

# **From the Black Sea to the British Isles: Cooperation in Contested Waters**

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The **Democratic Resilience in a New Age of War (DRNAW)** programme is a three-year, multidisciplinary initiative supporting democracies amid escalating drone-enabled warfare and hybrid conflict. Ukraine is both a core partner and a hub for operational learning and knowledge exchange. Leveraging LSE's global expertise, direct Ukrainian partnerships, and practitioner engagement, the programme delivers real-world solutions for democratic resilience against accelerating authoritarian threats and technological disruption.

March 2026

Editor: **Stuart Austin**

## Introduction

**W**ith Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine concluding its fourth year, and with a peace settlement nowhere in sight, LSE IDEAS convened a policy discussion focusing on the security, trade, and political situation in the Black Sea. In partnership with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office of the United Kingdom (FCDO) and the Embassy of Ukraine to the United Kingdom, this policy discussion was hosted on 10 November 2025 at Lancaster House in London.

This report sets forth to recap the discussion and distil the actionable insights from this assembly of guests and speakers. Our motivation as organisers was to foster an off-the-record exchange between the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and the littoral states of the Black Sea on policy instruments that could contribute to ending Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and, more broadly, to developing a framework for long-term security cooperation and deterrence in the Black Sea. Against the backdrop of ongoing diplomatic efforts by several states to explore pathways to a peace settlement, the host institutions sought to shed light on the (at times) neglected maritime domain. The themes herein identified represent our own extrapolations. In accordance with the Chatham House rule, this report refrains from direct attribution.

The central questions at the heart of discussion revolve around regional support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity at sea, the lessons of this war for Ukraine's partners, and what policy instruments are needed to effectuate a long-lasting security arrangement in the region. To address these questions, the discussion was divided between two roundtables, with the first analysing regional cooperation in support of Ukraine, and the second homing in on increased security, connectivity and prosperity in the Black Sea. The event brought together over 80 guests, with speakers including representatives from Prevail Partners (London), the Snake Island Institute (Kyiv), the New Strategy Centre (Bucharest), British Petroleum (London), the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (Thessaloniki), and the London School of Economics.

The day's proceedings were primed by introductory discussion engaging with two overarching themes: the centrality of Ukraine's maritime operational resilience against Russian aggression, and the urgent need for multilateral cooperation by littoral states to mitigate emerging risks, with Turkey as a particularly consequential actor. Given the broader focus on British-Ukrainian partnership and how bilateral collaboration can extend to regional cooperation in the Black Sea, a particular emphasis was placed on policy instruments. Pointing to established success in industrial integration through joint ventures, early discussants reiterated the centrality of deepening Ukrainian-British cooperation in mutually beneficial areas of trade, military, and industrial interexchange. These discussions highlighted several interconnected areas including the strategic and economic importance of the Black Sea for Europe, questions around security and connectivity governance, and the operational implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for regional stability, which form the focus of the next sections.

## The Black Sea as Europe's Economic Underbelly

The Black Sea is increasingly of economic and thus strategic importance to the non-littoral states, like the UK, and even more so for the European Union. Black Sea maritime shipping accounted for ~ 1.5% of European and OECD maritime trade in 2001, rising to ~ 5% in 2019. Furthermore, Black Sea trade accounted for approximately 16.5% of European trade in 2019, up from 12.6% in 2010 (Scutaru and Watkins, 2024). Given Ukraine's aspiration for European Union membership, the importance of the Black Sea for European trade could increase, with the port of Odesa and other Ukrainian ports potentially becoming important routes for European exports to North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus. In addition to this, Romanian and Ukrainian gas fields in the Black Sea – especially the Neptun Deep field under development – provide a potential alternative to Russian gas for Europe.

Organisers intentionally integrated authoritative expertise and representation from Black Sea littoral states, such as Georgia, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria. In this transnational spirit, discussants frequently underscored the importance of the Black Sea as an economic node interconnecting Europe with the Middle East and North Africa. In this way, Russia's ongoing war of aggression calls into question the economic stability for an extensive network of states extending far beyond the Black Sea's immediate maritime borders.

The active hostilities between Ukraine and Russia exacerbate a pre-existing weakness in the region: the lack of a unified political forum for Black Sea littoral states. Lacking centralised political instruments, participants pointed to the success of multilateral initiatives in stabilising Ukraine's sea-bound trade out of the port of Odesa. Fending off Russian pressure to permanently close and thereby suffocate Ukrainian trade was held up as a key success of regional allies of Ukraine. At the same time, however, other speakers upheld the success of the Ukrainian Navy in significantly diminishing Russia's hard power assets to enforce a full blockade.

While the war's chilling effect on economic activity in the region is predictable, several discussants expressed scepticism that a ceasefire, or even a peace settlement, would produce a dramatic increase in trade. Two factors, along this line of argumentation, are at play. First, Russia's rigid political leadership does not foster increased confidence that such a peace would last, thereby impacting investor confidence. Discussants from the banking industry pointed to the utter evaporation of European investment in Russian trade infrastructure in the Black Sea as but one knock-on effect. Second, Turkey's future role as a maritime security guarantor was generally accepted. This, however, begs the question: if trade is not expected to significantly uptick in the Black Sea, would the increased investment by the Turkish Armed Forces, to say nothing of the military exposure, be sustainable? Multiple voices explained that Ankara will need economic assurances and clear pathways to investment to offset these risks. Much in the same way, it was agreed that restoring economic stability in the Black Sea would be an urgently needed act of support for Ukraine.

## Security and Connectivity Governance in the Black Sea

Against the backdrop of heightened strategic urgency and building on earlier reflections about the economic implications of Russia's war against Ukraine, the discussion turned toward cooperation among Black Sea littoral states and the types of frameworks capable of reinforcing regional governance. Participants noted that regional coordination has become increasingly important amid systemic uncertainty and proximate security risks to Europe. The Black Sea was characterised as a focal point of both security and connectivity, given its centrality in global grain supply chains, maritime trade, and its place as an energy corridor. Mitigating the impacts of instability arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine was highlighted as a priority.

A recurring theme concerned strengthening complementary policy frameworks across institutional landscapes involving both the European Union and NATO. Within this context, one line of discussion highlighted the potential of multilateral cooperation among NATO littoral states with shared and immediate security concerns. It was suggested that issue-specific formats could reinforce interoperability, enhance maritime risk management, and complement broader Euro-Atlantic structures.

The Mine Counter Measures (MCM) Black Sea Task Group – established in 2024 by Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania – was taken as an illustrative example. Operating within the legal framework of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which restricts passage of belligerent warships and imposes limits on non-littoral vessels, the Task Group demonstrates how Montreux-compliant cooperation among NATO littorals can deliver immediate risk reduction in clearly defined operational areas, notably the neutralisation of drifting naval mines, while simultaneously contributing to interoperability in the Black Sea. The discussion further suggested that the remit of such mechanisms could, potentially, be broadened from mine action to encompass other areas of shared maritime concern, including the protection of critical underwater infrastructure. In this sense, the Task Group was viewed as an example of issue-specific maritime security framework operating within existing legal and institutional parameters.

There was, however, caution against overstating the strategic significance of such formats. While the MCM illustrates the capacity for narrowly defined cooperation among NATO littorals, it does not alter the underlying balance of power or the persistent clash of interests in the Black Sea. As such, the initiative was understood as a risk-mitigation mechanism rather than a foundation for a broader regional security governance architecture.

The conversation further emphasised Turkey's central role in regional security in the Black Sea and its enforcement of the Montreux Convention as a factor in preventing escalation since the outset of the war. Participants noted Ankara's support for Ukraine's defence industrial base and its mediation initiatives, from early facilitation of the grain deal to prisoner exchanges, as well as its ambition to serve as an energy hub. At the same time, constraints were recognised, including its energy dependence on Russia.

Mediation was identified as an attractive role for Turkey as it pursues a balancing policy between Russia and the West, seeks influence through bridge-building, and simultaneously manages domestic instability concerns. An increasing emphasis in Turkish foreign policy discourse on developing 'regional ownership' (Republic of Turkey. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025) in relation to the Black Sea suggests that regional cooperation has been identified as a strategic priority and may guide policy toward strengthening cooperation with littoral states.

Looking ahead, the discussion converged on a practical premise: durable deterrence in the Black Sea depends not just on Ukraine's battlefield resilience, but also on a security and connectivity order that raises the expected costs of future escalation and aggression. In this view, expanding cooperation and deepening defence-industrial ties are mutually reinforcing. It was further suggested that partners such as the UK and the European Union can reinforce this trajectory by co-funding resilience projects and backing defence-industrial cooperation with Ukraine and NATO's eastern allies.

## **Balance of Power and the Operational Implications of the Russia-Ukraine War**

Interlinking British security interests to the Black Sea, participants directly invoked two policy initiatives as a basis for discussion of the operational situation of the ongoing war: the 2025 Strategy Defence Review (SDR) and the UK-Ukraine 100 Year Partnership. The former does indeed highlight the Black Sea region and position Turkey as an 'imperative to UK security interests across Europe and on NATO's flanks', reinforcing the centrality of Turkey as a key bilateral ally (United Kingdom. Ministry of Defence, 2025, p. 75). Moreover, the wording of the partnership stipulates that both countries will 'work together to ensure NATO learns the lessons from Ukraine's experience in the Black Sea' as basis for future defence capabilities (United Kingdom. Prime Minister's Office, 2025, Pillar 3). References to the SDR pointed directly to the acute urgency for the UK to not merely learn, but to institutionally operationalise the lessons of the war's maritime domain into the armed forces. By contrast, the partnership's core role in discussion was to provide a delivery method for future policy initiatives aimed at supporting Ukraine's defence in the Black Sea against Russia.

By 2025, despite lacking substantial traditional naval forces, Ukraine has mounted an extraordinary sea denial campaign against the Russian Black Sea fleet. Propelled by the fruits of its industrial output, most prominently the Sea Baby and MAGURA V5, adept deployment of uncrewed systems platforms has led to the destruction of 20% of Russian fleet assets, forcing their forces to reside in the relative shelter of ports (Buchatskiy, 2025). One senior official stipulated that the Ukrainian Navy's operational deployment of uncrewed systems has led to a 'fundamental change in the balance of power' in the Black Sea. Maintaining this positive outlook, however, will require diligent cooperation. Discussants noted that Russian countermeasures against Ukraine's uncrewed maritime systems are gaining efficacy, with several observers pointing to Russian innovation in the land domain as proof of their

capacity. Simultaneously, Ukraine's ability to mount sustained success at sea is predicated on uninterrupted industrial output of uncrewed systems – a status quo actively disrupted by ongoing Russian air attacks on fabrication facilities.

One recommendation gained traction amongst participants to consider British and European financial support of Ukraine's production efforts to offset losses incurred by air attacks, while also jointly producing strategically vital systems outside of Ukrainian territory to ensure their safety. The notable example of a recent air attack against a Bayraktar drone production facility – despite ostensibly stable relations with Ankara – demonstrated Russian disregard of non-Ukrainian industrial ownership. Beyond financial support, multiple participants reiterated that augmenting Ukraine's capabilities necessitates personal engagement on the ground. British-Ukrainian joint ventures, for instance, that would focus on the maritime domain must engage in good faith by interfacing directly on site to maximise leveraging of Ukraine's first-hand expertise. In this way, ideal partnership models would foresee joint production and exchange in expertise. Overall, as Ukraine rapidly upscales its maritime production, external support is essential to maintain the current advantage in the Black Sea.

Progressing to public debates in partner countries, overcoming the hurdle of the discrepancy between a policy audience and the general public's perception of the Black Sea was reiterated as a necessity. Beyond Ukraine, popular engagement with the operational reality in the region is at best superficial. For example, those participants advocating for increasing the involvement of Turkish naval forces were quickly countered by the challenge of Turkish civil society's comparative disinterest in Black Sea security. Lacking popular backing, Turkey is unlikely to be rewarded by its public if the risks and demands are not immediately apparent. To bolster the Turkish government's position, a contingent of participants recommended NATO countries providing material, and not merely rhetorical, commitments to Turkey. Properly communicated incentives for Ankara, with commensurate follow through, will be a political precondition towards convincing the Turkish public of the value of intensified engagement in the Black Sea to counter Russia. Simply put, a lack of maritime awareness – what many scholars refer to as 'sea blindness' (Young, 2019) – in NATO countries will prove a hinderance in convincing the public to support maritime enforcement of security guarantees as part of a peace settlement.

Multilateralism, according to a military official, is the sole reason that the grain supply was guaranteed despite the operational pressure exerted to suffocate this vital trade route. Though the open question remained, and without satisfying resolution, of what military constellation could align all major political actors within the Black Sea. NATO's Standing Naval task forces (STANAV), and their associated naval exercises, were identified as critical tools for strategic communication to Russia. On a practical level, the deployment and drifting of Russian mines across the Black Sea further underscored the operational necessity of the MCM, with this need likely to extend into the following years.

Two challenges towards enforcement of the Montreux Convention elicited heated debate. First, owing to the operational consequences of the war, Russia will certainly seek to recoup losses to its Black Sea Fleet via reinforcement from other sectors. Government representatives from one participating state reiterated that a ceasefire should not be considered sufficient grounds for Turkey to cease its policy of preventing Russian reinforcement. Only a lasting peace settlement would satisfy this condition, as per the discussion. Consensus was clear that Turkey's pivotal role in sustaining its consequential enforcement of the Montreux Convention would remain critical in preventing Russia from regaining the initiative in the Black Sea.

Second, the future of uncrewed systems to unsettle this balance was put to discussion. Given the ease of deployment of uncrewed systems, and their transport over-land, non-littoral states such as the UK could feasibly contribute direct military forces to the Black Sea without entering these waters via the Turkish straits. This contravention of the Montreux Convention received no tangible endorsement. Instead, there was resounding preference for encouraging littoral states to retain full mastery of their regional waters, regardless of whether uncrewed systems are used or not. However, the notion does suggest the potential for uncrewed maritime systems of non-littoral states to disrupt the security constellation governing the Black Sea. In this way, a challenging balance is required. On the one hand, participants predominantly backed the notion that Black Sea security must remain the sole responsibility of littoral states. Simultaneously, discussion revolving around the economic significance of the region emphasised the benefits of multilateral engagement and the role of external stakeholders.

## **Conclusion: Cooperation in the Black Sea**

As part of the final remarks of the day, senior discussants argued that a fundamental challenge in the Black Sea is that it is a politically fragmented region. While multiple international institutions have a declared stake in the region, it was widely acknowledged that no single actor can unilaterally shape the Black Sea. Participants stressed the need to avoid 'self-defeating' half-measures that may prove unsustainable in the long term. Instead, a more inclusive framework involving the Black Sea littoral states was identified as an important initial step toward regional governance. The current absence of an effective regional framework has contributed to difficulties in coordinating regional responses, leaving economic and security cooperation vulnerable in the context of ongoing Russian aggression.

We submit three policy recommendations as working results of this discussion. These do not represent the views of any individual or government but rather reflect our conclusions as observers and participants in this conference.

First, increase political enablement and financial support for private joint ventures between British and Ukrainian companies. Government support for these ventures achieves multiple goals: bolstering industrial cooperation for both defence and civilian output, strengthening Ukraine's economic resilience, and enabling a structured exchange of wartime expertise.

Second, explore pathways to promote and strengthen regional governance mechanisms, including political forums for dialogue among Black Sea littoral states. In light of contemporary security challenges and the costs of instability in the region, all littoral states should have avenues and incentives to engage constructively in dialogue.

Finally, the precarious military situation in the Black Sea illustrates both the strategic value and the fragility of the Montreux Convention. Strengthening regional stability and security, including effective guarantees for Ukraine, depends on continued political engagement with Turkey. This recommendation calls on the UK Government to intensify dialogue with Turkey and collaborate on solutions that enhance security arrangements in the Black Sea. ■

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