

## **THE BATTLEGROUND OF THE BLACK SEA: A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS**

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**DOI: 10.5958/2249-7315.2022.00234.9**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Black Sea has emerged as a new battleground in the Heart of Europe. It has become the site of frozen conflicts and open wars. Thus, it has acquired great geopolitical significance, as it has remained throughout the history.*

*For a long period of time, the region around the Black Sea has remained a single(undivided) geopolitical space due to the geographical proximity and political affinity of the countries of the region. Despite these facts, the political change in the geopolitical landscape has created many fissures in the region. Subsequently, it has developed into an area of multiple conflicts. Several of these conflicts have challenged the geopolitical stability of not only this region but the world at a large.*

*Shortly after the disintegration of the USSR, the US and the European Union accepted almost every country in the Black Sea region into their reach. It increased their sphere of influence. Russia was also aspiring for strategic dominance in the Black Sea and the region surrounding it. The concern for Moscow over the expansion of NATO up to its borders has led to a new tension in the region. The conflict in the sphere of influence turned into open war, aggression and occupation of the land of sovereign countries.*

*The Black Sea has critical geostrategic importance for the countries of the region and for the other countries of Asia and Europe. For US and the European Union, the Black Sea is mainly a source of natural resources and a space for trade and transit but for Russia, it is a geopolitical space of its security. The critical geostrategic importance of the Black Sea has converted it and the region surrounding it into a region of conflict. Any provocation from western countries may lead to a major geopolitical crisis in the sea and the surrounding region. The present research is an attempt to interpret the changes in the security and stability of the Black Sea since the disintegration of the USSR.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Black Sea, Geopolitics, Russia, NATO, EU.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

‘Geography Matters’ (Massey and Allen, 1984) and it matters more in geopolitics. It may sound deterministic but geographical factors – such as proximity or nearness of countries, landmass, geographies of resources and so on – shape international relations and geopolitics. It determines the opportunities for security or vulnerability to external threats. It also defines the boundaries of influence and the opportunities or vulnerabilities to extend or control it. The geographical location and configuration provide certain inherent advantages or challenges for various countries attempting to secure certain areas for themselves; and/or evict the presence of existing countries or

delimit or minimize their ability to control the said area. The geopolitical boundaries of influence and control are also determined by the geographic location and configuration, certainly, other factors such as social, cultural, economic and political factors add to it. It also depends on the ability and willingness of the country to project its military power. Geographical location also defines the ability of a country to take advantage of the geopolitical landscape in any future conflict.

The geopolitical significance of the Black Sea has been determined by the peculiarities of its geographical location. The location of the Sea (and its historical position) certainly makes it an integral part of the Eurasian regions. For centuries it has remained integral to Russia (and USSR). Change in the political landscape of the region has changed its geopolitical position. It has brought the Black Sea at the centre of the world geopolitics.

The geopolitics (or rather geopolitical crises) of the Black Sea has been preconditioned by its geography and history (Sophia Petriashvili, 2015) and the changes therein. Of course, several of the countries along the littoral of the sea were once parts of the Soviet Union, while others, for all intents and purposes, were also close to the USSR. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the political geography and the geopolitics of the region acquired a new meaning. It has changed the geopolitics of the Sea.

Ever since the disintegration of the USSR, Russia maintained the perception that former Soviet Republics and the Black Sea area belonged to its natural sphere of influence. Just after 2004, when the integration of Romania and Bulgaria into NATO and the EU was decided, the Euro-Atlantic border reached the Black Sea. It brought a change in the security coordinates of the Black Sea. A further encroachment of foreign (western) countries in the black sea region has invited confrontation between East and West. The conflict became inevitable when the Western influence (interference) in the Black Sea entered in the sphere of interest of Russia. The subsequent strategic developments in the region have impacted the geopolitics of the Black Sea.

## **Encroachment of Geopolitical Space and Geopolitical Crisis**

Each country defines and constructs 'geopolitical spaces' which are crucial in the pursuit of its national interests (David Svarin, 2015). Any encroachment of its geopolitical space is regarded as an infringement of its national interest. It is perceived as a geopolitical challenge to the country. The attempt to counter the encroachment of geopolitical spaces or to neutralize the geopolitical challenge demands for counter geopolitical manoeuvring. No matter how adventurous it may prove. Both, the action of encroachment and the countermeasures lead to geopolitical crisis.

Russia, depends on the Black Sea region for energy, trade and other economic reasons and of course for its security. For Russia, its domination over the Black Sea region has always been considered a matter of national survival. On the other hand, the Black Sea is also an important region for NATO (Lembke 2006). It represents the new eastern dimension of the European Union (EU). Therefore, it has re-emerged as an area of geopolitical and geoeconomic conflict. European enlargement and further expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions to the Black Sea led to a change in the political geography of the region and new modes of geostrategic competition (Lembke, 2006)

Now the regional geopolitics is defined by the conflict of interest for the Black Sea between Russia and the Western influences. As a response to the challenge of increased western influence, coupled with regional ethnic conflicts, Russia had a direct confrontation in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea and parts of the Donbas in 2014. These conflicts continue even today and in fact, have escalated in recent months. The unresolved conflict of Nagorno Karabakh has also posed a challenge to regional peace and stability (AusrineArmonaite, 2020).

### **Geographical and Geopolitical Meaning of the Black Sea**

The territory or geography is never neutral (Michele Pigliucci, 2017). It is a defining factor in every geopolitical crisis. To understand a geopolitical crisis, it is necessary to know more about its territory or geography.

The Black Sea is situated at the south-eastern extremity of Europe. Six countries of Eurasia; Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania surround the Black Sea. To be precise, Ukraine is situated in the north, Russia in the northeast, Georgia in the east, Turkey in the south and Bulgaria and Romania in the west of the Sea.

The Black Sea is the largest inland sea of the world. Geographically it is situated between 40°55' to 46°32' N and 27°27' to 41°32' E. The east-west extent of the Sea is about 1,175 km, and the north-south extent is about 260 km. The surface area of the Black Sea is about 422,000 square km (Bakan and Buyukgungor, 2000). It is a (semi)enclosed sea. In the north, the Black Sea is connected with the Sea of Azov. It is only connected to the oceans through a narrow Channel. Kerch Strait connects it with the northern sea (Bakan and Buyukgungor, 2000). The Bosphorus channel connects it with the Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles Strait further connects it with the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean Sea is connected to the Atlantic Ocean by the Strait of Gibraltar.

Map – 1



The Black Sea commands an important geographical region that is defined as the land and seascape. It covers the area from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from the Ukrainian and Russian regions to Anatolia. It is situated at a crossroads of countries and civilizations. Even today, it constitutes a crossroads for Europe, Asia and the Middle East and has emerged as a vital route for the movement of energy to Europe (AusrineArmonaite, 2020) and other goods to Asia and Africa.

The Arctic Ocean freezes in the long winter allowing shipping only for three months in summer. Whereas the Black Sea provides a warm water port to Russia. Thus, Russia depends on the Black Sea which permits shipping all around the year. It offers a link to the Mediterranean Sea and onwards to the Atlantic Ocean. The Strait of Gibraltar lies in the territorial waters of Morocco, Spain and the British overseas territory of Gibraltar. Both the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles Strait are controlled by Turkey. Russia has friendly terms with Morocco and Spain too. Thus, this

entire chain of the sea route from the Sea of Azov to the Atlantic Ocean is easily accessible to Russia due to the presence of friendly countries.

Through its geopolitical dominance, Russia also projects its command in the Mediterranean.

## # Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Significance of the Black Sea

- Geopolitically, the Black Sea is situated at the strategic frontier of Europe and Russia. Besides, it is the region of frozen and festering conflicts. The region has always remained imperilled by divisions, rivalries and conflicts (AusrineArmonaite, 2020). Thus, it is a region of geopolitical confrontation.
- Geoeconomically, the region has great economic potential. It commands the energy security of Europe and beyond. Geostrategically, it has some important trade links and also pipelines.

The Black Sea is so significant for Russia that Russian geopolitics rests on the control of the Black Sea. It is significant to protect its economic and trade links with European countries. On the other hand, the European countries are dependent on Russian oil and gas. Therefore, there is competition and conflict for transit corridors.

The major regional and global players (active in this region) compete for the enlargement of their influence and take advantage of the regional geopolitical environment and access to the energy resources. The future prospects of the Black Sea will be shaped by the ambitions of countries in the region and the interaction between major external players.

In the present circumstances, the Russian geopolitical goals include warding off any threat from the EU and the countries of NATO to the Russian heartland (or its old strategic fortress in Crimea). It also wants to contain the influence of NATO. Therefore, it tries to undermine cohesion between the countries of Europe by trying to stoke fissures between these countries. Besides, it tries to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO.

## Literature Survey

The Black Sea has never been the subject of academic conversation from a geopolitical perspective. For a long time, the extension of the NATO-EU border to the East was out of the question. The Black Sea, therefore, had no reference in Western literature. For all practical purposes, it is meant to remain a buffer area between East and West. It also remained an ambiguous strategic area. When Romania and Bulgaria became members of NATO, the strategic presence of the NATO or EU increased in this area. In May 2004 an extensive strategy document was published regarding the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a document which defined in concrete terms the way in which the EU proposes cooperation with countries in the Extended Black Sea Region. At the same time, Policy Review in its 125 number of the June/July 2004 issue published the famous Manifesto for the Black Sea written by Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson - 'The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom', which presented, extensively, all kinds of arguments for substantial Western involvement in the region (Dan Dungaciu, 2020). Since then, many research documents have been published on the Black Sea Geopolitics. Recent research on the new geopolitical realities of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean has been published by NursinAtesogluGuney (2019). The present research is an attempt to interpret the geopolitical changes in the security and stability of the Black Sea since the disintegration of the USSR.

## Geopolitical History of Black Sea

Every geography has a history and every history has geography. The Black Sea has had an interesting geopolitical history. Historically Greece controlled the Black Sea. Since 1479 the Black Sea came under the control of the Ottoman Empire till it was taken over by the Russian Navy in

1783. Therefore, earlier in its history, it was regarded as an Ottoman Lake (Sophia Petriashvili, 2015).

For centuries the Black Sea has been fought over by some of the major empires of the world. Controlling the Black Sea has remained the prime objective of Russian foreign policy for centuries. It was required for dominance in the region. Russia always wanted to reach the southern seas to expand its influence. Under this logic, dominating the Black Sea was the necessary first step to reach the Mediterranean. After centuries of struggles, the rising Russian Empire finally managed to establish its firm control over the northern coast of the Black Sea (Alessandro Gagaridis, 2019). In 1783, Catherine the Great annexed Crimea for the first time. Ever since then, Russia became a dominant country in the Black Sea region. Control of Crimea has allowed Russia to use the Black Sea as a platform to launch and support naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Since then, the Ottoman Empire rapidly declined but the regional power struggle for the control of the Black Sea continued.

Throughout history, the control over the Black Sea has proven to be one of the most geopolitically important locations in the broader Eurasian region. It remained a bone of contention among the empires. Russia always had a competition with the Ottoman Empire over access to the sea. At the time of the Ottoman Empire, other dominant European countries, namely the UK and France, were also active in the Black Sea. France and Britain sided with the Ottomans to check the growing power of Russia in this region. In spite of its best-efforts Russia never got control of the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles Strait from the Ottomans. One of the main reasons for Russia to join World War I was to take over the control of these two straits. But the control over the southern straits again did not materialize. This time Germans sided with the Ottomans.

Both the Russian and the Ottoman Empires collapsed after World War I. The Republic of Turkey was proclaimed in October 1923 after the abolition of the Sultanate. World War II saw increased tensions between the Soviet Union and Turkey as the Soviets wanted to be equal partners with Turkey in controlling these two straits. Although Russia got access to the sea it had no control over it.

For Russia, domination of the Black Sea region has always been considered a matter of national survival. Russian Black Sea ports, being the only warm-water ports of Russia, have always served its economic interests. Although Crimea and the southern Russian port city of Novorossiysk provided Russia with access to warm water ports, due to a combination of geographical and political reasons Russia has obvious disadvantages in the Black Sea. At that time all ships entering or leaving the Black Sea must pass through the Turkish straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. These were the two strategically important passageways between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. This condition limited its access to the wider Mediterranean region. Turkey enjoyed the exclusive right to control the Turkish Straits, which required all foreign vessels passing through the Straits to obtain permission from Turkey. It has led to Turkey playing a central role in the Black Sea. It still has a sovereign right to control the Straits (Sophia Petriashvili, 2015).

Since the Montreux Convention of 1936, Turkey had control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Under the agreement, Turkey had the right to allow civilian ships to pass through the straits and to place restrictions on military vessels not belonging to the littoral states of the Black Sea. Russia has long been concerned about the ability of Turkey to control the straits during a conflict.

During the Soviet period, Moscow became the most dominant country in the region. It controlled the northern and eastern shores of the sea. On the western side, Romania and Bulgaria were also supporters of Russia. In 1952 Turkey and Greece became members of NATO. Turkey continued to serve as a competitor of the Soviet Union in the Black Sea. But during this period the Black Sea

became, practically a Soviet Lake.

In the last three decades, after the disintegration of the USSR, Russia experienced a reversal of its fortunes in the Black Sea region. After the disintegration of the USSR, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was also partitioned between the successor countries. Although Russia retained control over the bulk of the Black Sea Fleet of the erstwhile Soviet Union it lost the dominance of the naval power. Though Ukraine allowed Russia to lease the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol as the base of its fleet Russia was faced with competition from Turkey.

In the subsequent years, the former allies of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO. Georgia and Ukraine also declared their intent to follow the same path. It shifted the regional balance in the favour of NATO. These political and security shifts changed the geopolitics of the region. It forced Russia to seek ways out of this situation (Yermekbayev, 2020).

The end goal of Russia is a military presence in the Black Sea and access to the Mediterranean as a counterbalance to US and NATO expansion eastward.

### **Change in the Geopolitical Configuration of the Black Sea**

Not too far in the history, the countries around the Black Sea were part of the Soviet Union. The other neighbouring countries of the region were also under its influence. For Russia too, the former Soviet Republics and the Black Sea area belonged to its natural sphere of influence. Besides, this area has had great strategic importance for Russia. Russia sees the Black Sea as a geopolitical and strategic buffer. It has always provided a security cushion to Russia. But presently the Black Sea is surrounded by not the potential allies of Russia. Moscow understands the difficulty of the prevailing situation (Yermekbayev, 2020). The geopolitical stability of the region began to change with the Colour Revolutions, which occurred in the neighbourhood of Russia. Georgia witnessed the Rose Revolution in 2003-2004 and Ukraine went through the Orange Revolution in 2004-2005. It was an indicator of the presence of western influences in this region. At this same time, in 2004, NATO expanded its membership to include Bulgaria and Romania. As a result of it, three out of the six Black Sea littoral states became members of NATO. The two other states, Ukraine and Georgia were also working in close partnership with the 'alliance' with a potential view toward its membership. NATO viewed the Black Sea as 'important for Euro-Atlantic security' (Bucharest Summit Declaration, 2008). It was an encroachment into the traditional sphere of influence of Russia. Thus, it became a security challenge for Russia.

For Russia, the Black Sea belongs to Russia and is the starting point for its sovereignty. Besides, it provides natural security and protects to Russia from the volatility that could emanate from neighbouring regions. The Black Sea is also useful for military operations outside its immediate neighbourhood. Any event outside of Russia that is beyond its own control in the Black Sea region poses a threat to its existence and should be completely stopped (Yermekbayev, 2020). In response to the ongoing developments, Russia took measures to re-establish its influence and enhance its military presence in the Black Sea.

For Moscow, the security of the Russian homeland and the ability to project its power top all other considerations. Russia also has important economic assets in the Black Sea region, which it wants to protect. The Black Sea is an important trade and transportation artery for Russia. Consequently, in a counter geopolitical move, Russia has made clear to the West about its border and about its national security. It has clearly stated that it would not accept the expansion of the Western military alliance (Yermekbayev, 2020).

### **Security Challenges in the Black Sea**

Geopolitics in the Black Sea region was reset in 2008. Since then, Russia has had ongoing conflicts with Ukraine and Georgia. Besides, there are other challenges that cannot be discounted

(AusrineArmonaite, 2020). The Black Sea has proximity to the Russian heartland. Moscow has always been conscious of the threats from the Black Sea region. Control over the regional waters is important for Russia to grant it geopolitical and geostrategic dominance. It is not just the presence of regional players but also the possible encroachment of the NATO and EU. For Russia, the presence of the NATO and EU in close neighbourhoods is a potential source of instability because it brought a considerable part of European Russia into their range. NATO missile defence systems are stationed in Romania. It represented a further encroachment of U.S. strategic infrastructure in the neighbourhood of Russia. In fact, it was intended to undermine Russian security.

In 2014 realising that NATO will not give up without militarising Ukraine and that will gravely threaten the Russian security, Russia annexed Crimea and declared Crimea and the city of Sevastopol as the territory of Russia. Though it was a violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine but for Russia, it was the reoccupation of its territory that was Ukrainian possession. The annexation of Crimea is regarded as the greatest geopolitical manipulation of geography.

Russia wanted Crimea principally because it has excellent ports - it was the home port of the Ukrainian navy. The annexation has cut the coastline of Ukraine in half and has essentially turned the Black Sea into a Russian lake. Thus, Russia secured the sea route from the Sea of Azov to the Atlantic Ocean. It also increased the military footprint of Moscow in the Black Sea region. Therefore, it is considered as existential geopolitics of Russia.

Crimea had prominence in the Russian mission to deter the countries from the west and defend itself against the possible attack from the NATO and EU. Russian aggression against Georgia and Ukraine has prevented them from entering NATO. In the changed geopolitical circumstances, Russia plans to rebuild its position in the region that had considerably declined after the disintegration of the USSR.

## CONCLUSION

The Black Sea is part of an extremely important and sensitive geopolitical and geoeconomic area. It has huge natural resources and major transport and energy corridors. At the same time, it is situated on the frontier between the Heartland and the Rimlands. Control over this region determines control of Euro-Asia both today and in the future. For this reason, the Black Sea area... has been a centre of gravity for the geopolitical and geoeconomic and other interests of the global and regional forces (powers)

NATO has three full alliance members in this region (Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria) and two close partners in Ukraine and Georgia (Russia occupies land in both). Like the South China Sea, this is a potential maritime flashpoint. Additionally, it is likely to become a rich source of hydrocarbons, which will only exacerbate tensions in the region.

Moscow seeks to maintain its influence in the region, or at least not to allow the change in the balance of power towards the US and NATO. Moscow may have stopped Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO, but in doing so, it has turned both countries into permanent enemies, whose presence on the Russian border and growing ties with NATO will require Russia to maintain significant military assets. Therefore, Russia has since increased the build-up of naval, ground and air defence capabilities to face any adverse situation in this region. Today, Russia views the Crimean Peninsula as a springboard to project its influence not only into the large Mediterranean region but also in the European region.

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