

# The economic and geostrategic significance of the Black Sea region and the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine

Clara Weiss  
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The imperialist proxy war in Ukraine against Russia is the outcome of a decades-long drive by the imperialist powers to bring the territories of the former Soviet Union under their direct control and represents a qualitatively new stage in the emergence of a new world struggle between the imperialist powers for the redivision of the resources of the globe.

In its recent analysis of the role of critical minerals in the geostrategic and economic objectives of the imperialist drive to subjugate Russia through war, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted:

The breaking apart of Russia and its domination by American capital would be a strategic stepping stone in the efforts of the American ruling class to impose a “new American century” through the subordination of China and Eurasia more broadly to its aims. Resources play a role in this. Amid the enduring need for oil and natural gas, as well as the rapidly growing need for critical minerals, Russia is seen as a vital landmass with a vast array of riches.

If the war against Russia is a “stepping stone” to the war against China, control over the Black Sea is seen as a stepping stone for the breakup of Russia. This article will review the critical significance of the Black Sea region, where this war is taking place, from a geostrategic and economic standpoint.

## The geostrategic significance of the Black Sea region

Gaining direct access to the resources of the former Soviet Union, which had been closed off to imperialism for seven decades following the 1917 October Revolution, has been a major goal of the imperialist powers for decades. Within this context, the Black Sea region, which forms a nexus between Eastern and southeastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and the Middle East, is of strategic significance.

For US imperialism, already in the midst of a protracted economic and political decline, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy appeared like a gift from heaven. Drunk with triumphalism, the US ruling class proclaimed 1991 the “unipolar moment.” In 1992, a strategy document of the Pentagon determined that US strategy “must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.”

In his book *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the

most influential foreign policy advisers of Washington in the past half century, elaborated on the principal significance of what geostrategists call “Eurasia”—the landmass of Europe and Asia—for the desperate efforts by the US to preserve its global hegemony.

Within Eurasia, Brzezinski identified what he called the “Eurasian Balkans” as the region where the major conflicts over the control of all of Eurasia would take place. This region, Brzezinski wrote, stretched “from Crimea in the Black Sea directly eastward along the new southern frontiers of Russia, all the way to the Chinese province of Xinjiang, then down to the Indian Ocean and thence westward to the Red Sea, then northward to the eastern Mediterranean Sea and back to Crimea.”

Almost all of the 25 states in this region, he continued, are “ethnically as well as religiously heterogeneous and practically none of them [are] politically stable. ... This huge region, torn by volatile hatreds and surrounded by competing powerful neighbors, is likely to be a major battlefield, both for wars among nation-states and, more likely, for protracted ethnic and religious violence.”

Brzezinski’s book was not so much a “prediction” but rather an outline of the fundamental strategic objectives and considerations of US imperialism. Indeed, the region he termed the “Eurasian Balkans” has been turned upside down in the past decades through a combination of US bombing raids and invasions, and the systematic fueling of civil wars and ethnic strife.

Beginning with the US invasion of Iraq in 1991, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the second invasion of Iraq in 2003, it has also involved major interventions of imperialism through drone and other means of warfare in Pakistan and many other countries. Throughout the 1990s, the US and Germany also fueled ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, culminating in the savage NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.

More recently, the geostrategically critical Xinjiang province of China, which borders Russia and Kazakhstan, has become a linchpin of US provocations against China and attempts to destabilize and break up the country. In Russia too, the fueling of separatist tendencies and regionalist and political conflicts within the ruling oligarchy with the ultimate aim of carving up the country has been a central component of US policy.

The western end of this “Eurasian Balkans,” the Black Sea region, has been the focal point of both NATO expansion and several coup operations by Washington. Until the Stalinist bureaucracies restored capitalism in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe in 1989-1991, the Black Sea region was largely outside the direct control of imperialism. Only one of the states neighboring the Black Sea, Turkey, was a NATO member.

This changed completely with the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991. Today, following three decades of the eastward expansion of NATO, all states bordering the Black Sea with the exception of Russia itself are either members of NATO (Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria) or have

been largely integrated into the alliance in all but name, following massive interventions of US imperialism in their politics (Ukraine, Georgia.)

In addition to NATO's expansion to the Black Sea and Baltic Sea, these operations included the 2003 and 2004-2005 "color revolutions"—US-sponsored coups that relied on mobilizing layers of the privileged middle class and sections of the oligarchy—that took place in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively.

In 2008, Georgia, with the support of Washington, provoked a war with Russia over the two break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, on the eastern shore of the Black Sea.

These operations culminated in the 2014 coup in Kiev, that was heavily backed by Germany and the US and was carried out by far-right militias such as the Right Sector and a section of the Ukrainian oligarchy, headed then by the "chocolate oligarch" Petro Poroshenko.

These overt moves to encircle Russia have prompted fears in the Kremlin that the Black Sea is being turned into a "NATO lake." Indeed, this has been an objective of Washington, in particular, fully aware of the military and economic consequences that full NATO control over the Black Sea would mean for Russia.

### **The military significance of the Black Sea region in the conflict with Russia**

Ben Hodges, a retired US Army officer and former commanding general of the United States Army Europe, recently stated bluntly that the goal of the US in this proxy war consisted in "finally breaking the back of Russia's ability to project power outside of Russia to threaten Georgia, to threaten Moldova, to threaten our Baltic allies."

Undermining the Kremlin's position in the Black Sea region is critical to achieving this goal.

Alton Buland, the director for European policy at the US Department of Defense, has described the Black Sea as "Russia's geostrategic center of gravity" and its "gateway south, the gateway to the Middle East [and]...the gateway to Asia."

It is through the Black Sea and via the Bosphorus straits that Russia has access to the Mediterranean. However, this access is highly tentative as the Bosphorus and Dardanelles are controlled by Turkey, a NATO member, with whom Russia has a very tense relationship. (Control over the Bosphorus was a key objective of the Russian Empire vis-a-vis the Ottoman Empire in World War I.)

The proximity of the Black Sea states to Russia also means that large portions of European Russia, where the bulk of the country's population resides, can be easily targeted by US sea- and land-based intermediate range missiles, stationed in Ukraine or any NATO member in that region such as Romania or Bulgaria.

In this context, Russia has made its position in the Black Sea a major military priority, especially over the past ten years. Of six military bases that Russia retained in the former Soviet Union after 1991, three were located in the Black Sea, including its Black Sea naval port on Crimea, the peninsula in the Black Sea that Russia annexed in 2014 following the Western-orchestrated coup in Kiev. In 2019, the US Naval War College observed that the annexation of Crimea enabled Russia to reestablish its "maritime dominance in the Black Sea."

Russia's military base in Crimea is critical not only in the conflict with Ukraine. It is also the point from which the Kremlin controls its military operations in Syria, where a civil war and de facto proxy war between the US and Russia, which has been backing the Assad regime against the US-backed Islamist opposition, has been raging since 2011.

Cutting Russia off the Black Sea and thereby the Mediterranean would,

therefore, significantly undermine its position in the Middle East as well as in North Africa, where Russia still has significant economic and military interests, most notably in Libya, which has been thrown into a civil war by the 2011 NATO attack on the country.

Well aware of the geostrategic and military significance of the Black Sea for Russia, NATO has staged multiple provocations there over the past years, including in the immediate run-up to the Russian invasion.

This included the massive Sea Breeze exercises in the Black Sea in 2021, involving a record 32 countries, 5,000 troops, 32 ships, and 40 aircraft. It also entailed several provocations, including by Britain, which sent a warship into waters claimed by Russia off Crimea in June 2021, prompting the Russian army to drop a bomb in the destroyer's path. In both spring and the fall of 2021, the US also provocatively sent multiple warships into the Black Sea, well aware that the Kremlin considered this a "red line" in terms of its national security interests. As of February 2022, NATO had 18 warships stationed in the Black Sea.

Last month, Britain called for a NATO-led naval intervention in the Black Sea against Russia to "protect freighters carrying Ukrainian grain" under the cover of a "humanitarian mission" to avert a global hunger crisis. However, Ankara has closed the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits between the Aegean and Black Seas to both Russian and NATO warships since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Although not bordering the Black Sea directly, Greece, as a NATO member, has in recent years become an increasingly central country in US-NATO plans for the Black Sea region. The Greek port city of Alexandroupoli on the northern Aegean Sea has been transformed into an important US base and staging point. Since Ankara's closure of the straits, the city has been used for military deliveries to Ukraine in the NATO war against Russia.

### **"Grain, oil seeds and mineral oils": Pipelines and the economic resources of the Black Sea region**

The Black Sea region has been a central theater of both world wars of the 20th century. German imperialism in particular has sought to bring the region, and most notably Ukraine, under its direct control. The German historian Christian Gerlach, noting the parallels between German war aims in both world wars, wrote that the Nazis' occupation policies in the former Soviet Union—which resulted in at least 27 million dead—were focused on exploiting a few raw materials: "grain, oil seeds and mineral oils." (Christian Gerlach: *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord. Deutsche Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich 2001, p. 14)

The war policies of US and German imperialism today, which are fundamentally aimed at re-subjugating the entire region and transforming it into a colonial appendage of the imperialist powers, stand in that tradition.

#### *Agriculture*

The food crisis triggered by the war has highlighted the central significance of the Black Sea region for the global grain market. Indeed, the region, and in particular Russia and Ukraine, are considered the "breadbasket" of not only Europe but much of Africa and the Middle East.

The top exports of Ukraine are all related to its agricultural industry. As of 2020, the list is led by oil seeds (accounting for 10.1 percent of exports, worth \$5.32 billion), followed by corn (9.29 percent or \$4.89 billion), and wheat (8.76 percent or \$4.61 billion.)

Russia was the world's leading wheat exporter in 2021. The country also accounts for 2.3 percent of the world's corn market. Together with Ukraine, Russia is also a leading producer and exporter of sunflower oil as

well as barley. Romania too is a major agricultural producer. As of 2021, Romania was Europe's largest corn and sunflower producers, and among the EU's top five wheat and soybeans producers.

Control over these resources promises immense profits, especially at times of food crises when the agricultural giants can engage in massive speculation on corn prices. Already last year, the global food giant Cargill, one of the world's largest companies and one of four companies that control over 70 percent of the global agricultural market, topped \$5 billion in profits on \$134 billion in revenue. The combined wealth of the Cargill family grew by an average \$120 million a day during the pandemic, and it is set to grow significantly further amid record food prices.

#### *Gas and oil*

In addition to its own vast agricultural and raw material resources, the Black Sea region is critical for Russia's oil exports, and for the transport of oil and gas reserves from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

An analysis by the Carnegie Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, observed in 2021, "The Black Sea is an important trade and transportation artery for Russia. Both Russia and Central Asian countries are highly dependent on the Russian port of Novorossiysk to export grain and oil by ship."

Far from being an "imperialist" country, Russia, for all intents and purposes, is above all a raw material supplier of the world economy. Oil and gas, along with coal and other minerals, are the most important export commodities of Russia. Crude and refined petroleum together accounted for 37 percent (worth over \$74.4 billion) of Russia's exports, followed by petroleum gas (6 percent of exports and worth almost \$20 billion), gold (5.67 percent and worth \$18.7 billion), coal (4.4 percent or \$14.5 billion), platinum (3.2 percent and worth \$10.5 billion), and then wheat.

The Novorossiysk port on Russia's Black Sea shore is the country's single biggest port and its third most important hub for crude oil exports. In 2020, according to the EIA, 459,000 barrels of oil passed through the Novorossiysk port each day.

Given its extremely high reliance on oil and gas exports, cutting off Russia's access to the Black Sea and Mediterranean would be the economic equivalent of "breaking the back" of the country.

The Black Sea is critical for access to the resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus as well.

Following the destruction of the Soviet Union, energy company executives flocked to the region to negotiate lucrative contracts with the former Stalinist bureaucrats-turned-oligarchs to obtain access to these resources. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in 1999, a central objective of the imperialist-instigated wars in the Balkans in the 1990s was access to the Caspian Sea, just east of the Black Sea, which was understood to be home to the world's greatest untapped oil reserves, with between 17 and 33 billion barrels of oil, and 232 trillion cubic meters of gas.

Since the Caspian Sea is landlocked, the question of pipeline infrastructure became central to control over these resources. To this day, Russia's pipelines, while no longer providing exclusive access to these resources, are central and they all run through the Black Sea. Thus, the Caspian pipeline, which is operated by a multinational consortium that includes both Russian state-owned companies and the American energy giant Chevron, transports oil from oil fields in Kazakhstan, as well as Russian fields in the Caspian region, to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk from where its oil is shipped throughout the world.

Over the past two decades, the US and the EU have pushed to put an end to various other pipeline projects that would have run through the Black Sea and bypassed Ukraine. At the same time, they have pursued rival projects, aimed at directly linking up the EU to gas and oil fields in the Caspian region and Central Asia.

Thus, with \$4 billion, the US pushed the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (also known as BTC pipeline), which delivered oil from Azerbaijan over

Georgia to Turkey, bypassing Russia. The pipeline was an important consideration in US operations in Georgia, where Washington funded a coup in 2003 and encouraged a war with Russia in 2008.

These pipeline wars also entailed torpedoing rival Russian-backed projects. The biggest, apart from the Russian-German Nord Stream pipelines, was the \$50 billion South Stream pipeline project, which would have transported Russian gas from the Black Sea coast through Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary to Austria, via one route, and through Greece to Italy, via another. With an annual capacity of 63 billion cubic meters, the pipeline would have covered a tenth of Europe's total gas demand at the time. The Kremlin was forced to call off the project in 2014, right after the coup in Ukraine.

These pipeline wars have three principal objectives:

First, the imperialist powers are trying to gain direct control over the vast resources of the former Soviet Union, preventing Russia but also China, which has substantially increased its economic involvement in the region, from controlling them.

Second, they aim at undermining the Russian economy, which is heavily reliant on such oil and gas exports, and, by extension, the Putin regime.

And third, they are aimed at providing a geostrategic advantage to the imperialist powers, most notably the US, in the competition of oil and gas companies over market shares.

Through the exploitation of shale gas, the US, once the world's biggest net gas importer, has become a major exporter of gas, and is now directly competing with Russia for the European market. In January 2022, just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, US exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe for the first time exceeded Russia's gas pipeline deliveries. In response to the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Germany canceled almost immediately the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, while the White House announced an increase of its LNG shipments to Europe from 22 billion cubic meters to 37 billion cubic meters.

Already, US shale companies experienced a several-fold jump in their profits for the first quarter of this year: The profits of Pioneer Natural Resources increased more than fivefold, and those of Continental Resources more than tripled.

### **The conflict with China in the Black Sea region**

While Russia has been the primary target of the imperialist intervention in the Black Sea region, over the past decades rivalry with China has also become a central consideration of both the US and the EU in the Black Sea region.

For China, the region is the easiest and quickest connection between East Asia and Europe. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), initially conceived of as a \$40-billion infrastructure project, is planned to run through the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, including through Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Georgia and Turkey. Over the past years, the BRI has made very slow progress. Nevertheless, China has developed significant economic ties with many countries in the region, most notably Ukraine, which joined the BRI in 2017.

In 2019, China became Ukraine's most important trading partner, relegating Russia to No. 2. Ukraine has also become China's second largest corn supplier and largest supplier of weapons. In early 2021, President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that he hoped his country would become "a bridge to Europe for Chinese business."

However, the growing role of China in Ukraine has been a major thorn in the side of the US in particular, and Washington has intervened heavily to undermine the growing economic cooperation between Ukraine and

China. Thus, in spring 2021, as the US backed Kiev's provocations against Russia in the Black Sea, the Ukrainian government canceled a multibillion-dollar deal that would have allowed China to take over the Ukrainian company Motor Sich, one of the world's largest engine manufacturers for airplanes and helicopters, at the last minute, due to massive pressure from Washington and at considerable cost for the Ukrainian government.

But the EU, too, sees the growing influence of China in the region as a challenge to its economic and strategic interests, which the European imperialist powers seek to increasingly assert independently from Washington.

A recent analysis by the EU-based Global Security think tank noted:

"The US is involved in the [Black Sea] region to counter the geopolitical and energy interests of Russia as well as to limit the increasing influence of China, its BRI, and Chinese Digital Silk Road, through development aid, lethal military aid, and supporting the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and the Clean Network. Competing with Russian energy interests (Nord Stream 2 particularly), the US is also trying to find a market for its energy export.

"The EU wants to create a third space between China and the US so that it can act independently. It has acted relatively autonomously and through multifarious policies, initiatives, and partnerships to actualize its European Strategic Autonomy."

## Conclusion

As in the past two world wars, the Black Sea region has emerged as a principal battle ground between various capitalist states, with the imperialist powers determined to undermine both Russian and Chinese influence, while competing between themselves for dominance in the region.

One expression of these rivaling efforts has been the resurrection of the so-called "Intermarium" (meaning "between the seas"), an alliance of Eastern European states stretching from the Baltic over the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea. Under Trump, Washington pivoted toward explicitly supporting this alliance which has long been spearheaded by the Polish government of the far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS).

Originally developed by the inter-war Polish dictator Józef Piłsudski, who built up Poland as a bulwark of imperialism in the region, the Intermarium was principally directed against the USSR and the influence of the Russian Revolution on the masses of Eastern Europe. It established alliances with right-wing anticommunist forces throughout the region and exiles from the former Soviet Union, aiming to mobilize nationalist forces within the Soviet Union to destabilize it from within and prepare the path for a restoration of capitalism.

Today, the alliance has been revived as the so-called Three Seas Initiative under the umbrella of the EU and NATO. Just as in the inter-war period, the Intermarium principally relies on support from the major imperialist powers and on far-right nationalist forces. In Eastern Europe, it is endorsed by far-right forces such as the ruling Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party, and the neofascist Azov Battalion in Ukraine.

While this alliance today is primarily directed against Russian and Chinese influence, on the part of both Washington and Warsaw, it is also intended to undermine the substantial position of German imperialism in Eastern Europe. Berlin, the dominant imperialist power in the EU, is notably not a member of the alliance. Fearing to be pushed out, however, the German government has recently attempted to establish better relations with the Three Seas Initiative, despite clear resistance from Poland.

Whatever these shifting alliances, the crisis of world capitalism is driving the imperialist powers toward a new global conflagration. The imperialist proxy war in Ukraine, a de facto confrontation between the world's biggest nuclear powers, would be just the opening chapter in such a conflict. But the international working class will have its word to say.

Marxists, as Leon Trotsky stressed, follow the map not of war, but of the class struggle. The capitalist governments are only capable of "solving" the crisis of capitalism by resorting to catastrophic wars. By contrast, the working class must develop its response to this crisis through waging an international class struggle on a socialist basis, fighting to put an end to capitalism and the outdated nation-state system—the root causes of war.



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