

## **The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom**

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A series of historically unprecedented events have brought the attention of the West to the wider Black Sea region — that region including the littoral states of the Black Sea, Moldova, and the Southern Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The successful completion of the anchoring and integration of Central and Eastern European countries stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea in the Euro-Atlantic community marks the end of the grand historical project of the 1990s initiated in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the terrorist attacks of 9-11 and 3-11 have underscored the dangers of a new century and the fact that the greatest threats to both North America and Europe are now likely to emanate from further afield and beyond the continent, in particular from the Greater Middle East.

These events have begun to push the Black Sea from the periphery to the center of Western attention. At the same time, they have underscored the fact that the West today lacks a coherent and meaningful strategy vis-à-vis this region. Neither the United States nor the major European powers have made this region a priority nor have they identified strategic objectives in the region. Absent a compelling rationale attractive and comprehensible to elites and publics on both sides of the Atlantic, this is unlikely to change. Absent such a rationale, Europe and the United States are not going to be willing or able to generate the attention and resources necessary to engage and anchor the countries of the wider Black Sea region to the West — let alone to help them transform themselves into full partners and perhaps, over time, full members of the major Euro-Atlantic

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institutions. We mean to explain in this essay why the Black Sea region needs to be at the forefront of the Euro-Atlantic agenda.

### **Years of neglect**

Why has the West lacked such a strategy in the past and what has changed to make one so critical now? Four main factors explain the past lack of interest. First, in many ways the wider Black Sea region has been the Bermuda Triangle of Western strategic studies. Lying at the crossroads of European, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern security spaces, it has been largely ignored by mainstream experts on all three regions. Geographically located at the edge of each, the region has not been at the center of any. When it came to Europe, our priority was with the arc of countries extending from the Baltic states to the Eastern Balkan states. When it came to the former Soviet Union, we were focused on building a new cooperative relationship with Moscow. And apart from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the interests and attention of our Middle Eastern policy usually ceased at Turkey's southern border.

Second, given the crowded agenda of the Euro-Atlantic community since the collapse of communism 15 years ago, there was little time or political energy left to address the wider Black Sea region. The task of anchoring and integrating Central and Eastern Europe, stopping the Balkan wars, and putting those countries back on a path towards European integration — and, finally, trying to establish a new and cooperative post-Cold War relationship with Moscow — became full-time preoccupations. If one looked at the list of priorities of an American secretary of state or European foreign minister in the 1990s, rightly or wrongly, the Black Sea rarely broke through into the top tier of concerns. The exception was, of course, Turkey, which fought a lonely political battle to get the West to pay more attention to the region. Almost by default, our considerable interest in the safe and stable flow of energy through the region ended up driving our policy — as opposed to some overarching vision of how we saw the place of these countries in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Third, there was also little push from the region for a closer relationship with the West. No Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel emerged to capture our attention or pound at our door. The countries of the region, different and with widely varying aspirations, were preoccupied with their own problems and at times engaged in civil war and their own armed conflicts. Any thought of joining the West in the foreseeable future seemed unrealistic or even utopian — in their eyes as well as ours. In the West, there is always a tendency to ignore or neglect problems for which one has no immediate answer or prospect for success: the “too hard to handle” category. Henry Kissinger is reported to have said that a secretary of state should not tackle an issue without at least a 90 percent likelihood of success. The problems of the wider Black Sea region were seen as failing to meet that standard.

Fourth, the Black Sea has been a civilizational black hole in the Western historical consciousness. We suffer not only from a lack of familiarity with the region, its people, its problems, its rich culture, and its contribution to the spread of Western civilization, but also from a kind of historical amnesia. For some, “Europe” meant Western Europe; for others, it extended to the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea — but in the case of the latter, only to its western and southern edges. For many in the West, Ukraine and the Southern Caucasus seemed far-away lands of which we knew little and, rightly or wrongly, cared less. Others were too afraid even to think about venturing into what Moscow claimed to be its “near abroad” and natural sphere of domination.

Many of these hurdles and constraints are starting to soften or change. As the West succeeded in implementing its agenda of the 1990s, it now can afford to lift its geopolitical horizon and think about challenges that lie farther afield. The successful example of the “Big Bang” of nato and eu enlargements has helped awaken aspirations in the wider Black Sea region. Today, a new generation of democratic leaders in the region openly proclaims the desire to bring their countries closer to and eventually to join the Euro-Atlantic community. Having succeeded in joining nato, countries like Bulgaria and Romania are joining Turkey

in trying to impress upon the West the need to make the Black Sea a higher strategic priority. Having largely ignored the region for the past decade, the West is starting to wake up to the need to determine just exactly what our objectives and strategy should be.

### **What is the wider Black Sea region?**

Historically, the black sea has stood at the confluence of the Russian, Persian, and Ottoman Empires. During the Cold War, it was further divided between East and West. Public images of the region were shaped as much by spy thrillers and James Bond movies as anything else. The twin revolutions of 1989 and 1991, leading to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the ussr itself, in turn opened the door for a new chapter in the region's history and called attention to it for the first time since parts of the "Great Game" were played out along its shores in the nineteenth century. With nato members Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey dominating the western and southern shores and newly minted cis states Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia along the north and east, the region begins to take shape.

The wider Black Sea region must also include all three Southern Caucasus states — Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In referring to the region, we implicitly refer to the Euro-Asian energy corridor linking the Euro-Atlantic system with Caspian energy supplies and the states of Central Asia. Moreover, we are also making some claim to the projection of a Black Sea system northward from Transnistria, Odessa, and Sokhumi because a stable system would require both the resolution of "frozen conflicts" along a northeast arc and access to the great commercial rivers that flow into the Black Sea: the Danube, Dniester, and Dnieper. Conceptually, then, the wider Black Sea region is as broad and variegated a region as the North German Plain or the Baltic/Nordic zone.

Significantly, the concept of a unitary Black Sea region was envisioned in several 1990s efforts to build regional cooperation, first in ad hoc structures and since 1999 in the engagement of major Euro-Atlantic and European institutions. Limited systems of cooperation such as the Black Sea Economic Council and the so-called guam (a coordination mechanism among former Soviet republics Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) reflected a growing sense of common economic and political interest. The articulation of the so-called Southern Dimension of European security and in 2001 the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to nato in April 2004 confirmed that three major states of the Black Sea region agreed that they shared a single security system fully integrated into the larger Euro-Atlantic system. As we approach the nato summit in Istanbul, both Ukraine and Georgia are pursuing nato membership, suggesting that these states also see their futures in terms of shared Black Sea security and cooperation.

A similar convergence of regional interests can be seen in the development of relations with the European Union. The countries on the south and western shores of the Black Sea — Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania — constitute the entire class of formal applicants to the European Union and, therefore, potentially an integrated political and economic system. After the anticipated decision on June 12, 2004 to extend Europe's Neighborhood Policy to Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, all the countries on the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea — including Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova — will be engaged in developing closer relations with the European Union.

The engagement of other multilateral institutions — the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Minsk Group approach to the “frozen conflicts” of the Black Sea, the negotiations surrounding the southern flank of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe — all follow the formula of “Common Regional Problems, Cooperative Regional Solutions.” Common economic and security interests and the gravitational pull of a rapidly integrating Europe are driving the Black Sea states toward some manner of regional convergence. While

the persistence of conflict and the fragility of national institutions suggest that the emergence of a fully functional Black Sea geopolitical system is still some years in the future, there is strong evidence that the Black Sea is indeed an inchoate Euro-Atlantic region. It follows that the Euro-Atlantic states have an interest in and should have a strategy towards such an important and potentially positive development.

### **The strategic case**

Why do we need a new Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Black Sea region today? Let's begin with the strategic case, which has two major reinforcing components. The first element has to do with completing the job of consolidating peace and stability within Europe. The other has to do with addressing the most dangerous threat to future Euro-Atlantic security, which emanates from beyond the continent in the Greater Middle East. A subsidiary but still important strategic consideration pertains to European access to energy supplies.

Over the past decade nato and the eu successfully projected stability and helped consolidate democracy throughout much of the eastern half of the European continent, from the three Baltic states in the north to Romania and Bulgaria in the south. As a result, Europe today is probably more democratic, prosperous, and secure than at any time in history. At the same time, there are parts of the continent where peace and stability are not yet fully assured. They are centered in the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Belarus, and the Black Sea. Whereas the eu and nato are heavily engaged in the Balkans and are developing new approaches toward Ukraine and Belarus, the same cannot be said with regard to the Black Sea, a region just as important strategically and arguably more so.

The inclusion of the wider Black Sea region in the Euro-Atlantic system would both consolidate the foundation of this system and buttress it against many of the future threats to its peace and stability which concern us most. The case for

strategic buttress is easiest to illustrate in the negative. If one thinks about many of the major new problems and threats Europeans today are concerned about — be they in the form of illegal immigrants, narcotics, proliferation, or even trafficking in women — the wider Black Sea region is the new front line in combating them. This region constitutes one of the key routes for such illegal contraband. The traditional trade routes of the Silk Road are now used to bring heroin to European markets and dangerous technologies to al Qaeda terrorists. For the first time in more than a century, trade routes under the control of European states are being used for a sex-slave trade in women and children. Moreover, the four “frozen conflicts” monitored by the osce (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh) run through the region. It is widely and correctly believed that these unresolved fragments of Soviet Empire now serve as shipment points for weapons, narcotics, and victims of trafficking and as breeding grounds for transnational organized crime — and, last but not least, for terrorism.

Another equally important strategic reason has to do with the Greater Middle East. During the twentieth century, Europe — and Central Europe in particular — was the locus of the greatest potential conflict confronting the West. The Fulda Gap in a divided Germany was the place many feared the next major war would erupt. Today the only Gap left in Fulda sells blue jeans, and we worry about terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction launching attacks on either side of the Atlantic. Now the Greater Middle East is the place from which the most dangerous threats to the Euro-Atlantic community are likely to emanate and where Americans and Europeans are most likely to risk and lose their lives.

The Black Sea region is at the epicenter in the grand strategic challenge of trying to project stability into a wider European space and beyond into the Greater Middle East. As nato expands its role in Afghanistan and prepares for a long-term mission there and contemplates assuming added responsibilities in Iraq, the wider Black Sea region starts to be seen through a different lens: Instead of appearing as a

point on the periphery of the European landmass, it begins to look like a core component of the West's strategic hinterland.

Put simply, the interface between the Euro-Atlantic community and the Greater Middle East runs across the Black Sea, the new Fulda Gap. The generational challenge of projecting stability into the Greater Middle East will be much aided by a stable and successfully anchored wider Black Sea region. This is not just a matter of geography, territory, or Western access to military bases that might better enable us to prosecute the war on terrorism. We have a key interest in seeing the countries of this region successfully transform themselves into the kind of democratic and stable societies that can, in turn, serve as a platform for the spread of Western values further east and south. Azerbaijan's ability to transform itself into a successful Muslim democracy may be as important to our ability to win the war on terrorism as access to military bases on Azeri soil. What these countries become may be as important as where they are.

The mechanisms and alliances Europe and the United States develop in cooperative efforts in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Black Sea region will also likely be immeasurably valuable in tackling the long-term challenge of bringing democracy to the Greater Middle East. In the wider Black Sea region, ethnic conflicts, post-conflict societies, and economic devastation confront us with the same conditions we will find in the Greater Middle East. We may look back on a successful Black Sea strategy and see a proving ground on which effective multilateralism and nation-building were first developed.

A final consideration in the strategic case pertains to the role of Euro-Asian energy supplies in providing for the energy security of Europe as well as the environmental quality of the Euro-Atlantic. At present, Europe imports approximately 50 percent of its energy over complicated and often dangerous routes through the Bosphorus and English Channel. By 2020, Europe will be importing 70 percent of its energy from sources beyond Europe. To the extent that we might have political concerns about Russian or Saudi influence in European



capitals or harbor an environmental bias against nuclear power or unrestricted shipping off our beaches, we might look seriously at what a stable and secure Black Sea system offers as an alternative.

The wider Black Sea region straddles and indeed dominates the entire Euro-Asian energy corridor from trans-Ukrainian oil and gas pipelines running to the markets in Europe's north to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline running to the Mediterranean. A new Euro-Atlantic strategy geared towards anchoring and stabilizing the region can potentially bring the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Basin and Central Asia to European markets on multiple, secure, and environmentally safe routes. Not only will these energy supplies secure the prosperity of a politically independent Europe for decades to come, but the construction and maintenance of these routes will provide an important economic stimulus to the economies that were left behind in the revolution of 1989.

### **The moral case**

As important as the strategic argument for Euro-Atlantic engagement in the wider Black Sea region is the moral case. After all, it was precisely the combination of moral and strategic factors that made the case for enlarging NATO and the European Union to Central and Eastern Europe so compelling and which eventually carried both elite and public opinion. In a nutshell, that argument was based on the premise that the West had a moral obligation to undo the damage of a half-century of partition and communism and to make Europe's eastern half as safe, democratic, and secure as the continent's western half. Today that same argument must be extended to the wider Black Sea region.

Reaching out to the Black Sea countries is the natural next step in completing our vision of a Europe whole and free. Today there are growing numbers of voices in the region articulating their aspiration to anchor themselves to, and eventually become full members of, the Euro-Atlantic community through membership in

nato and the European Union. Ukraine publicly claims to have made a strategic choice along these lines (although some of President Leonid Kuchma's actions as well as Ukraine's limited progress on reform have undercut that case). More recently, Georgia has clearly moved in the same direction. Azerbaijan has harbored nato aspirations for some time. Armenia, with its close relationship to and dependence on Russia, thus far continues to be the odd man out.

These aspirations have evoked an ambivalent Western response — just as, for many, the aspirations of Central and Eastern Europe initially did a decade ago. Overwhelmed with the challenges of completing the integration of Central and Eastern Europe, many Europeans don't want to consider any options of further enlargement down the road. In addition, many in the West have forgotten the key role that this region once played in the evolution of Western civilization. Along with the Mediterranean, it was the cradle and meeting place of many of the cultures and peoples that have built the heritage of what we now call the West. Reclaiming those cultures and helping these nations reform and transform themselves into societies like ours represents the next step in completing the unification of Europe.

Once again, the West is struggling to define what constitutes "Europe" and the "Euro-Atlantic community." At several points in the 1990s debate over nato and eu enlargement, we faced the issue of how far membership in these institutions could or should extend. At each and every step there were Western voices calling for a pause or a cap on the process. The proponents of an open-ended approach prevailed with the moral argument that countries which had suffered longer under communism or were simply less developed should not be discriminated against or punished, but should instead have the prospect of one day walking through the open doors of our institutions once they have embraced our values and met the criteria for membership. We must press that case again today.

The moral case hinges on the extent of the Euro-Atlantic's collective responsibility to those people beyond the immediate scope of our defining

institutions but who share some or all of the cultural and historical characteristics that define our civilization — as, for example, Armenians undoubtedly do. The European Union’s new Neighborhood Policy comes as close as Brussels could be expected to get to asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” As Genesis informs us, opinion on this question varies. At one end of the spectrum are those who would narrowly define a “core Europe” whose highly integrated markets would be restricted to existing eu members and remain a de facto “Christian club.” At the other are those who see a politically completed community encompassing a wide range of ethnicities and faiths within a more modestly integrated Europe. At a minimum, we can say with certainty that the answer to this moral question has existential consequences for the 250 million people, most of whom live in the wider Black Sea region, who await our judgment.

The second moral reason underlying the need for a new Euro-Atlantic strategy for the wider Black Sea region revolves, paradoxically, around Russia. Today, all too many people see Russia as a reason for the West not to engage in the wider Black Sea region — for fear that engagement will generate new tensions with Moscow. The opposite may actually be the case. The long-term goals of the West are to support the democratization of the Russian state and to encourage Moscow to shed its age-old zero-sum approach to geopolitics. A policy that essentially cedes the Black Sea to Russian influence is likely to retard both. The anchoring and integration of the countries of the Black Sea to the West is likely to enhance both. While a full account of how to craft a Western policy toward Russia is beyond the scope of this paper, one thing is readily apparent: Once again, the West faces the dilemma that a strategy aimed at further extending stability will in all likelihood be seen by many Russians as hostile. And once again, the West will have to reject such thinking and instead be prepared to defend its own integrationist logic.

The reality is that nato and eu enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe has not created a new threat on Russia’s western border. On the contrary,

enlargement has probably created a more enduring peace and a greater degree of security in the region than at any time in recent history. An enlarged nato and eu have eliminated a worry that has haunted Russian leaders since Napoleon, namely, the rise of an aggressive and hostile power to its west. Moreover, since September 11, the United States and its allies have done much to reduce the threat to Russia on its southern border through the successful war against the Taliban and the deployment of a nato-led peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan.

### **Where to start?**

Developing a new Euro-Atlantic strategy for the wider Black Sea region must start with the major democracies of North America and Europe recognizing our own moral and strategic stake in the region. In this regard, the European Union has already taken a key step by including the Southern Caucasus in Europe's Neighborhood Policy, informally known as "wider Europe." This allows these new democracies to begin discussing the "Four Freedoms" of wider Europe — freedom of market access, direct investment, movement of labor, and travel. While the European Union will begin discussions of its Neighborhood Policy on a bilateral basis and will attach a high degree of conditionality, the liberalization of trade and labor and capital flows with the Black Sea countries will swiftly have beneficial regional and subregional effects.

It is time for nato to take a parallel step at its upcoming summit in Istanbul by recognizing the strategic stake the alliance has in the region. Such a recognition should be matched by a stepped-up program of outreach and both bilateral and regional cooperation. As proved effective in Central and Eastern Europe, various Western countries can organize themselves to take the lead in working with each of the Black Sea countries on a bilateral or multilateral basis. The tools for expanded military cooperation already exist under nato's "Partnership" programs. What is lacking is the political will and the guidance to tailor such programs to the

specific interests and needs of the region. Much as nato responded to the changed geopolitical circumstances of the Visegrad and Vilnius states, it must develop a comprehensive Black Sea strategy that complements the political objectives of the European Union.

Finally, North America and Europe, working through the osce and the United Nations, must step up and make a concerted effort to resolve the frozen conflicts that continue to plague the region, thereby setting the stage for the withdrawal of Russian troops who have remained since the end of the Cold War. Persistent conflict and occupying forces are childhood cancers in relation to the development of peaceful and prosperous regions. In place of economic development, a frozen conflict will substitute criminal enterprise and trafficking. In place of a shared regional approach to security cooperation, Russian military bases have only fostered the proliferation of arms, a climate of intimidation, and protection rackets. Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is time to make the resolution of the frozen conflicts from Transnistria to Nagorno-Karabakh a top priority of our diplomacy with Moscow.

Such steps can help contribute to a new dynamic of reform in the region. To be sure, the impetus for reform and change must come from within these countries, but the West can both assist in that process and help create a foreign policy environment that reinforces such trends.

In doing so, we would be laying the foundation for the completion of the third phase of a wider Europe. The first phase focused on the anchoring of Poland and the Visegrad countries. The second phase broadened our vision of an enlarged Europe by encompassing the new democracies from the Baltics to the western edge of the Black Sea. Today we face the challenge of extending our strategy to embrace a Europe that runs from Belarus in the north to the eastern edge of the Black Sea region in the south. The completion of this vision of a Europe whole and free would be a tremendous advance for the cause of democracy, integration, and security in the Euro-Atlantic region. It would also better position the United

States and Europe to deal with the challenges of the Greater Middle East. The key question is not whether it is desirable but whether it is achievable. What we have learned from the enlargements of nato and the European Union and since 1994 from coordinating the efforts of our multilateral institutions in the Balkans argues that a common and compassionate strategy toward the Black Sea is well within our grasp.