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Research Article

The Critical Black Sea Zone

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Abstract: The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has brought to the forefront the complex interplay of military, energy, and food security dynamics in the Black Sea region. Russia's strategic focus on dominating the Black Sea and its littoral areas is evident through weaponization of energy and food exports and its persistent efforts to assert control since Putin's rise to power in 1999-2000. This aggression underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive Western strategy to address the security challenges of the Black Sea region.

The article argues that the West must prioritize supporting Ukraine and enhancing Black Sea security through a multifaceted approach that encompasses military, political, and economic dimensions. Key missions include ensuring Ukrainian victory, providing energy security to Ukraine, and breaking the Russian blockade of the Black Sea to liberate vital energy and grain shipments. Additionally, efforts to engage with regional actors like Turkey and Azerbaijan are crucial to diversifying energy sources and reducing dependence on Russian resources. By recognizing the interconnectedness of security challenges in the Black Sea region and demonstrating a collective will to address them, the West can mitigate Russia's influence, promote stability, and establish a more secure and prosperous future for the region.

Keywords: Black Sea security, Russian aggression, Russia-Ukraine war, energy security, military strategy, regional dynamics, Western response, geopolitical tensions.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and, implicitly, the West forcefully underscores the multiple and interlinked dimensions of Black Sea security, e.g., military, energy, and food security. It also highlights Russia's unremitting strategic focus on the Black Sea and its littoral in all these dimensions –weaponizing energy and food or grain exports are long-standing Russian strategic practices. But

here, it only functions through the prior agency of a blockade.¹ Meanwhile, prioritization of the takeover of Ukraine and of domination of the Black Sea began no later than Putin's accession to power in 1999-2000. Russian subversion of Ukrainian politics was visible by the election of 2004, and the decision to turn the Black Sea into a Russian "lake" occurred by 2007 at the latest.²

Simultaneously, this war graphically spotlights the issues of Black Sea security. The entire globe, and Ukraine in particular, is paying a considerable price for the neglect of Putin's authoritarian domestic policies that facilitate his empire-building foreign policies and, therefore, must now try to catch up rapidly.³ Thus, the EU is now pressing Bulgaria to reach agreement with North Macedonia on its terms of accession to the EU to consolidate the EU's position in the Western Balkans.⁴ And it is offering Moldova and Ukraine candidate member status in the EU for similar reasons.⁵ Nevertheless, it remains clear, especially absent an effective response to Russia's blockade of the Black Sea and theft of Ukrainian grain exports, just how difficult it is to confront the Black Sea's strategic realities. Therefore, this article suggests a Western course of action for the Black Sea zone that meets urgent needs and simultaneously lays a foundation for a new future strategy.

These clashing policy postures also reflect a preceding conceptual abyss between Russia and Europe. The Black Sea Region (BSR) "is, in short, the literal and philosophical frontier between liberal democracy and autocracy. It matters to the West and to the Kremlin."⁶ While some Western observers invoke a "Wider Black Sea," that includes the Balkans, Caucasus, potentially the Caspian, and/ or the Levant; no concerted multi-dimensional or truly Western strategic approach

¹ The Holodomor against Ukraine in 1932-33 and current Russian energy policies are examples of this fact.

² Stephen Blank, "Will Sudan Be the Latest Jewel in the Russian Crown?" Forthcoming as a Newport Paper from the U.S. Naval War College Press.

³ Vladimir V. Kara-Murza, "Russia and the Baltics: Once Friend, Now Foe," *World Affairs* 177, no. 5 (January/February 2015), 21, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150123111431/http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/russia-and-baltics-once-friend-now-foe>.

⁴ Ben Hall and Sam Fleming, "Bulgaria Vote Buys Prospect of EU Expansion Into Western Balkans," *Financial Times*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/1905ab99-dbfa-473a-af2c-0b9ea958609d>.

⁵ Mark Temnycky, "Ukraine and Moldova's EU Candidacy Shows How Far Europe Has Come," *The National Interest*, June 27, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/ukraine-and-moldova%E2%80%99s-eu-candidacy-shows-how-far-europe-has-come-203247>.

⁶ Lt. General F. Ben Hodges (USA RET), "The Black Sea ... or a Black Hole?" *CEPA*, January 21, 2021, <https://cepa.org/the-black-sea-or-a-black-hole/>.

to the Black Sea exists, e.g., truly viable regional security structures however one conceptualizes the region.⁷

Russia regards the Black Sea and its littorals as part of the Russian empire, which it alone must dominate to be secure. For Russia, the Crimea (and presumably the Black Sea, too) is what Constantine Pleshakov calls a national fetish or object of imperial Russian desire.⁸ This perspective clearly emerges from Putin's lengthy articles and speeches on Ukraine that glorify the Tsarist and Soviet empires, deny any independent agency to Ukraine, and openly invoke Russian imperial claims.⁹ In this perspective, Crimea is "a maritime citadel in the middle of the Black Sea – Whoever rules Crimea commands the Black Sea, and who rules the Black Sea commands the continental trade routes between the Balkans and China."¹⁰

Since Russia's perspective is imperial, it is hardly surprising that it has instigated a new Cold War in Europe. Indeed, Russia regards itself as being at war with Europe since its efforts to subvert Ukraine's government and elections in 2004 went awry. On January 18, 2005, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov told the Academy of Military Sciences:

Let us face it, there is a war against Russia under way, and it has been going on for quite a few years. No one declared war on us. There is not one country that would be in a state of war with Russia. But there are people and organizations in various countries, who take part in hostilities against the Russian Federation.¹¹

Dmitri Trenin, then Director of the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment, later observed that, for some time, "the Kremlin has been de facto operating in a war mode."¹² This posture is intrinsic to the idea of Russian empire in Eurasia because empire presupposes war.¹³ As Alfred Rieber has written,

⁷ Velizar Shalamanov, "Security Cooperation Opportunities in the Wider Black Sea Area," in *The Role of the Wider Black Sea Area in a Future European Security Space*, Occasional Paper 11 (Rome: NATO Defense College, Research Branch, 2005), 33-34.

⁸ Constantine Pleshakov, *The Crimean Nexus: Putin's War and the Clash of Civilizations* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 6, 95.

⁹ "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; "Meeting with Young Entrepreneurs, Engineers and Scientists, June 9, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68606>.

¹⁰ Pleshakov, *The Crimean Nexus*, 6.

¹¹ M.A. Gareyev, *Srazheniya na Voенно-Istoricheskom Fronte* (Moscow: ISAN Press, 2010), 729 cited in MG I.N. Vorob'ev (RET) and Col. V.A. Kisel'ev (Ret), "Strategies of Destruction and Attrition," *Moscow, Military Thought*, in English, no. 1 (January-March 2014), accessed June 2, 2014.

¹² Trenin quoted in Ivo H. Daalder, "Responding to Russia's Resurgence Not Quiet on the Eastern Front," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2017-10-16/responding-russias-resurgence>.

¹³ Aliaksei Kazharski and Andrey Makarychev, "Suturing the Neighborhood? Russia and the EU in Conflictual Intersubjectivity," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 6

If imperial boundaries have no intrinsic limitations and are solely established by force, then they are bound to be heavily and persistently contested. The universal claims of empires, whatever the practical constraints may be in carrying them out, cannot by their very nature be accepted as legitimate by either the people they conquer or their rivals for the contested space. There can be no community of empires as there is a community of nation states. All empires share a common problem of legitimizing boundaries. As perceived through the prism of the community of nations imperial frontiers appear problematic because they are sustained by force, even though they might have been recognized from time to time by solemn treaties.¹⁴

Thus, Russia's long-running imperial self-assertion and obsession with being perceived at home and abroad as an empire entails a permanent program of either, if not both, kinetic and non-kinetic war, and not only in Europe. Putin spokesmen like Sergei Karaganov, honorary chair of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, stated: "We are at war with the West. The European security order is illegitimate."¹⁵ Consequently, the invasions of Ukraine also confirm that for Putin and his entourage, their state cannot survive except as an empire, entailing the diminished sovereignty of all its post-Soviet neighbors and former satellites.¹⁶ Thus, any Russian sphere of influence means Russia is secure only if all its neighbors are permanently insecure, i.e., a permanent state of war or pre-war.¹⁷ Moreover, the forceful drive to recreate the empire has long since become a major driver shaping Russia's lurch towards a new totalitarian repressiveness and autocracy.¹⁸

(November-December 2015): 328-339, 331, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1057077>.

¹⁴ Alfred J. Rieber, "Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers," in *Imperial Rule*, edited by Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber (Budapest and New York: Central European Press, 2004), 199-200.

¹⁵ Federico Fubini, "Sergey Karaganov: 'We Are at War with the West. The European Security Order Is Illegitimate'," *Corriere Della Sera*, April 8, 2022, https://www.corriere.it/economia/aziende/22_aprile_08/we-are-at-war-with-the-west-the-european-security-order-is-illegitimate-c6b9fa5a-b6b7-11ec-b39d-8a197cc9b19a.shtml.

¹⁶ Stephen Blank, "The Values Gap between Moscow and the West: The Sovereignty Issue," *Acque et Terre*, no. 6 (2007): 9-14 (Italian), 90-95 (English); and Stephen Blank, "Russia and the Black Sea's Frozen Conflicts in Strategic Perspective," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 23-54, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2008-012>.

¹⁷ Timothy J. Colton and Samuel Charap, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2017), 109, <http://www.tinyurl.com/y3hj93z4>.

¹⁸ Valerie Bunce, "The Prospects For a Color Revolution in Russia," and Keith A. Darden, "Russian Revanche: External Threats & Regime Reactions," *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 25-28 and 128-141, <https://direct.mit.edu/daed/issue/146/2>.

Empires are anachronisms in the twenty-first century. They are non-democratic, centralized political systems formed in earlier historic periods. As ancient political systems, empires are incompatible with twenty-first century mass ideologies such as nationalism. The maintenance of empires *depends* on the non-participation of the masses.¹⁹

And in Russia's imperial quest we find numerous analogies to Fascist and Nazi tropes, e.g., equating diasporas with citizens and stating that the entire USSR was actually Russia are easily discernible.²⁰ Thus, domestic autocracy and external empire presuppose war, dictatorship, curtailment of Russia's neighbors' sovereignty, and placement of their territorial integrity at constant risk. Since Russia can only achieve its goals by force, i.e., war, any state's choice between Russia or the West is really a choice, willing or not, between two rivalrous models of socio-political development.²¹

Furthermore, the two aggressions against Ukraine of 2014 and 2022 reveal that the fundamental precondition for European security is foreclosing Russia's imperial option. Empire and autocracy are two sides of the same coin in Russian history and are mutually justifying ideological-institutional formations. Therefore, the West must devise and execute a long-term multi-dimensional strategy encompassing this Wider Black Sea region that comprises, admittedly in varying degrees, the Balkans, Levant, and Caucasus to defeat decisively and conclusively Russia's many-pronged efforts to perpetuate a state of war throughout this zone.

Missions for the West

The most urgent missions presently connected with the Black Sea are ensuring, sooner rather than later, a Ukrainian victory, and providing sufficient energy to Ukraine so that the population does not freeze during the winter. That outcome could generate a massive refugee and migration crisis or challenge to Central and Western Europe and undermine Ukraine's economy. Clearly these missions link together military, political, and economic tasks. Operationally these missions point in four directions: a long-term and much larger provision of modern weapons and technologies to Ukraine to thwart Russia's long-range air, naval-based, and missile strikes, and break the blockade of the Black Sea; Western action to deprive Russia of energy revenues by finding alternative sources for its energy

¹⁹ Susanne Michelle Birgerson, *After the Breakup of a Multi-ethnic Empire: Russia, Successor States, and Eurasian Security* (Westport CT and London: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 193. (Italics in original)

²⁰ Vladislav L. Inozemtsev, "Putin's Russia: A Moderate Fascist State," *The American Interest* 12, no. 4 (March-April 2017): 32-33, published online on January 23, 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/23/putins-russia-a-moderate-fascist-state/>.

²¹ Temur Basilia, "Eurasian Commentary," in *Russian-Eurasian Renaissance: U.S. Trade and Investment in Russia and Eurasia*, ed. Jan H. Kalicki and Eugene K. Lawson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 166.

and increasing energy flows to Ukraine; providing long-term underpinning for Ukraine's economy that requires several billions of dollars monthly merely to survive; and lastly breaking the blockade of the Black Sea to liberate energy and grain shipments. This last mission alleviates the threat of hunger in major parts of Africa and the Middle East that depend on Russian or Ukrainian grain exports, earns desperately needed foreign revenues for Ukraine, opens up several opportunities for non-Russian energy imports into Ukraine and Europe, and reduces, if not eliminates, Russian military threats to Odessa, and efforts to close the Black Sea while using it as a gateway with which to challenge NATO in the Mediterranean.

Beyond long-term sustainment of a "hot production line" of modern weapons and economic assistance to Ukraine, these missions translate into several other equally urgent long-term tasks that combine military-political-economic programs. Strategically, they also open up the Black Sea, negate Russia's maritime, if not overall, strategy, and wrest escalation control in this war from Moscow's grasp. The blockade is a wholly illegal and piratical act of aggression. Absent a Russian declaration of war, this entire war is wholly illegal as are its actions like the blockade. But while the West conducts diplomatic maneuvers to get around the blockade and free up grain, the crisis continues. Putin continues the blockade and energy blackmail of Europe armed in the belief that allied unity will shatter since the allies lack the will to challenge Russia. Clearly, something more is needed to break the blockade and enhance Black Sea security. Moreover, the steps needed to operationalize those missions and ensure Ukraine's victory must strategically combine and coordinate military and non-military steps. Breaking the blockade alleviates Ukraine's economic travails and upholds the long-standing international principle—for which Washington went to war in 1812 and 1917—of the freedom of the seas. Finally, it will also establish a lasting basis for a much-needed full-time Western presence in the critically important Black Sea.

Mark Cancian's recent assessment of ways to break the blockade underscores the fact that all options bear risk and that force may be necessary to accomplish that mission.²² Therefore a new basis for Turco-Western rapprochement is an unconditional necessity since Turkey holds the keys to the Black Sea but also seeks to follow an independent policy between NATO Alliance, of which it is a member, and Russia. Today there are signs of this rapprochement in Ankara's agreement on Finland and Sweden's NATO membership and the resumption of talks on the sale of F-16s to Turkey.²³ These provide openings that can, if handled adroitly, be redound to the allies' benefit.

²² Mark Cancian, "How to Break Russia's Black Sea Blockade: The World Must Act to Address the Global Food Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-07-01/how-break-russias-black-sea-blockade>.

²³ Josh Rogin, "How a Thaw with Turkey Could Help Ukraine Win the War," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/06/30/biden-erdogan-thaw-turkey-help-ukraine-against-russia/>.

There are several conceivable avenues of approach here. First, the U.S. could immediately implement the legislation establishing a lend-lease program with Ukraine, to get formerly U.S. and now Ukrainian ships into what are now U.S. and/or NATO bases. This places the onus of escalating directly against the U.S. on Moscow, something it clearly is unwilling to do and thus helps reduce Russian escalation control and naval options in the Black Sea. Others have suggested that the UN General Assembly (UNGA) could create a naval escort force under a third party commander, e.g., a Turkish commander given Turkey's good ties with Moscow and Kyiv, that would be equipped with minesweepers, air defenses, and other requisite capabilities to break the blockade and export stored grain.²⁴ However, this solution then leaves Odessa and other ports exposed to Russian attacks, so it must be supplemented by other measures to prevent that contingency or a credible Russian commitment—which is unlikely—to lift the blockade. A convoy solution, discussed by Cancian, reveals similar risks.²⁵ Therefore, apparently, the only truly effective way to break the blockade is by force, e.g., on the basis of the new Lend-Lease legislation for the U.S. Alternatively, and possibly more preferably, the UNGA could repeat its 1950 example of the “Uniting For Peace” Resolution authorizing the U.S. to take command of forces in South Korea against the North's invasion there and authorize NATO to lift the blockade on humanitarian grounds, e.g., preventing mass hunger. That resolution would allow NATO to use its bases in Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey to make Crimea and the blockade in the Black Sea untenable. That method, combined with Ukraine's outstanding successes in the naval sphere, would relieve much of the Russian strategic and commercial pressure on Ukraine. This method of operation also would preserve intact the Montreux treaty and thus not contradict NATO's ambition to repair ties with Turkey. Meanwhile, the blockade continues with ruinous consequences.

Obviously, NATO does not lack opportunities, but despite its resolutions, has consistently not capitalized on them with respect to the Black Sea. For various reasons, NATO has not exploited the military-political opportunities afforded to it under the Montreux Treaty regulating the Black Sea before the war.²⁶ NATO has clearly been effectively deterred from offering a physical presence in Ukraine or the Black Sea. U.S. and NATO naval vessels have left the Black Sea to avoid

²⁴ “Ukrainian Grain: How to Lift Russia's Black Sea Blockade?” *Naval News*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/06/ukrainian-grain-how-to-lift-russias-black-sea-blockade/>.

²⁵ Cancian, “How to Break Russia's Black Sea Blockade.”

²⁶ LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, COL (Ret.) Ray Wojcik, and Carsten Schmiedl, *One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank* (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, May 2020), <https://cepa.org/one-flank-one-threat-one-presence/>.

provoking Russia, leaving Russia's blockade unchallenged.²⁷ This outcome poses great threats to all the other littoral states, including NATO candidate Georgia and NATO members Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria. Moreover, the absence of a countervailing force permits the continuation of the blockade and naval shelling of coastal targets. So NATO, as part of its presumed revival in the war, could fully maximize its ability to defend European security interests in the Black Sea zone or region now that Russia has militarized it.

Apart from long-term sustenance in both economic and military terms, we must also impress upon Putin that Ukraine is not isolated and that he cannot achieve a victory. Analysts admit that currently Putin could declare victory at any point. "Victory is whatever Russia can claim on the day it decides to stop fighting, *provided—and this is key—that it stops fighting of its own volition.*"²⁸ Therefore it is necessary to wrest control of the initiative and therefore escalation dynamics from Moscow. Russia's overall strategy has long aimed precisely at escalation control to make the Black Sea and even the entrance to it inaccessible to the West.²⁹ Russia's nuclear threats to Europe displayed in previous exercises and current operations validate *The Economist's* insight that this is a war of escalation, i.e., whatever the world does and says about it, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens to act more violently – including nuclear threats.³⁰ Putin's strategy evidently includes repeated escalatory nuclear threats to wrest victory from the jaws of stalemate or even defeat and override his ongoing crimes and military mismanagement.³¹ This behavior fully comports with the more general purposes of escalation and nuclear threats in Russia's overall nuclear strategy, and with the larger purposes of Russia's general nuclear strategy to secure escalation dominance throughout all stages of a crisis, including not only threats but also actual use of nuclear weapons in a first-strike mode.³²

²⁷ John Irish, Robin Emmott, and Jonathan Saul, "NATO Leaves Black Sea Exposed as Russia Invades Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-leaves-black-sea-exposed-russia-invades-ukraine-2022-02-24/>.

²⁸ Sam Greene, "Why We Fight," *TL;Drussia*, June 30, 2022, <https://tldrussia.substack.com/p/why-we-fight>. (emphasis in the original)

²⁹ See, for example, Stephen Blank, "Baltic Buildup," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 29, no. 5 (May 2017): 12-13.

³⁰ "A War of Escalation: Just How Far Will Putin Go?" *The Economist*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/films/2022/03/07/a-war-of-escalation>.

³¹ David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt, Helene Cooper, and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Makes Contingency Plans in Case Russia Uses Its Most Powerful Weapons," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/us/politics/biden-russia-nuclear-weapons.html>.

³² Nikolai N. Sokov, "Russian Military Doctrine Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-escalation.' Here's Why," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 8, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/russian-military-doctrine-calls-a-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation-heres-why/>; Michael Kofman, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Concepts, Debates, and Players in Military Thought," *Russian Military Analysis*, April 20, 2020, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/>

Writing about the war in Ukraine and Russian nuclear strategy, Heather Williams observes:

But the invasion of Ukraine is escalation of a different sort – it is intentional escalation. Russia’s strategic doctrine is made up of offensive and defensive components, to include intimidation and imposing costs in an effort to manage escalation. While often misrepresented as “escalate to de-escalate,” Russia’s approach to strategic deterrence ultimately is about intentional risk manipulation.³³

And that is certainly true here. Putin continues escalating against Ukraine and thus only indirectly against NATO by unleashing his air force and missiles to conduct terror bombing and attempting to force Belarus into the war.³⁴

Therefore, to avoid future wars and a scenario where Russia wins, NATO and the EU must admit that their vital interests are at stake and find the means to defeat Russia. Ukraine not only serves as a test of Russia’s imperial intentions, which it conspicuously failed but also challenges the viability of the West’s normative narrative.³⁵ Those values are among the major issues at stake here. We have also noted the conjoined challenge of empire and autocratic dictatorship. But this victory, to meet the urgent challenges listed above, cannot entail exclusively military options. Economic programs, particularly in bringing energy to the Wider Black Sea zone, are essential preconditions of future peace and security throughout this zone, not only in Europe but also in the Levant.

Energy for the Black Sea Zone and the Balkans

As noted above, Black Sea security cannot be contemplated without including the Balkans. Although Balkan states represent rather small energy markets, they are crucial to European energy policy and security. Their proximity to energy suppliers ensures that they will play an outsized role in affecting European energy security. Since any Balkan crisis quickly metastasizes into a general crisis of the overall European state system, this principle equally applies to energy security as well.³⁶ The centrality of energy as potentially the

2020/04/20/russian-strategy-for-escalation-management-key-concepts-debates-and-players-in-military-thought/.

³³ Heather Williams, “What We Got Wrong About Nuclear Risk Reduction,” *The Hill*, May 23, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3497843-what-we-got-wrong-about-nuclear-risk-reduction/>.

³⁴ Stefan Wolff and Anastasiya Bayok, “Commentary: Growing Fears Russia Could Drag Belarus into Ukraine War,” *Channel News Asia*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/ukraine-russia-belarus-invasion-join-war-putin-2762621>.

³⁵ Lilia Shevtsova and David J. Kramer, “Ukraine, Russia and Two Horses,” *The American Interest*, August 21, 2012, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/08/21/ukraine-russia-and-two-horses/>.

³⁶ Stephen J. Blank, “Introduction” and “Yugoslavia’s Wars and European Security,” in *Yugoslavia’s Wars: The Problem From Hell*, ed. Stephen J. Blank (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.:

most important weapon in Moscow's arsenal regarding European security reinforces this finding.³⁷ This is because pipelines function as transmission nodes for Russian political leverage throughout Central and Eastern Europe to control revenues, infrastructure, and, ultimately, governments.³⁸

Consequently, the Balkan states are a critical linchpin in the European energy system and an epicenter of the confrontation between Moscow and the West. Russia's attempted coups in Montenegro and the Republic of North Macedonia highlight this point.³⁹ And since there is a visible need for major gasification and infrastructure projects across the Balkans for them to accelerate and galvanize their individual and regional economic development, the location of current and future infrastructure and pipeline projects was both a domestic and an international issue in each country before this war.

Therefore, questions pertaining to Balkan pipelines are inherently politicized. First, since the Balkan states are either relatively recent members or aspirants to EU membership, like Albania, they are obliged and expected to devise their energy programs in keeping with the EU's energy frameworks and *Acquis Communautaire*.⁴⁰ That fact plus the normal and natural conflicts of interests within governments ensures that major domestic decisions on pipelines and energy policy will be objects of internal political struggle. Second, because energy is Russia's overall trump Russia incessantly uses these issues to create advantages for itself vis-à-vis Europe.

Thus, both Russia's earlier South Stream proposal and the current Turk Stream pipeline project stem from Moscow's desire to circumvent Ukrainian pipelines, erode any potential Ukrainian leverage over Russia, undermine the foundations of Ukrainian independence, and isolate Ukraine from Europe, rendering it exclusively dependent on Russia for energy. Conversely, Western counter-proposals aim to block Russia's efforts to isolate Ukraine and deprive

Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1995), 1-5 and 123-159, respectively, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/226/>.

³⁷ Martin Vladimirov, "Reassessing Russian Influence: Economic and Governance Underpinning," in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Ognyan Shentov, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

³⁸ John R. Haines, "The Geopolitics of Russia's Networked Energy Infrastructure," *Orbis* 59, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 557-599, 562, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2015.08.010>.

³⁹ Mersiha Gadzo, "Russian Spies Found Guilty of Montenegro Coup Attempt," *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/9/russian-spies-found-guilty-of-montenegro-coup-attempt>; Frieda Ghitis, "Russia Tries to Tip the Scales in the Fight Over Macedonia's Future," *World Politics Review*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/26241/russia-tries-to-tip-the-scales-in-the-fight-over-macedonia-s-future>.

⁴⁰ USAID, "Energy Strategy for Albania: Enhancing Capacity for Low Emission Development Strategies (EC-LEDS)" (USAID, January 2018), 35, <https://www.h2o-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/documents-public/Albania/USAID-2018-Albanian-Energy-Strategy.pdf>.

Russia of a monopoly over Balkan gas flows that would then be used to lay the foundation for its corruption, subversion, and ultimately capture of local governments.⁴¹ Since Western states have also long striven to induce Ukraine to develop its own energy industries and become not only self-supporting in energy but also an exporter to less well-endowed areas in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.⁴² This war now provides an even greater opportunity to realize that objective by finding new alternatives to Russian energy, thereby reducing Russia's overall influence in and around the Balkans and Black Sea.

While the G-7 is capping the price of Russian oil imports to deprive Moscow of revenues, the search for new sources that do not come from Russia through the Balkans to Central Europe continues.⁴³ Several governments are already exploring African contracts but neither those contracts nor even increased U.S. production and exports suffice.⁴⁴ Therefore Europe is now exploring new sources coming from areas connected to the Black Sea zone either directly or indirectly. The EU has now signed deals with Israel and Egypt to bring gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Greek refineries from where it can go to the Balkans, and thence to Italy and Germany.⁴⁵ The EU may yet also include the sizable Cypriot holdings since Cyprus, Greece, and Israel continue to cooperate to free that energy up for Europe and Cyprus has recently signed solar energy and electricity deals with the EU.⁴⁶ Another possible

⁴¹ Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>.

⁴² Donatienne Ruy, Heather A. Conley, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook-2-enablers>.

⁴³ James Osborne, "What Rick Perry Was Doing in Ukraine?" *Houston Chronicle*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/energy/article/Rick-Perry-s-Ukraine-mission-14539165.php>; "Ukraine and Its Relations With the United States"; Testimony, Daniel A. Russell, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Testimony Before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Washington, DC, March 16, 2010), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/140325.htm>.

⁴⁴ Matthew Dalton, "G-7 Bid to Cap Russian Oil Price Faces Hurdle of Global Enforcement," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/g7-bid-to-cap-russian-oil-price-faces-hurdle-of-global-enforcement-11656425299>.

⁴⁵ Ariel Cohen, "A Scramble for African Energy," *Forbes*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2022/06/30/a-scramble-for-african-energy/>.

⁴⁶ Sarah El Safty and Ari Rabinovitch, "EU, Israel and Egypt Sign Deal To Boost East Med Gas Exports To Europe," *Reuters*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/eu-israel-egypt-sign-deal-boost-east-med-gas-exports-europe-2022-06-15/>.

⁴⁷ Reuters, "Greece, Cyprus and Israel to Expand Energy Cooperation amid Ukraine War," *Reuters*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/greece-cyprus->

source might become the gas that Turkey has claimed to discover off its Black Sea coast.⁴⁷

But these and Eastern Mediterranean sources are still not ready for export because there is no dedicated pipeline for any of these gas flows and building them will take time and huge investments. Therefore, the West seeks expanded shipments from existing pipelines. This brings Azerbaijan into play since it is exporting gas to the Balkans through the Trans-Anatolian-Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TANAP-TAP) and oil through the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Just before the war, Azerbaijan announced plans to increase gas exports to Europe this year to 16.2 BCM and ultimately double them.⁴⁸ Once the war began, Baku reaffirmed its intention to ship more gas to Europe.⁴⁹ However, beyond strengthening energy ties to Azerbaijan, this war offers the U.S. and the EU new opportunities to increase their overall engagement with the Caucasus and reduce Russia's capacity for inciting new conflicts. The EU mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh wars is now proceeding and apparently making progress in bringing Baku and Yerevan to talk.⁵⁰ While it will be necessary to make peace there, to bring all the parties, including Russia and Turkey, into an ongoing negotiation, the possibility for enhanced and more enduring EU presence in the Caucasus through this process and stronger energy ties is now a real one and should not be lost as happened previously, the result being the many wars in the Caucasus and Ukraine since 2000. This does not mean excluding Russia, which is, in any case, impossible in the Caucasus, but

israel-expand-energy-cooperation-amid-ukraine-war-2022-04-05/; "EU Invests over €1 billion in Energy Infrastructure in Support of the Green Deal," *European Commission*, January 26, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/eu-invests-over-eu-1-billion-clean-energy-infrastructure-support-green-deal-2022-jan-26_en; Georgios Georgiou and Paul Tugwell, "EU Commits \$736m to Fund Cyprus, Israel Power Link to Europe," *Bloomberg*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-27/eu-commits-736m-to-fund-power-cable-linking-cyprus-to-europe>; AFP, "Greece, Egypt, Cyprus Sign Energy Deal with Europe in Mind," *ET Energyworld.com*, October 20, 2021, <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/renewable/greece-egypt-cyprus-sign-energy-deal-with-europe-in-mind/87153204>.

⁴⁷ Hasan Selim Özertem, "Turkey's New Gas Discovery in the Black Sea and Its Potential Implications," *IFRI (French Institute of International Relations)*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/editoriaux-de-lifri/turkeys-new-gas-discovery-black-sea-and-its-potential-implications>.

⁴⁸ Reuters, "Azerbaijan Set to Boost Gas Supply to Europe This Year, Double Capacity in Future," *Reuters*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/azerbaijan-set-boost-gas-supply-europe-this-year-double-capacity-future-2022-02-23/>.

⁴⁹ Fareed Rahman, "Azerbaijan Plans to Supply More Natural Gas to Europe amid Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *The National*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/energy/2022/05/09/azerbaijan-plans-to-supply-more-natural-gas-to-europe-amid-russia-ukraine-conflict/>.

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Watch List 2022 – Spring Update," ICG, May 24, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/watch-list-2022-spring-update>.

it does mean a stronger and more lasting presence to counter its imperial games in Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia while strengthening regional confidence in the durability of Western interest. This process also merits strong American support as that is the material basis on which the EU can resist Russian provocations. More generally, the West must grasp that the Black Sea region as a whole, including the Caucasus, Balkans, and the Levant, allows NATO/EU countries to interact with the states of the South Caucasus, Middle East, and Central Asia to prevent Russian revisionist challenges.⁵¹ This insight applies to economic, political, and military challenges that are inter-linked. Neither is it confined to the Caucasus because the “sub-regions” around the Black Sea or of the Wider Black Sea are linked.

A major solution to the energy problem of supplies for Balkan states lies in increased shipments from Azerbaijan through the TANAP-TAP pipeline and from the Eastern Mediterranean. But beyond that, increased energy supplies from Azerbaijan to Europe through the Balkans, added to other sources cannot meet local or European challenges without substantial progress on completing the pipeline infrastructure needed to move non-Russian hydrocarbons throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe. This is a major task for the EU and sub-regional organizations like the Three Seas Initiative, which again underscores the linkages among energy, political, and ultimately military outcomes in the Wider Black Sea.⁵²

Conclusions

Thus, we return to where we began. The West confronts multi-dimensional but ultimately linked security challenges in the Black Sea Region that it has hitherto shirked with the results being multiple wars, the most terrible of which is Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. This war affords NATO and them a chance to use their economic-military superiority to engender a more legitimate and durable order across the Black Sea and reduce, if not eliminate, Russia’s perennial imperial and violent threats to that order. The question, then, is not one of resources, for they exist. Rather, as so many have noted, the question is one of will. For only if the West truly wills the creation and sustainment of that order will it not be a dream.

⁵¹ Pavel Shlykov, “Russian-Turkish Relations in the Wider Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Competition,” *Perceptions* 23, no.2 (Summer 2018): 93-116, 99, <http://sam.gov.tr/pdf/perceptions/Volume-XXIII/Summer-2018/sf-93-116.pdf>.

⁵² Stephen J. Blank, “The Balkans and Euro-Atlantic Energy Security,” *Orbis* 66, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 58-77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2021.11.006>; Haines, “The Geopolitics of Russia’s Networked Energy Infrastructure,” 557-599.

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