



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Securing Strategic Waters Across the MENA Region: The Black Sea

DIALOGUE BRIEF
October 2026

Executive Summary

This paper reflects perspectives shared during a Hollings Center dialogue session on maritime security in the Black Sea, supplemented by additional comments submitted by one participant following the discussion. The session is part of the Center's initiative examining strategic maritime security challenges across the MENA region and adjacent waters, including the Red Sea, Black Sea, Persian Gulf, and Eastern Mediterranean.

Participants described a Black Sea security environment transformed by the war in Ukraine. Traditional naval doctrine, focused on dominance and complex force projection, has morphed into a new reality in which inexpensive technology and hybrid warfare changed strategy from "sea-dominance" to "sea-denial" – preventing an adversary from utilizing the sea. The Black Sea has become a case study in this doctrinal shift. Russia entered the conflict with a significant conventional naval advantage, but Ukraine has increasingly constrained Russian freedom of action through uncrewed systems, long-range strikes, intelligence support, and other sea-denial capabilities. Russian naval forces have been pushed away from much of the western Black Sea, reducing pressure on Odesa and the threat of large-scale amphibious operations. Russia nevertheless retains significant capacity to strike Ukrainian ports, infrastructure, and commercial vessels. The result is a contested maritime environment in which neither side exercises uncontested control and relatively inexpensive systems can impose significant costs on conventional naval forces.

Uncertainty created by this new security environment complicates civilian navigation, particularly in commerce and trade. Ports can remain technically open while becoming commercially difficult to use because of attacks, insurance costs, damaged infrastructure, and electronic interference. Both Russia and Ukraine are adapting trade patterns in response. At the same time, their continued dependence on maritime exports, particularly agricultural products, creates some overlapping interest in preserving civilian navigation. Participants suggested these economic pressures could eventually support limited arrangements to reduce risks to commercial shipping without requiring a broader political settlement.

Participants also emphasized that the Black Sea can no longer be treated as an isolated theater. Security pressures across the Black Sea, Mediterranean, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Caspian Sea increasingly overlap through military cooperation, weapons transfers, sanctions evasion, energy flows, commercial rerouting, and electronic warfare. Russia's relationship with Iran further connects developments in Europe with security challenges in the Middle East. As conflicts

become more interconnected, policies organized around separate geographic theaters may become less effective.

Participants were cautious about ambitious proposals for a new post-war Black Sea security architecture. Participants noted existing distrust among littoral states. The Montreux Convention remains important for regulating naval access through the Turkish Straits, but many capabilities shaping the current balance—drones, missiles, electronic warfare, surveillance, and coastal defenses—fall outside its traditional focus. Türkiye will remain central to any future arrangement, but participants suggested that a realistic objective may be a combination of credible littoral deterrence, practical cooperation, protected commercial navigation, and managed military restraint.

Practical Policy Applications

Strengthen Littoral Deterrence and Sea-Denial Capacity

The war has demonstrated that effective maritime deterrence may depend less on conventional fleet size than on the ability to deny an adversary freedom of action.

- Expand cooperation on coastal and air defense, uncrewed systems, surveillance, and maritime awareness.
- Facilitate allied procurement and transfer of U.S.-origin capabilities needed to protect ports, infrastructure, and commercial access.
- Strengthen mine countermeasure, coast guard, and maritime law-enforcement capabilities among Ukraine, Türkiye, Romania, Bulgaria, and other regional partners.

Protect Commercial Navigation and Critical Infrastructure

Commercial disruption does not require the physical closure of the Black Sea. Persistent uncertainty can itself alter shipping patterns, increase costs, and reduce commercial confidence.

- Improve coordination among governments, insurers, ports, shipping companies, and maritime security providers while expanding contingency planning for attacks on ports, offshore energy infrastructure, and commercial vessels.
- Explore limited arrangements designed to reduce risks to civilian navigation and food exports.
- Preserve viable commercial access between Ukrainian ports and the Bosphorus and strengthen environmental response capacity for damaged vessels and maritime infrastructure.

Improve Maritime Awareness and Counter Hybrid Threats

Participants described an environment in which conventional attacks, electronic warfare, sanctions evasion, and commercial activity increasingly overlap.

- Improve monitoring and information sharing on AIS manipulation, GPS spoofing, jamming, uncrewed systems, and suspicious vessel activity.
- Strengthen U.S. and partner enforcement against sanctions evasion and shadow-fleet activity through legal, financial, port-state, maritime-service, and commercial tools.
- Conduct regular exercises involving governments and private operators responsible for ports, pipelines, offshore energy, communications, and shipping.

Build Practical Cooperation and Managed Restraint

Participants remained skeptical that Black Sea states will quickly converge around a comprehensive postwar security system. Their threat perceptions, economic interests, and relationships with Russia differ substantially.

- Build on Türkiye-Romania-Bulgaria cooperation on mine countermeasures and critical maritime infrastructure while prioritizing practical coordination in search and rescue, mine clearance, infrastructure protection, environmental response, and maritime awareness.
- Use targeted U.S. convening and technical support to strengthen littoral-led cooperation while encouraging European partners to assume primary responsibility for regional funding and conventional capabilities.
- Maintain the Montreux Convention as a stabilizing mechanism unless a clearly superior alternative emerges, while avoiding unnecessarily large permanent naval deployments that could intensify regional competition.
- Explore limited, monitored arrangements covering commercial navigation, infrastructure protection, mines, and notification of military activity while preserving sufficient coastal and economic-zone defense capabilities to deter coercion.

Türkiye would be central to such an approach. Its support for a limited and monitored system of maritime restraint could help bridge differences between states seeking stronger deterrence and those concerned about further militarization.

Conclusion

The Black Sea demonstrates how conventional naval power, asymmetric warfare, commercial vulnerability, and regional security are increasingly intertwined. It also shows how conflicts once treated as separate theaters are becoming connected through trade, energy, technology, military cooperation, and sanctions evasion. As in the Red Sea, disruption does not require full closure of a waterway: uncertainty itself can produce strategic effects by changing commercial behavior. The practical challenge is therefore to combine credible deterrence with restraint, protect commercial navigation and infrastructure, and strengthen functional regional cooperation without turning the Black Sea into a permanently militarized arena.