous international organizations and regional groupings has not been able to fill this vacuum. In fact, the plethora of interests simply causes overcrowding, confusion and insecurity.

The EU and the USA are trying to promote basic Western values, such as democracy and respect for the rule of law and human rights, as the best way to find solutions to existing problems. However, the region is currently witnessing an escalation in authoritarian practices. Instead of finding innovative and peaceful ways to deal with gridlocks in the not-so-frozen disputes and to reconcile conflicting national interests, some regional actors tend to use political and military pressure in their international affairs, and favour authoritarianism in order to deal with domestic dissent. Proposals for the resolution of existing and potential problems may vary significantly according to the governing styles and problem-solving preferences. In order to devise viable solutions for regional problems, it will be necessary to identify key areas where views and attitudes coincide.

One of the current problems related to regional rivalry is the changing role of international organizations. Although the EU continues to be a relevant actor, the significance of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has diminished primarily as a result of geopolitical rivalry between the major powers. This is a new challenge, for the OSCE is an inclusive organization that incorporates nearly all the state actors in the region whereas the EU is a selective club. The consequences of this reversal of roles for regional security and stability will become apparent in the coming years.

Conclusion and policy alternatives for regional harmony

The Black Sea region needs to be transformed from the existing competitive security environment into one that fosters and strengthens regional cooperation. In order to achieve this, international or regional cooperation initiatives should be supported wholeheartedly, as should the articulation of cooperation into tangible structures that can play a role in regional security. To establish an atmosphere of mutual trust, global and regional policies that emphasise competition and generate tension and mistrust should be set aside. This also requires substantial change in discourse.

As discussed above, international organizations such as the UN or the OSCE are important players and, as such, must be given the opportunity to promote trust and cooperation in the region. These organizations can help alleviate the political mistrust that has pervaded the region in the recent past. A possible way ahead is by establishing proactive and effective international monitoring mechanisms in place in areas that could easily turn into hot conflict zones. In case the monitoring fails, there should also be further international mechanisms which could involve other regional actors as quickly as possible for initiating a ceasefire between the belligerent parties.

The region suffers from numerous protracted and frozen conflicts, which are, as discussed in detail above, perceived as the root causes of current problems. The de facto situation in the Black Sea region, particularly in the Caucasus, requires the involvement of *all* the parties in the peace-making processes. The Geneva talks

on Abkhazia could be the model for a new political vision in which the Abkhaz, Karabakh Azeris and Armenians jointly participate in a peace-making process. The necessity of collective deliberation and compromise should be emphasised; however the mechanisms established in this process should not constitute a *de facto* recognition path for the separatist entities. The ultimate goal must be to reach a solution that is acceptable to all the parties involved.

Escalating authoritarian and militarist tendencies pose another significant problem for the stability and security of the region. Despite this looming threat of armed conflicts, there is still a lack of comprehensive and systematic information regarding the military capabilities of regional actors. Formulating a military armament map of all the states in the region and taking concrete steps to establish political and military mechanisms for future disarmament would certainly improve the regional power balance and overall stability. Here, international security structures could be especially useful when it comes to developing preventive mechanisms.

The energy issue should evolve into being a venue of cooperation rather than competition. This requires designing structures for cooperation that include all states in the region. Such a regional organization that could coordinate the cooperation of producer, transit and consumer countries would certainly make positive contributions to long-term regional stability. A collective mechanism designed to provide security for the ever increasing number of pipelines that criss-cross the region might also trigger regional cooperation.

Terrorism, human trafficking and arms smuggling are other important issues that need to be tackled both by regional and global actors. Countries outside the region should provide the utmost support to establish regional cooperation mechanisms, and prevent the region from slipping into the hands of criminal and terrorist networks. Strong cooperation mechanisms among regional and global intelligence agencies are a vital factor for successful containment and elimination of these threats.

Lastly, inclusion rather than stratification and exclusion should be the new motto for regional affairs. Consequently, the EU cooperation programmes should be more even-handed towards certain actors in the region. They should be redesigned as inclusive programmes that depend on the participation of all the regional actors. In this framework, existing regional structures such as the BSEC should assume leadership roles. Similarly, policies that perceive Russia as the irreconcilable 'Other' should also be shelved away. Russia should be attracted into the network of collaboration. Yet, the sensitivities of certain countries in the region that have a lower threshold for a potential Russian threat should also be taken into account. Regional security programmes need to be devised in a way to make all parties feel secure.⁵

Notes

1. There are numerous studies that discuss the regionalism aspect of the Black Sea region. An important part of these studies perceive the Black Sea region as a by-product of the geopolitical realities, and therefore, they take the existence and geographic coherence of the region for granted (Aydin 2004, 5). Similarly, the Black Sea area is considered a 'natural geopolitical centre' from a traditional geopolitical point of view. Current developments contribute to the regionalization of the area and elevate it to the status of 'geopolitical pivot' (Pavliuk and Klympush-Tsintsadze 2004, 9). For a more comprehensive analysis of this issue, see Triantaphyllou (2009, 227–8).
2. In order to avoid confusion, this article uses the term 'Black Sea region', based upon the definition of the BSEC. This definition includes 12 countries, namely Albania, Armenia,

- Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. The European Commission also includes the same countries, minus Serbia and Albania, in its definition of the Black Sea region (European Commission 2007). Apart from these two definitions, others exist as well. For instance, both the German Marshall Fund of the USA and the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies, which conduct extensive research on this area, define it as the ‘wider Black Sea region’. This definition is more political than geographic, and is associated with the forging of a Western and Euro-Atlantic Alliance Strategy in the region (see Asmus 2006; Cornell et al. 2006). For a further different analysis, see the ‘Black Sea Region Project’ by Ciuta (2008, 121–34).
3. Black Sea Synergy: Bringing the region closer to the EU, <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/07/486>.
 4. For a detailed evaluation of these initiatives, see Regional initiatives aimed at enhancing security in the Black Sea maritime domain. http://www.tsk.tr/eng/uluslararası/karadenizdenizisbirligigorevgrubu_p.htm.
 5. Operation Black Sea Harmony and BLACKSEAFOR are examples of positive initiatives of this type.

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