

The New Black Sea (Dis)Order: Russia's Trump Card

Russia's war against Ukraine, among other things, is about the control of the Black Sea. This is where Putin's territorial and non-territorial ambitions converge, ranging from expanding Russia beyond its borders to securing its place among the world's great powers. From Moscow's perspective, controlling the Black Sea is vital for cementing its dominance over its sphere of influence and extending its reach into the Balkan Peninsula and the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas. The Black Sea's strategic importance to Russia's global ambitions has also increased with the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, which has weakened Russia's position in the Baltic. Ukraine's successful asymmetric offensive against the Black Sea fleet has, in turn, made naval reconstitution one of Russia's urgent priorities.

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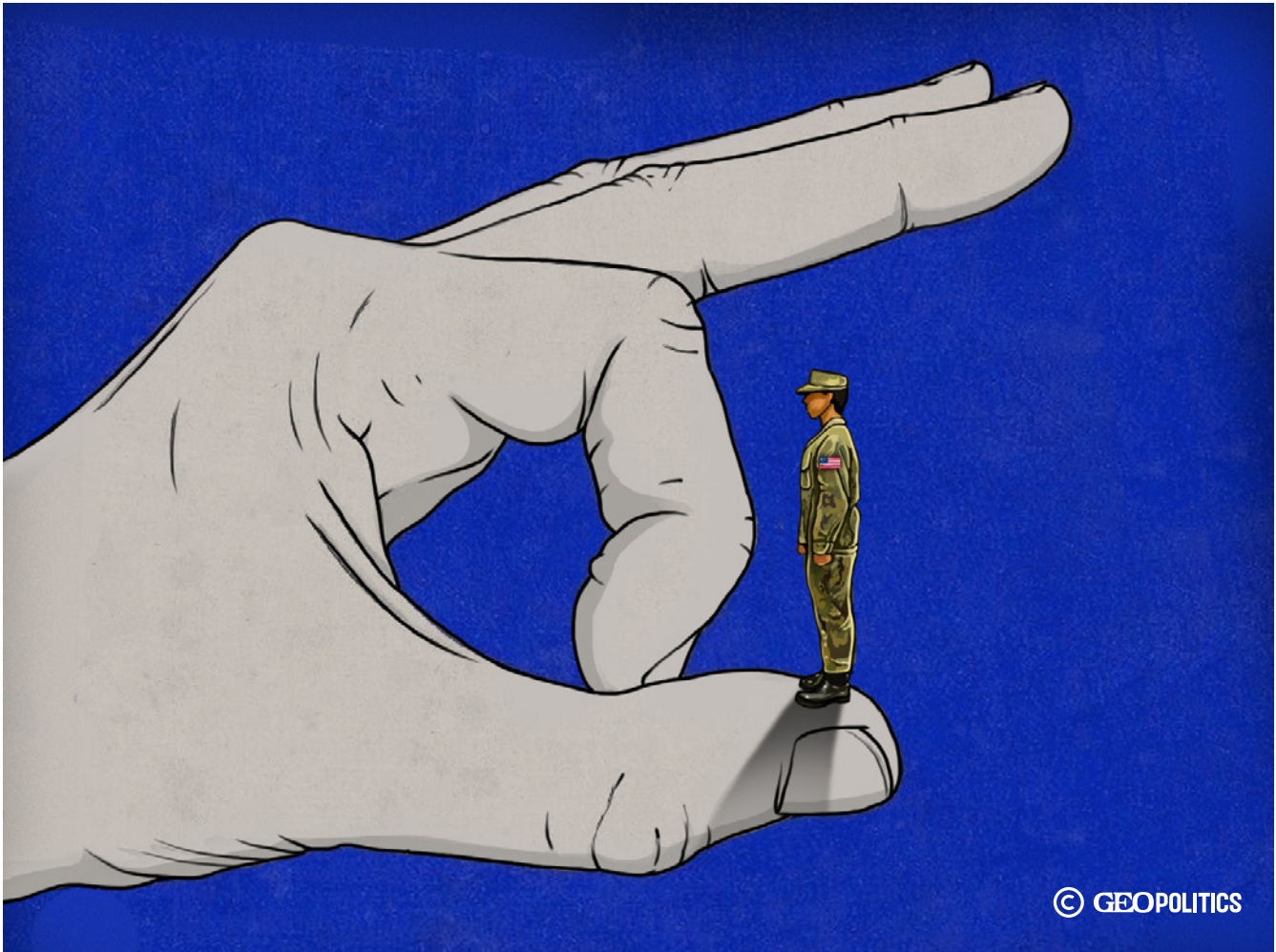
key trade and energy routes. To achieve this, Russia must limit Western, particularly NATO's, expansion, 'demilitarize' Ukraine, and manage its relations with Türkiye to its advantage. These are essential preconditions for Russia to deal successfully with the growing influence of non-Western actors such as China and Iran and to engage in so-called '[friendly balancing](#)' within a framework of competitive cooperation. Russia's success or failure in realizing these aims will define the emerging order in the greater Black Sea region.

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Russia's political and military priorities in the Black Sea illustrate its broader strategic outlook in the fracturing international order. First, the West is an enemy *par excellence* while others are partners and rivals, depending on circumstances. Second, power political competition, not international cooperation, is a defining feature of the international system. In this context, mastering below-the-threshold grey zone operations is indispensable for maintaining a competitive edge. Third, balancing power is achieved not only through military, political, and economic means but also, crucially, through ideational factors. Ideological alignment can turn a foe into a friend and advance geopolitical interests by expanding a network of supporters.

Much of this outlook reflects Cold War-era thinking; the outcomes of its application to the Black Sea region, however, will be shaped by today's political circumstances. Despite its global ambitions,

Russia is not the superpower that the USSR once was. While the Cold War saw the geopolitical order in the Black Sea defined by uncontested Soviet hegemony, the patterns of contestation today are far more complex and multilayered, creating a deeper regional security vacuum and risking greater disorder.

The Black Sea and Russia's Post-Soviet Revisionism

Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia became one of the 15 successor nation-states. [The Belavezha Accords](#), which formalized the dissolution of the Soviet Union, adhered to the principle of *uti possidetis juris* according to which the mutual borders of successor states follow administrative boundaries of the prior shared state. Within those boundaries, however, Russia struggled to conceive of itself as a nation-state. It formally recognized

the independence of the former Soviet republics but never fully respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its former imperial subjects. Russia adopted a 'policy of compatriots,' asserting a special role in determining the fate of Russian speakers beyond its borders. It fueled separatist movements, from the Baltic to the Caucasus, by exploiting strained state-minority relations, thus creating leverage to undermine efforts by these states to break free from Russia's sphere of influence. Defiance, in turn, invited retaliation. As Putin famously quipped, "[Russia's border doesn't end anywhere](#)."

The Black Sea region has been the primary theatre of Russia's post-Soviet revisionism. It lies at the heart of [Putin's Novorossiya project](#)—greater Russia conceived as a civilizational state uniting Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. Crimea is intended as the cradle of Novorossiya whose revival will make Russia "great again". It was here that Moscow signaled its readiness to escalate as necessary to prevent further NATO expansion and to resist what it viewed as Western encroachment on its sphere of influence.

The Black Sea has become the battleground where Russia confronts the West in both conventional and hybrid ways, asserting itself as a power to be reckoned with. By attacking Georgia, Russia engaged in its first open state-on-state war since the end of the Cold War; it violated Georgia's territorial integrity and effectively blocked its NATO integration prospects. Following the war, Russia expanded its control over the northern Black Sea coast by occupying Abkhazia. Fearing the loss of Crimea as a military and economic base after the Maidan revolution in 2014, Russia annexed the peninsula, evoking a right to self-determination as a justification for violating Ukraine's internationally recognized borders and [the Budapest Memorandum](#). Because Ukraine continued to pursue Western integration despite the loss of Crimea and ongoing war in the Donbas, Russia launched a full-scale in-

vasion in 2022, making Ukraine's Black Sea coast a primary target.

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Russia's assertiveness in the Black Sea region reflects its dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War normative and geopolitical order. Russia has accused the West of double standards in the application of international law, particularly criticizing NATO's intervention in Kosovo without UN Security Council approval. In Georgia and then in Crimea, [Russia justified](#) its actions by claiming to follow the "precedent" set by the West in Kosovo.

While violating the territorial integrity and interfering in the domestic affairs of other states, either through force or malign influence, Moscow simultaneously pushed back against Western interventionist tendencies. It interpreted sovereignty as an exclusive right, in contrast to the more liberal conception of sovereignty as responsibility, and placed the principle of non-intervention at the top of the international norms hierarchy. For Russia, the liberal internationalism promoted by the West is a façade, masking an escalating power-political competition. Through military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has asserted the right to veto the sovereign choices of its neighboring states regarding their foreign alliances and political development.

The Black Sea has served as a springboard for Russia's pursuit of global ambitions. Russia's military campaigns in Syria could not have been executed without its naval bases on the Black Sea. In turn, Syria became a critical foothold for Russia to extend its influence further into Africa, challenging and even displacing Western legacy presences in some regions, particularly the Sahel. The Black Sea is an essential and critical factor in Russia's pro-

jection of influence beyond its original post-Soviet sphere of influence. When Russia blockaded Ukraine's Black Sea ports, it demonstrated its leverage over the Global South. The grain trade has become a key instrument for advancing Russia's interests. As Jens Stoltenberg has [stated](#), Russia is "weaponizing hunger." If Russia were to capture Odesa and control Ukraine's ports, it would control 30 percent of the global grain trade—the largest share any country has ever held.

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The biggest obstacle to Russia realizing its ambitions is Ukraine's valiant resistance. Thanks to Ukraine's highly effective asymmetric naval warfare, the Black Sea has become one of the areas where Russia suffered its most significant wartime defeat. Despite lacking a fleet of its own, Ukraine's innovative use of sea drones has destroyed one-third of Russia's Black Sea fleet, forcing the remainder to seek refuge away from Sevastopol.

Another significant obstacle is Türkiye. Its enforcement of the [Montreux Convention](#), which restricts access by navies to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, prevents Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea Fleet and thus hinders its ability to launch a large-scale amphibious assault against Ukraine. In 2022, Moscow welcomed Ankara's strict application of the Montreux Convention because it stopped NATO ships from entering the Black Sea. Ukraine has benefited from the restrictions since Russia's fleet has been effectively neutralized. Türkiye has avoided antagonizing Moscow; it has not joined sanctions against Russia and remains one of the major purchasers of Russian oil. But it has also supported Ukraine. Ankara was quick to supply Ukraine with Bayraktar drones. It has pursued a strategic partnership with Kyiv and advocated

for its NATO membership. Türkiye has uniquely positioned itself in a manner that both Russia and Ukraine see as beneficial.

Enter Trump

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With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the U.S. has scaled back its support for Ukraine, re-engaged with Russia, and embarked on a diplomatic effort to bring the war to an end. A ceasefire at sea and in the air was a precondition to a sustainable settlement; making the Black Sea safe for navigation would open trade routes and reduce associated costs. While Ukraine accepted the ceasefire terms unconditionally, Russia bargained for more, including a partial lifting of sanctions. A proposed ceasefire in the Black Sea might allow Russia to reconstitute its fleet there and to reverse its defeat. As a Carnegie Russia publication [argues](#), Russia has much to gain and little to lose from a Black Sea ceasefire. Ukraine has continued to trade through the safe route along Romania's coastline. Although the trade volumes are lower than before the war, Ukraine has secured a viable export route and can gain little from what is proposed. The risks are significant, however, particularly if a cessation of hostilities pressures Türkiye to open the Straits. Russia would likely seize the opportunity to bring submarines and other naval assets back to the Black Sea from its base at Tartus in Syria. Odesa, a prime objective for Moscow, would be at risk. Grain exports via Odesa and other Black Sea ports are an economic lifeline for Ukraine. Its economic viability would be severely compromised without access to global shipping routes. Protecting Odesa and keeping what remains of Ukraine's Black Sea coast out of Russian

control is vital for Ukraine's survival, European security, and global food security.

Russia is also expected to put forward 'soft' demands for any future settlement with Ukraine. These would likely include granting special status to the Russian language and the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Russia would probably pursue uninhibited operation by Russian cultural institutions and the holding of elections. In the past, Russia has weaponized such seemingly democratic and reasonable provisions to further its geopolitical interests. At particular risk would be Odesa. If Russia cannot capture the city by force, it can use hybrid methods to mobilize the large Russian-speaking population to support its cause. According to the latest reports, pro-Russian sentiment in Odesa [has fallen](#) significantly. With time and effort, however, Russia might succeed at rebuilding its 'soft' leverage to destabilize Ukraine.

Trump's return has had an unexpected impact on Russia's ideological instrument of influence projection. As part of its hybrid strategy, Russia has deployed anti-liberal, anti-status quo rhetoric across the Black Sea region for some time, including its NATO states. Russia's interference in Romania's elections and information operations in Bulgaria are recent examples. By supporting nationalist, anti-establishment, and anti-liberal political figures and parties, Russia has framed anti-liberalism as anti-Westernism and capitalized on the growing popularity of its traditional values ideology to foster pro-Russian political stances. Now, however, Russia and the new U.S. administration appear to be aligned in the global culture wars. Trump's conservative, anti-woke stance has decoupled anti-liberalism from anti-Westernism, weakening Russia's monopoly over populist conservatism and blunting one of its most potent instruments of influence.

At the same time, however, by abandoning the promotion of democracy and embracing inter-

est-driven transactionalism, the Trump administration has inadvertently boosted the authoritarian trend sweeping much of the Black Sea region. The shift benefits Russia, which supports anti-liberal, autocratic political elites opposed to Western influence in domestic affairs. There is a clear correlation between regime and geopolitical alignment which Russia will likely promote and exploit. Without U.S. support for democratic forces, all Black Sea states will become more vulnerable to Russian influence and interference.

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Trump has suggested recognizing Russian control of Crimea as part of a deal to end the war in Ukraine. That would mark a significant shift in U.S. policy and deal a blow to international law that would reverberate for years. The norms of the inviolability of internationally recognized borders and the non-recognition of forceful territorial revisions have played a stabilizing role in the post-Cold War international order. To be sure, those norms have been violated. But the violations have rarely been recognized or rewarded. Smaller states have been shielded from the predatory actions of great powers and the incentives for territorial conquest have shrunk. Recognizing Russia's control of Crimea would upend valuable norms and set a dangerous precedent. Even if the U.S. were to withdraw from the Black Sea, restoring the Russian hegemonic order would not be easy. Russia has turned Ukraine into an enemy with the population resolutely determined to resist and fight for its independence. Ukraine's collapse would undermine European security, making it crucial for Europe to step up and defend its eastern flank, from north to south. The withdrawal of U.S. commitments to European

security, coupled with an emboldened, revisionist Russia at Europe's doorstep, poses a direct threat to the survival of the European project.

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Moreover, despite its balancing act, Türkiye [is not interested](#) in seeing Russia regain uncontested hegemony in the Black Sea. Türkiye's position vis-à-vis Russia has been significantly strengthened following Assad's fall and Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara's security interests now align more closely with Europe's than with Russia's. Consequently, the geopolitical order in the greater Black Sea region looks neither certain nor orderly.

Georgia's Grey Zone Trap

International conditions that have reduced the costs of authoritarianism and increased opportunities for balancing one regional actor against another have contributed to Georgia's democratic backsliding.

As the smallest Black Sea state and as a state with unresolved territorial disputes, Georgia is particularly vulnerable to the impact of regional and global shifts such as the destruction of the rules-based international order. The turn toward Russia and the shedding of the democracy promotion agenda by the Trump administration are likely to influence Georgia's domestic political development and foreign policy outlook. The two have been closely interconnected; Georgia's determination to join Western institutions, particularly the EU and NATO, was a driving force behind its domestic democratization efforts. Although never a fully consolidated democracy, Georgia was eager to meet

European and Euro-Atlantic integration criteria. With its recent pivot away from the West, however, the domestic governance model has shifted from a partially democratic system to an increasingly authoritarian one. International conditions that have reduced the costs of authoritarianism and increased opportunities for balancing one regional actor against another have contributed to Georgia's democratic backsliding. Trump's transactional approach and rejection of value-based diplomacy may further fuel the autocratic tendencies of the Georgian Dream government.

If Ukraine is defeated and the Russian occupation of its Black Sea coast is unchallenged, the prospects for Georgia regaining its territorial integrity would be close to nil. Moscow would likely maintain its grip on Abkhazia and might integrate Sokhumi more tightly. Russia is already expanding the [Ochamchire naval base](#) to establish a new base for its Black Sea Fleet. Within the framework of European integration, Georgia had the opportunity to engage in a conflict-settlement process that offered Abkhazia a credible future in the European Union. With Georgia's EU prospects now suspended, the likelihood of a negotiated and lasting settlement to the conflict appears remote.

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The emerging regional order relegates Georgia to a perpetual grey zone where rules do not apply and 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.' Lacking Western backing, Georgia will have to balance the interests of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and other non-Western actors from a position of weakness. Although Tbilisi is closely engaged in cooperation with Türkiye and

Azerbaijan, the balance of power in this triangle is rapidly shifting away from Georgia. The logic of transactional competition suggests that Tbilisi will become increasingly accommodating toward Russia, while facing resistance from the population, which harbors no pro-Russian sentiments. As Georgia distances itself from the U.S. and the EU, it will face mounting pressure to engage in region-

al formats, such as the 3+3, which excludes Western states and is led by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. A likely outcome would be the collapse of rules-based multilateralism in the greater Black Sea region. For a small state with an unaccountable authoritarian leadership, navigating the troubled waters of the new, competitive, and fragmented Black Sea order promises to be a risky business ■