



Reprioritizing the Black Sea After the War in Ukraine

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War has once again engulfed the Black Sea region with Russia's attack on the sovereign territory of Ukraine, and yet the sea itself has figured far less than the land around it in the battle space. Why? The 1936 Montreux Convention, forged from great-power rivalry and Turkey's balancing diplomacy, has safeguarded the Black Sea for nearly a century. In 2022, Ankara's invocation of Article 19 of the Convention successfully limited the naval theater of the war against Ukraine, proving that the framework under Turkish sovereignty serves as a stable bulwark against Russian aggression and wider conflict. But preserving the status quo after the war will require renewed strategic attention, because Russia's ambitions will not fade even with a ceasefire (which is not yet on the horizon). What could the United States, the European Union, and other interested parties do to diminish the Black Sea as a locus of hostilities and enhance its role as a nexus of trade and cooperation?

BACKGROUND

Ironically entitled the "Pontus Euxinus" ("hospitable sea"), the Black Sea has been a battleground for maritime dominance since antiquity. Its sole entrance, the Turkish Straits, facilitates over 20 percent of the global wheat trade and safeguards the stability of the greater Black Sea region. Between the late seventeenth century and 1936, the Straits' legal regime shifted on average every seventeen years with fourteen separate ratified treaties; the Russian Empire was the main instigator of such instability, benefiting from all negotiations unfavorable to the Ottoman government (as shown in table 1). While focused on the Gulf of Finland and the Danish Straits, Russia saw access to warm-water ports on the Black Sea coast and unhindered passage through the Turkish Straits as increasingly indispensable. During the rule of Catherine the Great, Russia's yearning for ascendancy over the Black Sea became ingrained in Russia's imperial identity. It is also with Catherine's glory and legacy that Vladimir Putin purportedly most resonates.

The present settlement since 1936, the most enduring by far, remains acutely relevant to contemporary geopolitics. On March 1, 2022, Turkey invoked Article 19 of the Montreux

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TABLE 1 TREATIES ON THE STRAITS REGIME SINCE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Year	Treaty	Signatories	Conflict	Outcome regarding the Black Sea / Turkish Straits	Beneficiary
1700	Treaty of Constantinople	Ottoman Empire, Tsardom of Russia	Azov Campaign of 1695-96 in the Russo-Turkish War of 1686-1700	Russian possession of the Azov region; first Russian access to the Black Sea	Tsardom of Russia
1711	Treaty of the Pruth	Ottoman Empire, Tsardom of Russia	Russo-Turkish War of 1710-13	Azov Fortress returned to the Ottoman Empire; Russian Black Sea access curtailed	Ottoman Empire
1774	Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire	Russo-Turkish War of 1768-74	Russia gained various port cities on the Black Sea coast; freedom of navigation for merchant ships through the Straits	Russian Empire
1798, 1805	Russo-Ottoman Secret Treaty	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire	Napoleonic invasion	Limited Russian warship passage through the Straits	Russian Empire
1809	Treaty of the Dardanelles	Ottoman Empire, United Kingdom	Anglo-Turkish War, 1807-09	Ancient rule codified; affirmed that no warship of any power should enter the Straits	Ottoman Empire
1829	Treaty of Adrianople	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire	Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29	Russian occupation of the Danubian Principalities, more territories on the Black Sea Coast; Dardanelles open to all commercial vessels	Russian Empire
1833	Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire	Egyptian-Ottoman War, 1831-33	Secret alliance allowing Dardanelles to be closed to all foreign warships at Russia's request	Russian Empire
1841	London Straits Convention	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, United Kingdom, French July Monarchy, Austrian Empire, Kingdom of Prussia	Expiration of Hünkâr İskelesi; Egyptian-Ottoman War, 1839-41	Reestablished ancient rule: closure of Straits to all warships during peacetime	Ottoman Empire, United Kingdom

TABLE 1 TREATIES ON THE STRAITS REGIME SINCE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (*continued*)

Year	Treaty	Signatories	Conflict	Outcome regarding the Black Sea / Turkish Straits	Beneficiary
1856	Treaty of Paris	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, Austrian Empire, Second French Empire, Kingdom of Prussia, United Kingdom, Kingdom of Sardinia	Crimean War, 1853–56	Black Sea neutralized; Russian possessions returned to Ottoman Empire and prohibition of Russian military presence	Ottoman Empire, United Kingdom, Second French Empire
1871	Treaty of London	Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, United Kingdom, Austro-Hungarian Empire, French Third Republic, Kingdom of Italy, German Empire	Franco-Prussian War, 1870–71	Russia regained rights to maintain a fleet in the Black Sea; reaffirmed Ottoman sovereignty over the Straits	Russian Empire
1920	Treaty of Sèvres (signed but not ratified)	Ottoman Empire, Allies of World War I	World War I, 1914–18	Established the International Straits Commission under the League of Nations; internationalized the Straits and permitted full navigation for all vessels during peace or wartime	Allies of World War I
1923	Treaty of Lausanne	Turkey, United Kingdom, French Third Republic, Kingdom of Italy, Kingdom of Romania, Empire of Japan, Kingdom of Greece, Kingdom of Yugoslavia	Turkish War of Independence, 1919–23	Restoration of Turkish control of the Straits but under the condition of demilitarization, allowing passage of all foreign warships and commercial vessels	International Straits Commission
1936	Montreux Convention	Turkey, USSR, French Third Republic, United Kingdom, Kingdom of Romania, Empire of Japan, Kingdom of Greece, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Tsardom of Bulgaria, Commonwealth of Australia	No direct conflict; rise of Fascist Italy in the 1930s	Restored full Turkish sovereignty and right to remilitarize the Straits; discretion to regulate warship passage in wartime	Turkey

Convention to close the Straits to all warships from both belligerent and nonbelligerent states, including those of NATO members. Notwithstanding a broad interpretation of Montreux, this decision definitively limited escalation in the naval theater of the war in Ukraine. With exceptional tales of Ukraine's sinking of the Slava-class cruiser *Moskva* and recapturing Snake Island in the early stage of the war, Russia's pursuit of unfettered access to the Black Sea was substantially impeded: Russia's overwhelming naval superiority failed to translate into effective maritime control, underscoring the weight of the Montreux regime. Notably, Turkey's invocation was welcomed by both belligerents. Ukraine praised the closure of the Straits, as it precluded Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea Fleet, allowing Kyiv to degrade Russian naval capabilities; Russia similarly commended Turkey's decision, as it excluded NATO presence and influence.

Nearly four years into the war, even a ceasefire will not signify the termination of Russian aggrandizement toward the region. Historical precedent and Moscow's current Maritime Doctrine suggest that Russia's appetite for the Black Sea and the region's geopolitical vulnerability are perennial problems that cannot be resolved with a peace plan in Ukraine. Russia will continue to view the Black Sea as an internal lake, and Moscow's quest for access to warm-water ports will remain a vital national interest. Once the Turkish Straits are reopened after the signing of a ceasefire, the Black Sea will be exposed to Russian advances toward its north coast. It is thus crucial that policymakers across the Atlantic anticipate the region's potential post-war instability. This brief addresses three central questions: What are the historical lessons for safeguarding the Black Sea? What contributed to the diplomatic success of the Montreux Convention? Why should the Black Sea be strategically reprioritized as the war in Ukraine approaches a settlement?

SAFEGUARDING THE BLACK SEA: LESSONS FROM HISTORY

LESSON 1: DOMINANCE IN THE BLACK SEA IS NONNEGOTIABLE FOR RUSSIA

Any post-ceasefire settlement in Ukraine must confront one constant: For Russia, dominance in the Black Sea is nonnegotiable. Assumptions that Russia will abandon expansionist objectives after a ceasefire in Ukraine are therefore dangerous. Centuries before NATO, Russian rulers viewed the Black Sea as a vital sphere of influence and a gateway to imperial expansion, annexing the Crimean Khanate and establishing the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. European powers later watched quietly as Russia negotiated the rights to close the Straits at her discretion. Even considerable territorial concessions through European diplomatic efforts have failed to restrain Russian advances toward the north coast of the Black Sea. Each time Russian influence expanded unopposed, the European balance of power was shattered. In 2026, there is little reason to expect any fundamental changes in Russia's objectives and diplomatic conduct. Regarding the Black Sea region, demands perpetuating Russian dominance will be reiterated until accepted, or rather, capitulated to. Policymakers must prepare for continued Russian rigidity and refusal to negotiate.

LESSON 2: GREAT-POWER RIVALRY CAN CURB RUSSIAN EXPANSIONISM TOWARD THE BLACK SEA

Russian restraint and setbacks in the Black Sea, including Turkey's accession to NATO and the formation of the Montreux Convention, have emerged from the presence of competing great-power rivalries. When Russian aggrandizement was growing unchecked in the East Mediterranean, it was the rise of Britain and her Royal Navy that eventually stalled Russian advances, neutralizing the Black Sea after the mid-nineteenth-century Crimean War. The Montreux Convention, the current legal regime safeguarding the region, was also forged by great-power rivalry. Conflicting priorities among the UK, Soviet Union, and Germany led to the production of a compromise, of which Turkey was the beneficiary. Less than a decade later, Moscow raised demands on Turkey to revise the Montreux Convention. Fearing that Soviet menace in the Mediterranean would upset the balance of power in Europe, the United States backed Turkey to uphold the existing regime. When Turkey officially joined NATO in 1952, Washington and Brussels secured a significant victory in hemming in Russian ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean and gaining Ankara as a strategic treaty ally. In 2026, even though few nonlittoral great powers are as deeply invested in the Black Sea as Russia, great-power rivalry can still effectively undermine Russian advances toward the region.¹

LESSON 3: TURKEY'S BALANCING DIPLOMACY REMAINS CENTRAL TO CURRENT ANKARA-MOSCOW RAPPORT

Following a potential reopening of the Turkish Straits, Turkey's calibrated balancing diplomacy with Russia remains the determining force of Black Sea security. In 1936, Ankara's diplomatic flexibility and openness to temporary alignments helped construe the Montreux Convention. Today, the pragmatic relationship between Ankara and Moscow is still central to the global balance of power, but European allies must be wary of the utilitarian understanding between the regimes of Turkish President Erdoğan and Putin. The key to Montreux's success in 1936 lay in the balancing diplomacy adopted under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who championed national sovereignty and the preservation of the status quo. Given the natural rivalry between the two powers over the Black Sea, any ostensible understanding between Ankara and Moscow today is inevitably more delicate and transactional than publicly exhibited. Similarly, cognizant of the convoluted history of its relations with Russia, Turkey found it precarious to break free from Soviet tutelage in 1936 despite strong economic ties between the two countries.² Termination of today's war in Ukraine will once again threaten to jeopardize the transactional relationship between the two Black Sea littoral states.

LESSON 4: A CLEAR LEGAL FRAMEWORK IS INDISPENSABLE FOR MANAGING THE MARITIME CHOKE POINT

For the postwar Black Sea order, the durability of Montreux underscores the importance of an unambiguous legal framework with a trusted ally, as it effectively extends NATO's control and security protection to the maritime choke point. Montreux's clarity provided a robust framework for Turkey's resilience. The 1936 Convention delineates access to the

Straits through a clear distinction between riparian and nonriparian states for both merchant and military vessels, in addition to four distinct conditions with varying degrees of Turkish discretion: peace, war with Turkey neutral, war with Turkey belligerent, and imminent danger of war (“la Turquie s’estimerait menacée d’un danger de guerre imminent”).³ Furthermore, the Montreux Convention meticulously regulates advanced notification, tonnage, and duration of stay for nonriparian warships. Preferential treatment to Black Sea riparian states is explicit. Nonriparian warships are capped at fifteen thousand tons and limited to a twenty-one-day presence, whereas Black Sea navies are exempt from those restrictions.⁴ Through the stipulations’ clarity, Ankara’s invocation of the international treaty was met with little resistance in 2022. Also bolstered by the second-largest standing army in NATO, Turkey obtained an elevated status on the Black Sea—an asset for securing stability in the region.

Advances in modern surveillance and precision weaponry have further enhanced Montreux’s political relevance. The balance of military power in the Black Sea has decisively shifted shoreward and no longer rides on the naval assets at sea. The Royal Navy learned this lesson in the Dardanelles Campaign in the First World War when it found itself unable to force a passage through the Straits. The lesson from military history endures today: Ships cannot fight forts. Today, the coastline of the Black Sea is fully lined with mobile launchers, and the sinking of the *Moskva* would happen to any warship that tries to navigate the constricted waters under satellite and drone surveillance. This technological evolution has three implications for Montreux: (1) Montreux’s naval tonnage limits are less militarily decisive than in 1936, but the Straits regime remains a mechanism of escalation management; (2) by constraining large foreign warships, Montreux limits symbolic naval deployments with high political visibility but limited operational value; and (3) Montreux shields NATO from pressure to conduct such escalatory deployments.

WHY DOES THE CURRENT MONTREUX REGIME WORK?

FROM INSTABILITY TO DURABILITY

Earlier regimes of the Straits failed because the balance of power in the Black Sea region was asymmetric: The rule of the Ottoman Empire over the Straits was fragile and frequently vulnerable to Russian aggression. Beyond the strategic necessity for year-round warm-water ports on the Black Sea coast, Russia’s national identity was also imbued with the yearning for Constantinople. British involvement introduced a counterbalance to Russian advances, but a maritime Anglo-Russian rivalry transformed the Black Sea into a sparring ground for the two imperial powers, further destabilizing the region. A durable order became possible only after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. The Montreux Convention succeeded because its establishment aligned with the political realities of the 1930s. Three conditions were crucial:

1. *Great-power rivalry produced compromise.* Britain, the Soviet Union, and Germany held divergent interests, allowing Turkey to exploit their competition to attain political autonomy.

2. *Turkey framed control of the Straits as a question of national sovereignty.* Following the Turkish War of Independence, the Treaty of Lausanne was seen as humiliating to Turkish national sovereignty. Remilitarization and nationalization of the Straits was therefore pursued with clarity, resolve, and domestic support.
3. *The European political climate in 1936 made the existing regime untenable.* Following the remilitarization of the Rhineland and Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, the de jure internationalization of the Straits could no longer be practiced without provoking conflict, creating the momentum to codify a new regime.

Montreux's endurance until today rests on additional reinforcing factors.

1. *Turkey emerged as a status quo state that benefited from diplomatic flexibility.* Kemalist foreign policy was shaped by the historical memories of Ottoman decline and the War of Independence. Therefore, in the wake of national survival, the Turkish Republic prioritized stability.
2. *Turkey's stabilizing posture was strengthened by her growing military capacity.* Turkey's pragmatic balancing diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia has been bolstered by the second-largest standing army in NATO, which grants her leverage over Moscow while anchoring Ankara within the Eurasian security architecture.
3. *The legal and procedural clarity of the Montreux Convention minimized ambiguity.* The meticulously defined and comprehensive provisions have limited external pressure on Turkey and enabled the Convention's effective enforcement.

The successful establishment of the Montreux regime comprised a unique combination of factors: patriotism in Turkey, rivalries among European great powers, and menace of war in Europe. Its endurance necessitated an even more delicate mixture of circumstances: Turkey's diplomatic flexibility and balancing act, and the rare juxtaposition of her status quo outlook with a strong military presence. Attempts to adapt the Montreux Convention to other maritime choke points would therefore be meritless due to the distinctive diplomatic preliminaries of the Convention. The political equilibrium in the Black Sea had been prone to instability before Montreux, but the 1936 Convention reinforced the fragile balance through great-power compromise, middle-power diplomatic adroitness, and a conducive international political milieu.

CAUTION AGAINST REVISING THE MONTREUX CONVENTION

When a ceasefire is eventually reached in Ukraine, Russia and other players could exert pressure on Turkey to revise the Montreux Convention. These suggestions should be resisted. The endurance of Montreux relies upon a unique convergence of political and military factors; even an attempt at revising Montreux today would be destabilizing for the balance of power between Russia and Europe. As a potent legal regime governing the maritime choke point controlling a semienclosed sea, the military and security significance of the Montreux Convention cannot be overstated.

Turkey's proposed Kanal Istanbul, despite its logistical challenges, further complicates the existing equilibrium. The planned canal, intended as an alternative route between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara to the west of the Bosphorus Straits, poses concerns for the enduring validity of the 1936 Convention. Montreux's jurisdiction is explicitly limited to the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus; the existence—or mere proposition—of alternative pathways could invite arguments based on *rebus sic stantibus* for a renegotiation of the Montreux regime, threatening destabilization of the status quo. For this reason, Kanal Istanbul should not be viewed as an infrastructure project alone, but as a potential disruption to the Montreux legal regime.

WHY REPRIORITIZE THE BLACK SEA POST-UKRAINE?

Despite elevated stakes in the region, Western engagement with the Black Sea's safeguarding remains insufficient, in Brussels and Washington alike. NATO and the European Union only belatedly reprioritized the Black Sea following the 2022 Russian invasion, and even then, rhetoric still outpaced resources: Brussels has yet to mobilize funding commensurate with stated ambitions. Even in October 2025, the EU's new strategy on the Black Sea devotes only a single section to maritime security, prioritizing instead trade diversification, digital connectivity, and energy links.⁵ Washington, meanwhile, still lacks a coherent Black Sea strategy; the 2025 National Security Strategy makes no mention of the region or the Straits as a choke point. Initiatives proposed to both the Biden and Trump administrations remained largely conceptual rather than operational.

The historical perception of the Black Sea as being peripheral has contributed to its strategic neglect from both sides of the Atlantic. Located at the lower-right-hand corner of the map of Europe, the region appears geographically removed from the continent's core. The United States has traditionally prioritized NATO's northeastern flank due to the concentration of Russian forces there and the robustness of Polish, Baltic, and Nordic democracies.⁶ The Baltic Sea, in turn, benefits from its proximity to NATO's Western European members, geographic compactness, shared democratic values, and cohesive institutional development; any successful management of the Black Sea must overcome the absence of these attributes. In comparison, heterogeneity among the six littoral states of the Black Sea has created complex logistical governance challenges for Brussels and Washington. Indeed, the economic heft of the Black Sea countries cannot rival that of Baltic Sea counterparts, and except for Turkey, the Black Sea nations also have declining populations. These countries remain widely divided in political alignment, economic robustness, and institutional capacity, limiting NATO's ability to present a unified regional strategy.⁷

But *Russia* has never regarded the Black Sea as peripheral. The region has always been and will continue to be a core theater of Russian national prestige and strategy. The reasons for renewed Western prioritization of the region are manifold: persisting Russian territorial ambitions; the rising significance of the Middle Corridor and the potential for Sino-Russian disruption on the trade route; fragility of the transactional Russo-Turkish rapport after the war in Ukraine; and NATO's Article 5 security commitments.

1. Russian Expansionist Ambitions Toward the Black Sea Will Not Change

Russia's neoimperial expansionist ambitions toward the region are not contingent on the outcome of the war; they are enduring, ingrained in Russian national identity since Catherine the Great, and unlikely to abate. As soon as the Straits reopen, Russia will be able to redeploy naval assets from its Northern, Baltic, or Pacific fleets to reinforce the Black Sea Fleet. Then, as a littoral power of the Black Sea, Russia is well positioned to deploy gray-zone tactics to disrupt commerce and regional stability. The Black Sea's vulnerabilities beyond the maritime domain can also be weaponized, particularly as the Middle Corridor trade route linking Europe and Asia grows in strategic importance.

In Russia's latest Maritime Doctrine, the Black Sea is effectively viewed as a domestic Russian lake, akin to the Baltic, Caspian, and Azov Seas. The document emphasizes "intensive reinforcement of the geopolitical positions of the Russian Federation." The Russian doctrine also emphasizes the priority of creating a more favorable international legal regime in the Black Sea, likely alluding to revising the framework established by the Montreux Convention. In the Black Sea region, Moscow hopes to develop underwater pipelines, commercial fisheries, Mediterranean cruises from the ports of Crimea, world-class seaside resorts, and yachting tourism.⁸ Unlike in Russian discourse on the Baltic region, notably absent in the section on the Black Sea is the recognition of other littoral states, consistent with Moscow's characteristic reluctance to recognize the sovereignty of southern neighbors.

Such historical ambition has long made the region prone to frequent political turmoil. The present settlement of nearly nine decades, albeit the most enduring by far, is not immune to change. The case for caution remains convincing. In particular, recent episodes of Russian military aggression illustrate the region's persistent volatility: Transnistria (1991), South Ossetia and Abkhazia (2008), Crimea and the Donbas (2014), and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022). Even when the present war concludes, the Black Sea region will remain vulnerable to Russia's propensity toward projecting power in the southeastern flank of Europe.

2. Middle Corridor Trade Links Offer Sino-Russian Leverage and Can Be Targeted

Along with Russia's historical ambitions is the emergence of the Middle Corridor, a key trade route connecting Europe to China via the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Central Asian steppe. Compared to the war-ridden Northern Corridor through Russia, or sea lanes through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea that are vulnerable to Houthi attacks, the Middle Corridor is not only the shortest route between Asia and Europe but also the most shielded from geopolitical volatility. As a critical junction on the Middle Corridor trade route, the Black Sea has the potential to become a choke point for Eurasian commerce. Since the war in Ukraine, there has been a growing appetite for the Middle Corridor from European investors, notably from Austrian Federal Railways' (ÖBB) Cargo Group, Denmark's Maersk, and the Dutch Rail Bridge Cargo, all of which have forged public-private partnerships to increase cargo turnover and leverage the route's potential.⁹ The World Bank Group has also projected that by 2030, trade flows along the corridor will triple.¹⁰ Even though attacks have diminished in the Red Sea area and the Arctic Sea route has become more accessible due to global warming, the advantages of the Black Sea route remain compelling.

The increased relevance of the Black Sea for global commerce demands Western vigilance: China has demonstrated deepened interest in the trade route and the wider Black Sea region, which provides for the possibility for Sino-Russian cooperation in disrupting the choke point and the global trade that it administers. These considerations will become vital after the termination of hostilities in the current war in Ukraine. On the eastern end of the Middle Corridor, China has already demonstrated growing interest in investing in developing this route. In August 2025, China Railway Container Transport Corporation (CRCT) joined Middle Corridor Multimodal Ltd., signaling Beijing's deepening involvement in the project.¹¹ With the Black Sea's central location on the route for connecting Europe and Asia, the region could expect to see heavier Chinese footprints as the corridor expands its trade capacity.

3. The Delicate Transactional Relationship Between Turkey and Russia Can Fracture Postwar

Consider the historical perils of the Russo-Turkish relationship in the context of the Black Sea: From 1686 to 1918, the two powers fought more than a dozen wars, each driven by incompatible ambitions in the Black Sea and the Straits. The crux of the matter today still lies in Ankara's intricate balancing act vis-à-vis Moscow. The ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted Turkey's unique diplomatic conundrum. On one hand, Turkey, the growing middle power, is a NATO member state that has consistently affirmed its support for Ukrainian sovereignty. In January 2026, Turkey even publicly joined the Coalition of the Willing meeting in Paris and committed to mobilizing forces in the case of a Russian ceasefire violation, focusing on the maritime domain.¹² On the other, Turkey has maximized her delicate position to sustain a transactional understanding with Russia. The Turkish government has not joined Western sanctions against Russia since the outset of the war, as Ankara continues to rely on Russian natural gas via the TurkStream pipeline. In 2024, Turkey became the second-largest buyer of Russian pipeline gas after China. In November 2025, Turkey and Russia initiated negotiations to renew gas supply contracts between Gazprom and BOTAŞ totaling a volume of 22 billion cubic meters annually.¹³ Both governments have shared similar priorities in the Black Sea region since 2022: The maintenance of a status quo ante with limited Western naval presence is a desirable outcome for both countries. The Black Sea has effectively been transformed into a mare clausum during wartime under the Montreux framework, where Russia and Turkey share a zone of privileged interests through the Straits' closure.

However, Turkish military presence in a ceasefire enforcement coalition and mounting pressures from the Trump administration to curb energy ties with Moscow will likely strain the existing Russo-Turkish relationship. Further, Turkey's recent attempt at reactivating negotiations for EU accession and Turkey's consent to Sweden's admission into NATO in July 2023 have added more tension between Moscow and Ankara. Turkish weapons supplies to Ukraine, a testament to deepening economic and military ties between Ankara and Kyiv, remained another source of frustration and irritation for the Kremlin. Tellingly, despite Turkey's refusal to join Western sanctions against Russia, Ukraine has not allowed any criticism of Ankara since the Russian invasion. All factors served to undermine the thin foundation for the current Russo-Turkish understanding.

As demonstrated by Turkey's tentative attempt to break free from Soviet tutelage in 1936, history cautions that a convergence of interests renders the transactional partnership (*"mariage de convenances"*) inherently fragile and fleeting; the absence of deep-seated shared values and memories of a long-standing rivalry rightfully draw concerns to the durability of the delicate Russo-Turkish alignment. While a full confrontation between Russia and Turkey after the Russo-Ukrainian War remains highly unlikely due to NATO's Article 5, any deterioration in relations between Ankara and Moscow would come at the expense of any remaining leverage that the West holds over the Kremlin. If the fragile alignment between Moscow and Ankara ruptures after the war in Ukraine, Russian assertiveness in the Black Sea could be unleashed with vigor. Any miscalculation or escalation would then constitute a high-risk scenario: NATO allies could find themselves confronted with plausible provocations for the invocation of Article 5 on the alliance's southeastern flank. Brussels and Washington must be conceptually and realistically cognizant of the profound security implications of the Black Sea region.

4. NATO Collective Security Commitments Are in Play for the Black Sea Region

After Turkey joined NATO in 1952, the Straits question and Black Sea security became inseparable from the collective security commitments of Western Europe and the United States. Turkey's accession provided a buttress for NATO's southeastern and Eastern Mediterranean flank and a checkpoint for Russian expansion toward southern Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. Turkey's joining NATO was also revolutionary for the history of the Straits regime: Instead of the Montreux Convention, Turkey's survival and security became entrusted to Article 5 of the NATO alliance. By extension of the article, safeguarding of the Turkish Straits falls within the collective security commitments of NATO allies, including the United States and Western Europe. Turkey's 1952 move to NATO transformed the nature of the Straits question: Instead of being an isolated regional issue, Turkey's sovereignty over the Straits could potentially trigger a general conflict that involves Russia, Western Europe, and the United States.

Once foreign warships reenter the Black Sea after a ceasefire, Russia could immediately reinforce her Black Sea Fleet with assets transferred from her Northern, Baltic, or Pacific fleets. Russia would then be well positioned to disrupt maritime traffic by employing gray-zone tactics such as mine laying, harassment of merchant vessels, and pressure on Ukrainian and Georgian ports. Following Russian withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Russia could also interfere with Ukraine's grain exports, pressurizing the Ukrainian economy. The consequences of delays and rerouting of cargo along the Middle Corridor and in the Black Sea in general would be immediate and substantial: higher global shipping costs, rising insurance premiums, and lower confidence in the resilience of the Middle Corridor supply chain. Moreover, in a hypothetical scenario where China faces intensified Western pressure on other contentious issues such as over the Taiwan Strait, Beijing could theoretically encourage Moscow to disrupt maritime commerce in the Black Sea. Therefore, NATO must reinforce deterrence and maintain a credible posture for crisis-response readiness along the alliance's southeastern flank.

5. Russian Leverage over the Black Sea Grain Market and Global Food Security Has Deepened

Beyond its security significance, the Black Sea is central to global food security. According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Russia and Ukraine held an average combined market share of 29 percent of global wheat exports between 2023 and 2025, primarily supplying highly import-dependent regions in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴ As a result, when the blockade of Ukrainian ports in February 2022 paralyzed Black Sea trade, the global impact on grain supplies and prices was severe. Within days of the Russian invasion, global wheat futures rose by 60 percent and corn futures by around 15 percent, causing one of the sharpest spikes in global commodity prices since early 2008.¹⁵ Four years into the conflict, as supply chains recovered, markets gradually stabilized and adapted to a normalized level of disruptions in the Black Sea; a potential ceasefire, though not on the immediate horizon, is unlikely to have a major impact on market dynamics.

However, the Black Sea grain market could still be weaponized geopolitically after the war due to Russia's leverage over the wheat, fertilizer, and Global South export markets. Most of the import-dependent countries purchasing Black Sea grain have minimal capacity to hedge against geopolitical shocks. Their people are thus particularly vulnerable to grain price volatility—a historical source of acute political tension in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Postwar price fluctuations in the fertilizer market, critical for the entire food-production supply chain, may further intensify such volatility due to Russia's position as a top exporter in the market. Although prices for phosphate, nitrogen, and potash have eased from record highs in 2022, an upward trend was observed in 2025 as the market remains in flux amid persisting geopolitical tensions.

The war has considerably strained Ukrainian agricultural capacities; a postwar recovery will be arduous. While still a top producer, Ukraine has lost its status as a major player in the global grain market, with diminishing production and harvested area. According to USDA's long-term projections, Ukraine's grain exports are unlikely to be restored to prewar levels within the decade. Questions as to whether Kyiv will retain control over Odesa, the main port for Ukrainian grain exports, add uncertainty to postwar agricultural prospects for Ukraine. There are still reasons for hope: Ukrainian export markets have diversified due to changes in EU grain import regulations in late 2025 and have seen increasing flows toward Egypt and Algeria. Through the EU-facilitated Solidarity Lanes (after the rupture of the short-lived Black Sea Grain Initiative in 2023), infrastructure developments on the west coast of the Black Sea, particularly the ports of Constanta, Varna, and Burgas, will provide long-term resilience of alternative shipping corridors.

Russia, by contrast, has continued to dominate global grain markets on a weaker ruble and became a major supplier of grain for Turkey. In 2026, Russian grain production is projected to increase by 7 percent for wheat, reaching a robust 87.8 million metric tons, and by 9 percent for corn despite drought in some regions. Adding to the delicacy of Russo-Turkish relations, Turkey became the second-largest consumer of Russian grain in 2024 (after Egypt); Turkish dependence on Russian grain supplies further deepened in 2025 after Ankara introduced a

duty-free wheat import policy. On one hand, the growing volume of Russo-Turkish grain trade strengthens the shared interest of both countries in maintaining secure commercial shipping routes in the Black Sea, particularly as Russian exports move from Novorossiysk through the Straits to Turkish distribution hubs. On the other, amplified Russian leverage over Turkey and the entire Black Sea grain market looms large in a potential ceasefire.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Montreux regime, forged from great-power rivalry and Turkey's balancing diplomacy, has safeguarded the Black Sea for nearly a century. In 2022, Ankara's invocation of Article 19 successfully limited the naval theater of the war in Ukraine, proving that the framework under Turkish sovereignty served as a stable bulwark against Russian aggression. Preserving the status quo after the war in Ukraine will require renewed strategic attention, because Russia's ambitions will not fade with a ceasefire. Attesting to persistent Russian hubris toward the Black Sea and the Straits, the British ambassador to Turkey during the 1936 negotiation of Montreux, Sir Percy Loraine, articulated the reason for continued alert:

The Russians, after all, do not change. In the days of the Tsar, their eyes were constantly fixed upon Constantinople. The new Tsar (Stalin) works in a different way. He makes a military alliance with Turkey; he becomes indispensable to Turkey, or so he believes; he encourages the fortification of the Straits; he endows Turkey with certain industries; he obtains a privileged position, generally, in this country. How far will this movement proceed?¹⁶

Western allies must reprioritize the Black Sea, because Russia will invariably harbor expansionist ambitions toward the region, and access to year-round warm-water ports will always be a vital national interest for Moscow. In 2025, Loraine's observation of tsarist propensity and Turkey's balancing diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia have stood the test of time. Although Turkish military capabilities have been fortified since the early Republic years, Ankara and Moscow still enjoy a delicate relationship despite the latter's broader diplomatic isolation. Furthermore, Russian dominance over the Black Sea grain and fertilizer markets deepens Moscow's leverage over Turkey, along with other major importers of Russian wheat and fertilizers. A ceasefire, albeit not imminent, could severely test the resilience of Russo-Turkish relations and engender renewed instability and security concerns in the Black Sea.

Reopening the Turkish Straits will predictably beckon Russian designs and permit the reinforcement of the Russian Black Sea Fleet; proposals to revise the Montreux Convention to dilute the current regime would also threaten to destabilize the region. Along with the Middle Corridor trade route, navigation through the Black Sea can be plausibly disrupted, and its vulnerability weaponized, by gray-zone tactics.

The Black Sea has never been peripheral for Russia. Now in 2026, as the war in Ukraine enters its fifth year, the Black Sea region's future stability rests squarely on Western powers' resolve to elevate the region beyond a peripheral concern. To sustain the status quo painstakingly

preserved under the Montreux regime for nearly a century, the United States and Europe must acknowledge that Russia's ambitions will endure, and that safeguarding the Black Sea demands immediate strategic reprioritization as soon as a ceasefire in Ukraine is reached—before Moscow seizes on the next opening of the Turkish Straits.

NOTES

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