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## RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

The article examines the geopolitical significance of the black sea region for the foreign policy of Russia. The history of Muscovy's development before the Russian Empire is mainly connected with the process of increasing expansion on the Black sea and in the Caucasus region. Traditionally, the Black sea was considered an internal water for the Russian Empire, and any foreign presence was perceived as a threat. During the Cold war, the black sea region was not of primary importance to NATO and the Soviet Union, primarily due to the weakness of the North Atlantic bloc in the region.

The changing balance of power resulting from the collapse of the Organization of Warsaw Treaty and the inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania, and the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO, put Russia in a difficult position. The 2008 war against Georgia and the 2014 annexation of the Crimea can be seen as Russia's attempt to maintain the balance of power in the region. The rapid strengthening of Turkey's position in the region poses new challenges for Russian policy to ensure its national security in the Black sea and the Caucasus.

**Key words:** Russia, Black sea, security, Balance of power, Crimea, Georgia, confrontation.

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## Ресейдің Қара теңіз аймағындағы геосаясаты

Бұл мақалада қазіргі Ресейдің сыртқы саясатындағы Қара теңіз аймағының геосаяси маңыздылығы қарастырылады. Ресейдің Мәскеу патшалығынан империяға дейінгі даму тарихы негізінен Қара теңіз және Кавказ аймағында экспансиясының күшеюімен байланысты. Дәстүрлі, Қара теңіз Ресей империясы үшін ішкі су қоймасы ретінде қарастырылды және кез келген шетелдік қатысу қауіп ретінде қабылданды. «Қырғи қабақ соғысы» кезінде Қара теңіз аймағы Солтүстік Атлантикалық Шартты Ұйыммен Кеңес Одағы үшін маңызды болмады, басты себебі бұл аймақтағы Солтүстік Атлант блогының әлсіздігімен байланысты еді. Сонымен қоса, Түркияның билігіне Р.Т. Эрдоған келгенге дейін Анкараның аталмыш аймақтағы белсенділігі де төмен болғандымен түсіндіруге болады.

Варшава Шартты Ұйымының ыдырауы және Болгария мен Румынияның қосылуы нәтижесінде қалыптасқан жаңа саяси алуал және Украина мен Грузияның Солтүстік Атлантикалық блогына мүше болу перспективасы Ресейді қиын жағдайға қалдырды. 2008 жылғы Грузияға қарсы соғыс және 2014 жылы Қырымды аннексиялау Ресейдің аймақтағы күш тепе-теңдігін сақтауға әрекеті ретінде қарастыруға болады. Түркияның аймақтағы позициясының күшеюі Ресей саясатына Қара теңіз бен Кавказдағы ұлттық қауіпсіздігін қамтамасыз ету үшін жаңа мәселелерді туындатты.

**Түйін сөздер:** Ресей, Қара теңіз, қауіпсіздік, күш тепе-теңдігі, Қырым, Грузия, қарама-қайшылық.

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## Геополитика России в Черноморском регионе

В данной статье рассматриваются вопросы геополитической значимости Черноморского региона для внешней политики современной России. История развития Московии до Российской империи в основном связана с процессом усиления экспансии на Черном море и в регионе

Кавказа. Традиционно Черное море рассматривалось для Российской империи как внутренний водоем, и любое иностранное присутствие воспринималось как угроза. В период Холодной войны Черноморский регион не имел первостепенного значения для НАТО и Советского Союза, прежде всего, это было связано со слабостью западного блока в регионе. Турция до прихода к власти Р.Т. Эрдогана также не проявляла активности в регионе.

Меняющийся расклад в результате распада Организации Варшавского Договора и включения Болгарии и Румынии, перспектива вступления Украины и Грузии в НАТО поставили Россию в сложное положение. Войну 2008 года против Грузии и аннексию Крыма в 2014 году можно рассматривать как попытку России сохранить баланс сил в регионе. Стремительное усиление позиции Турции в регионе ставит перед российской политикой новые задачи по обеспечению своей национальной безопасности на Черном море и Кавказе.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия, Черное море, безопасность, баланс сил, Крым, Грузия, противостояние.

## Introduction

The Black Sea region is the place of convergence of different civilizations, religions and cultures, that has become a geopolitical and geostrategic region throughout history, as it represents the transit zone between the East and the West, between the north and the south as well. At the same time, this region has become the important boundary between the Western and Eastern bloc during the Cold War. After the collapse of the USSR and the formation of new independent states, geopolitical tensions in the region were expected to be defused, but the USA, NATO and the European Union, in other words, the Western bloc, have accepted almost all the Black Sea states into their structures, expanding their sphere of influence shortly thereafter. The concern of Moscow over the expansion of NATO to its borders has led to a new tension 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 United States and NATO. Shifting the center of American policy towards its new eastern partners cause frustration on Moscow, but also on Ankara, which is striving for a leading position in the region. The events that have taken place over the past decade of the new century show the desire of Russia to defend its geopolitical interests at any costs.

## Statement of the problem

There are ongoing discussions about the membership of Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, which was announced at the 2008 Bucharest Summit. During the course of this military operation against Georgia, Russia gave a clear signal to the West and the countries of the region about the need to take into account its interests in the region. Similarly, Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 is a repetition of this scenario, but in fact more

aggressive and enforcing international law. Russia has made clear to the West about its border, about national security and clearly stated that it would not accept the expansion of the Western military alliance. Changing the geopolitical configuration in the region is not in favor of Moscow, forcing Russia to seek ways out of this situation. Obviously, Russia does not have possible military allies in the region in case of a possible confrontation with NATO, as well as Moscow is surrounded by the Black Sea region which is not its potential allies as in the Baltic Sea region. The Kremlin understands the difficulty of the prevailing situation, and seeks to find options for the development of the scenario to its advantage. A likely scenario for this is the transformation of the coastal countries in regions that are dependent on Russian energy supplies, by turning the region into a transport corridor. Endless gas wars with Ukraine forced to look for alternative routes for transporting hydrocarbons. The construction of bypass routes was to guarantee uninterrupted gas supplies to the European market directly, without the participation of Ukraine and Poland, which adhere to anti-Russian positions. Germany, as the major consumer of Russian gas, understands that it is profitable to directly receive gas from Russia than to be dependent on Washington policy, which the Baltic countries and Poland are guiding. The Black Sea region is another alternative option for transporting gas to Europe.

*The goals and objectives of the study.* Consider the policy of Russia in modern geopolitical configuration to return to a leading position in the Black Sea region.

*Research Methods.* The fundamental principles of the school of neorealism became the methodological basis for studying this problem. The applied principles of historicism and scientific objectivity allowed the authors to consider events in a time sequence and take into account the entire

complex of phenomena that influenced the formation of a new political reality in the Black sea region.

### Historical analysis

The strengthening of the position on the Black sea is primarily due to Russia's desire to become an important player in Europe, Armand Goşu asserts. "The Black sea is a traditional direction for Russian expansion. In fact, the first direction of expansion of the founder of the Russian Empire, Peter the Great, was to the South, to the shores of the Azov and Black seas, towards the Crimea. Moscow, the "Third Rome", organically sought to geographically approach the first two, meaning Constantinople and Rome, warm seas, the Black and Mediterranean seas, and not the frozen North" (Armand Goşu, 2015).

Russia entered a difficult and painful period of transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During this transitional period, where Boris Yeltsin was the president, Russia sought to change its political, economic and military preferences, while trying to balance its subjects within the new Russian Federation and determine the basis for a new foreign policy. During this period, Russia faced a choice: take the path of rapprochement with the West as a democratic state, or try to maintain its existence as a Eurasian imperial state. In the 90s of the last century, the Russian policy in the Black Sea region was not distinguished by ambitiousness; this was previously all due to the socio-economic situation of the country in a crisis. Russian policy was perceived as unacceptable by the countries of the region, this is particularly true about the war in Chechnya, which is condemned by many countries, and especially Turkey. Secondly, Moscow's support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the separatist sentiments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have complicated relations with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. There were no major energy projects with Turkey during the administration of Yeltsin. Russian policy was aimed at building economic relations with Turkey, but the situation was complicated due to the supply of Russian arms to Cyprus, and the support of some politicians for the Kursk rebels in Turkey. Moscow reliance upon traditional Slavic and Orthodox unity has not brought the expected results, on the contrary, it was the countries of the former socialist camp that became active opponents of the policy of Moscow. Under these circumstances, Russia needed to build a stable relationship with Ankara, despite many differences. The strengthening of the American presence in the

region, and the desire of the European Union to diversify the supply of Russian hydrocarbons by expanding economic contacts with the countries of the Caspian and Black Sea region, has made (facing) the Kremlin a difficult geopolitical choice. Primakov's appointment as a Minister of Foreign Affairs marked a new stage in Russian foreign policy. Primakov's policy was aimed at building relations with countries of the East, especially with China, India, Iran and Turkey, that marked the beginning of a change in the geopolitical orientation of Russia from West to East, was called the "new Eastern policy of the Kremlin" (Nursha, 2015).

The arrival of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2000 was the final stage of this process, and Russia refused to pro-Western policies pursued by Boris Yeltsin, and the beginning of the policy of building pragmatic relations with Turkey in the region. The coming to power of the Party of Justice and Development and the change of the geopolitical orientation of Turkey was beneficial to Moscow. Turkey's desire to become part of a united Europe, has met resistance from some countries, and the US military campaign in Iraq changed the balance of power in the Middle East, these and a number of other factors influenced the change in the geostrategic orientation of Ankara. Almost simultaneously, there were changes in Turkey and Russia. Russia and Turkey have reached a period of departing from the traditional opposition to the dynamically developing cooperation. Turkey's intention to pursue an independent policy in the region, has led to increased tension between Turkey Washington and Brussels, and this opportunity was promptly seized by Russia. Deterioration in the relations Russia and Turkey with the USA and the EU pushed Moscow and Ankara to close cooperation. But there are many questions a compromise on which it is difficult to find, these are questions on the Syrian Kurds, Bashar al-Assad's fate, a question of the post-war device of Syria, a problem of the Black Sea gulfs, the Crimea and the Caucasus (Yermekbayev, 2019a).

Since the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia has begun to pursue a different policy and basically began to pursue the five major foreign policy goals. They are designed to uphold their security, prevent further interference in their internal affairs, emphasize the right of Russia to pursue its foreign policy as a sovereign state and a superpower, prevent further interference from its external influence and again become a global force (Lo, 2018).

After Vladimir Putin came to power, relations of Russia especially with the USA and other developed Western countries, were based on a minimalist and

profitable basis. Although they continue to talk about the goodwill and the possibilities of cooperation between Russia and the West, they are actually being carried out without any strategic goals.

Russian foreign policy changes can be observed since 2001, when at the meeting in Brussels in 2001, Vladimir Putin mentioned that Russia was not against expanding NATO to the east, if Russia's opinion was taken into account, but added that Russia would reconsider its position if it was excluded from the process (Press-konferentsiya, 2018).

Russia has seen that the unipolar world system that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the sole superpower like the United States, does not respond to the interests of the new Russian state. Hence, Russia supported the multi-polar world system as a system that could prevent US intervention.

The Black Sea is part of Russia and is the starting point for its sovereignty. Any events outside of Russia that are beyond their own will and control in the Black Sea region pose a threat to its existence and should be completely stopped. Stability in the Black Sea region of Russia is possible only with the current situation, that is, with the dominance of Russia and the control over the Black Sea, and any NATO presence inside and outside the sea is a threat to the region itself. For Russia, the Black Sea is considered its own area, and it will not allow other external players to influence its security.

In this context of threats, when we view the political importance of the Black Sea to Russia, two states, Ukraine and Georgia come as the priority issue. The most important common feature of these two states is their anti-Russian and pro-Western policies, especially after 2000. Because the policies pursued by these two states could change the balance of power in the Black Sea, and therefore the Kremlin has sought to control everything.

Russia believes that in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO and particularly the United States, are trying to pursue a policy of threat to its national interests. Until the 90s of the last century, the Black Sea region, which remained in the secondary plane for the Euro-Atlantic bloc, from the 1990s attracted the attention of the Western bloc for various political, economic and military reasons, and the Western bloc is now central and eastern. They have made significant efforts to ensure the integration of European states with the West. The growing concern of the West about its security after September 11, 2001, and its growing demand for energy in the region intensified US intervention in the Caucasus region. Especially

after the September 11 attacks, the United States began to actively pursue its policy in the region of the Middle East and the Black Sea. (Barany, 2003). In this context, the United States increased its military presence in Afghanistan in Uzbekistan and Georgia, that aim at dominating the region. All these events made it inevitable that Russia and the West, that have different approaches and ideas regarding the stability in the Black Sea, would at some point collide with each other.

The security of the Black Sea region is directly linked to the strategic balance between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic bloc. As soon as the Western bloc was trying to break into the Black Sea region, it was inevitable that that Russia would take measures and, above all against Georgia and Ukraine. However, Russia allowed and had no objection to the activities of EU in the region, because it prefers to use the EU as the counterbalance to US policy in the region.

### **The economic importance**

One of the most important consequences of the end of the Cold War in the Black Sea region is undoubtedly the economic sphere. The Black Sea region, which economically was in second place as the boundary line between the Western and Eastern bloc during the Cold War, after its completion and accession countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, in the process of integration with the West, began to acquire strategic importance. This led to the rapid growth of trade relations between the countries of the region, and the economic development that they began to carry out a positive contribution to the economy of the region (Papatulica, 2014).

In this context, the most important economic development in the region was in the field of hydrocarbon transportation. The Black Sea has become the major energy corridor between Europe and the Caspian region, which is rich in energy resources such as oil and natural gas (Çelikpala, 2013).

It is very important for Russia to export hydrocarbons through energy corridors on the Black Sea. But most importantly, control them. The countries of Europe have realized the important fact that this will lead to their greater dependence on Russia.

First, energy trading is the most profitable way to support an economy that has almost collapsed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Secondly, energy can also be used as a political tool. Russia does not hesitate to use its energy map as a political purpose.

Moscow's intention to use the Black Sea for gas transit coincided with Ankara's desire to become the most important Energy Hub in Southern Europe. For Ankara, the energy issue is an important and a priority task on the way of turning it into a player on the world stage.

Cooperation in the energy sphere between Russia/the U.S.S.R. and Turkey goes back to 1984, when the sides signed an agreement on natural gas supplies to Turkey. At that time, Turkey saw the Soviet Union as a geopolitical adversary, while gas (0.4 bcm a year) was moved along the Trans-Balkan pipeline. The previously impossible close cooperation began with the gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey being laid on the seabed. Russia does not limit its attention to Turkey's energy sphere by gas supply only. It is building a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu on Turkey's Mediterranean coast (Yermekbayev, 2019b).

### **The military significance of the region**

In Soviet times, the Black Sea was a defensive line, the most important task of the fleet was to protect against possible nuclear attacks by the West. Therefore, there were ships defensive in nature as part of the Black Sea Fleet of the USSR (Grinevetskiy, 2009), but Russian orders for Mistral-type warships built by the French shipyards, there are signs of change in the military strategy of Russia (Gosudarstvennyye, 2015). New warships were built for operational activities, such as anti-terrorism activities, the fight against piracy and the evacuation of Russian citizens from domestic remedies. Were built new warships designed for operational activities such as anti-terrorism, the fight against piracy and the evacuation of Russian citizens from domestic remedies.

In his statement in 2014, the commander of the Navy, Admiral Viktor Chirkov, said that the two most important goals of the new Naval Doctrine of Russia until 2030 were to strengthen Russian military presence in Crimea and in the Arctic region. Chirkov said that Russia would strengthen its military strategy in these two regions over the next 15 years and that the new Navy strategy had identified Crimea as the priority region (Sharkov, 2019). The Black Sea Fleet of Russia already had more than 10,000 people and more than 40 warships. Despite difficult economic times, with economic sanctions, Russia is holding a record military spending.

For Russia, the Black Sea is a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and further to the world as

well. Russia declares that it is interest of Russia to maintain stability in the Black Sea in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that Russia participated in international initiatives with other Black Sea and NATO states, such as Operation Black Sea Harmony and Effort. For Russia, the Black Sea is a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and from there to the world. Russia says that in the interest of Russia to maintain the stability in the Black Sea in the world. It is not surprising that Russia is involved in international initiatives with other Black Sea states and the states of NATO, such as "Black Sea Harmony" Operation and "Force".

However, one of the most important goals of Russia is to prevent players from outside the region from dominating the region and re-balance. From the military point of view, Russia considers NATO, Georgia and Ukraine as participants seeking to change the balance in the region. Meanwhile, the current balance in the Black Sea is remained, as long as Russia maintains its sovereignty in the Black Sea, Russia believes that the Black Sea will remain stable. The annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, was one of the most important political and military events in the Black Sea region. As a result of the referendum held in Crimea, 96 percent of voters voted for Crimea joining Russia. It must be abolished that most countries of the world are not recognized as legitimate. Even the closest allies of Russia like Kazakhstan and Belarus refrained from taking any diplomatic steps, although Presidents Lukashenko and Nazarbayev hinted that we should take into account the opinion of the majority of the population. This situation has significantly changed the military and strategic balance in the Black Sea region. This was a serious blow to NATO in the Black Sea.

This fact gives Russia a great advantage in military terms. In addition, Russia has the opportunity to provide air control over the Black Sea air space through the deployment of its air defense systems in the region. With all these weapons systems deployed Crimean Peninsula provided a significant advantage in terms of safety from any military threat from the south of Russia. Philip Breedlove, an Air Force General and one of NATO's commanders said the air defense and ground attack systems that were established by Russia in Crimea made it a great platform that is a concern in this area of NATO.

The annexation of Crimea not only strengthened the Russian presence in the Black Sea, but also made it possible to control the whole of the Ukraine and the Sea of Azov, and Kerch Strait received.

Thus, Russia strengthened its direct contacts with separatist forces in eastern Ukraine and completely eliminated the impact of Ukraine in the region (Le Miere, 2015).

The naval base in Sevastopol is very important for Russia. Geographic advantages of Sevastopol, its natural harbor and a highly developed infrastructure make it the best naval base in the Black Sea. Despite the fact that Russia continues to build a new naval base in Novorossiysk due to the need to evacuate the base in Sevastopol in the late 90s., the nature of the sea and proximity of the base to the major commercial port does not allow using its full potential.

The naval base of Sevastopol, which was founded 235 years ago in the royal period, and remained in Russia, making it an important naval base Russia had an opportunity to increase its influence and presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Middle East as well. Russia almost guaranteed their superiority in the Black Sea, by placing its military forces in the Crimean Peninsula and the naval base in Sevastopol. We should not forget that 13 Russian ships based in Sevastopol, blocked the Georgian warships in 2008 and decided the outcome of the conflict to their advantage.

Although the scale of Russia is military infrastructure and deployments in Crimea do not yet equal those of the USSR, the peninsula's incorporation into the Russian Federation and the Southern Military District is of strategic importance. It plays a pivotal role in the southwestern direction of Russia's defense system, it is part of the strategic rear of Russia's military contingent in Syria and, of course to a debatable extent, other military operations, official and unofficial, in the Mediterranean (James Sherr OBE, 2020).

### **Threats and Risks**

The main strategy that Russia adhered to on the Black Sea after the Cold War is the avoidance of scenarios that could change the balance in the region. One of the main reasons that Russia adheres to the reaction strategy is that it cannot work out a new policy in accordance with the international conditions that arose after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Brzezinski considers Turkey to be one significant subject. In his opinion, "Turkey and Iran are primarily important geopolitical centers. Turkey stabilizes the Black sea region, controls access from it to the Mediterranean, balances Russia in

the Caucasus, still remains an antidote to Muslim fundamentalism, and serves as the southern anchor of NATO" (Brzezinski, 1998).

Today, the Black Sea region has become an important energy corridor and trade region. However, factors such as the separatist movements, common in the region make it difficult to become a stable region. Nagorno-Karabakh region, which cannot be resolved between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the region, is the major source of tension between the two countries. There is a problem of the unrecognized states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Tbilisi government has failed to control 18% of the territory of the country (Mansurov, 2016). Russian annexation of the Crimea and the ongoing Russian separatist conflicts in the eastern part of Ukraine is actually divided into two parts. The Russian separatist movements in Chechnya and other parts of the Caucasus threaten the security of Russia and cause weak spots in the security sector, particularly in the terrorist activities carried out in major cities. Again, in Moldova Transnistrian separatist movement interferes with the stability in Moldova. All these separatist movements pose a threat to safety and are the most fundamental factors hindering stability in the region, because they can break out again at any time.

The strategy of Russia against the USA, NATO and other competing states in the region is carried out on 5 principles. They need to maintain its position as a major player in the region and prevent the realization of energy projects that are not under the control of Russia, to prevent the formation of anti-Russian coalition, as well as the entry of the region into NATO and fight against the separatist and terrorist movements.

In particular, the military advantages provided by the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russia made the most important and effective force in the region. The Russian annexation of the Crimea saved Russia from the need to evacuate the port of Sevastopol and allowed to continue using the port of Sevastopol, that was much more advantageous in terms of its of its geographical position and infrastructure.

According to A. Dugin Ukraine's sovereignty is such a negative phenomenon for Russian geopolitics that, in principle, it can easily burst into armed conflict (Dugin, 1997). By annexing Crimea, Vladimir Putin seeks to make Ukraine less attractive to the West. We can also say that Russia annexed the Crimea and in fact actually some little intimidated anti-Russian activities in the Black Sea region. It is also aimed at

putting an end to the efforts of countries in the region for closer relations with NATO and the West.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea region has entered a period of significant change. In particular, the growing energy demand of Europe and the fact that has become an energy corridor linking the Caspian and Central Asia, and Europe with oil and natural gas have increased the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Black Sea for all world and regional powers (Klus, 2014).

With the end of the Cold War, countries in the region are trying to cope with the new situation and have been experiencing the period of transition. However, as we have seen in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, we cannot say that this transitional period is over. The Black Sea region is very heterogeneous region with economic, political and cultural point of view. However, most countries in the region are connected to the same sources, and many angles are interdependent and vulnerable. Regional tensions, natural resources and competitive factors make the Black Sea a sensitive region, as well as a strategic area. Even states in the Black Sea region are inclined to consider the Black Sea as the place where the various regions of Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus, rather than treating the Black Sea region as a purely internal.

## Conclusion

Looking at the geographical area covered by the Russian Federation, it is clear that there is a

Eurasian state. The Black Sea is one of the most strategic points of the Eurasian states and Russia is the gateway to the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, due to its geopolitical and geostrategic importance, namely the security of Russia starts there. For historical, geographical, military, economic and political reasons, Russia sees itself as the natural leader of the Black Sea.

The strategy pursued by Russia on the Black Sea, especially under Putin is characterized by the active presence. The main task of Russia is correct the changing balance to their own advantage. It is clear that Russia will pursue a more active foreign policy, especially after the Georgian and Ukrainian crises.

Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and the recent crisis in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea are very important in terms of demonstrating Russian determination in the Black Sea. It is clear that Russia will pursue a much more active foreign policy in the Black Sea region.

For Russia, the geostrategic significance of the Black sea region has not changed since 1853. However, after NATO and the United States replaced individual European States as Russia's main geopolitical competitors in the region – Crimea became the main geopolitical stronghold for Moscow. For NATO and the United States, Turkey is the center, and the Turkish Straits are a strategic checkpoint to the Black sea. Moscow seeks to prevent the strengthening of geopolitical rivals and will consider the Black sea and Straits as a counterweight to the presence of NATO in the Aegean and Central Mediterranean.

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