

Talk of Western Intervention in the Black Sea Is Pure Fantasy

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

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Crimea is essential to Russia strategically and economically, but speculation over Ankara helping to boost the US presence in the Black Sea is far-fetched given Turkey's energy deals with Moscow

A power struggle over the Black Sea between Russia and the US plus NATO has the potential to develop as a seminal plot of the 21st century New Great Game – alongside the current jostling for re-positioning in the Eastern Mediterranean.

By now it's established the US and NATO are stepping up military pressure from Poland to Romania and Bulgaria all the way to Ukraine and east of the Black Sea, which seems, at least for the moment, relatively peaceful, just as Crimea's return to Russia starts to be regarded, in realpolitik terms, as a fait accompli.

After a recent series of conversations with top analysts from Istanbul to Moscow, it's possible to identify the main trends ahead.

Just as independent Turkish analysts like [Professor Hasan Unal](#) are alarmed at Ankara's isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean energy sphere by an alliance of Greece, Cyprus and Israel, Washington's military buildup in both Romania and Bulgaria is also identified as posing a threat to Turkey.

It's under this perspective that Ankara's obstinance in establishing a security "corridor" in northern Syria, east of the Euphrates river, and free from the YPG Kurds, should be examined. It's a matter of policing at least one sensitive border.

Still, in the chessboard from Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, Turkey and Crimea, the specter of "foreign intervention" setting fire to the *Intermarium* – from the Baltics to the Black Sea – simply refuses to die.



'Russian lake'?

By the end of the last glacial era, around 20,000 years ago, the Black Sea – separated from the Mediterranean by an isthmus – was just a shallow lake, much smaller in size than it is today.

The legendary journey of Jason and the Argonauts, before the Trojan war, followed the Argo ship to the farther shore of Pontus Euxinus (the 'Black Sea') to recover the Golden Fleece – the cure for all evils – from its location in Colchis (currently in Georgia).

In Ancient Greece, steeped in mythology, the Black Sea was routinely depicted as the boundary between the known world and *terra incognita*. But then it was “discovered” – like America many centuries later – to the point where it was configured as a “string of pearls” of Greek trading colonies linked to the Mediterranean.

The Black Sea is more than strategic, it's crucial geopolitically. There has been a constant drive in modern Russian history to be active across maritime trade routes through the strategic straits – the Dardanelles, the Bosphorus and Kerch in Crimea – to warmer waters further south.

As I observed early last month in Sevastopol, Crimea is now a seriously built fortress – incorporating S-400 and Iskander-M missiles – capable of ensuring total Russian primacy all across the eastern Black Sea.

[A visit to Crimea](#) reveals how its genes are Russian, not Ukrainian. A case can be made that the very concept of Ukraine is relatively spurious, propelled by the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of the 19th century and especially before World War I to weaken Russia. Ukraine was part of Russia for 400 years, far longer than California and New Mexico have been part of the US.

Now compare the reconquest of Crimea by Russia, without firing a shot and validated by a democratic referendum, to the US “conquests” of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. Moreover, I saw Crimea being rebuilt and on the way to prosperity, complete with Tatars voting with their feet to return; compare it to Ukraine, which is an IMF basket case.

Crimea is essential to Russia not only from a geostrategic but also an economic point of view, as it solidifies the Black Sea as a virtual “Russian lake”.

It's immaterial that Turkish strategists may vehemently disagree, as well as US Special Representative for Ukraine Kurt Volker who, trying to seduce Turkey, dreams about increasing the US presence in the Black Sea, “whether on a bilateral basis or under EU auspices.”

Under this context, the building of the Turk Stream pipeline should be read as Ankara's sharp response to the rampant Russophobia in Brussels.

Ankara has, in tandem, consistently shown it won't shelve the acquisition of Russian S-400 missile systems because of American pressure. This has nothing to do with pretensions of neo-Ottomanism; it's about Turkey's energy and security priorities. Ankara now seems more than ready to live with a powerful Russian presence across the Black Sea.

It all comes down to Montreux

Not by accident the comings and goings on NATO's eastern flank was a key theme at last summer's biennial Atlanticist summit. After all, Russia, in the wake of reincorporating Crimea, denied access over the eastern Black Sea.

NATO, though, is a large mixed bag of geopolitical agendas. So, in the end, there's no cohesive strategy to deal with the Black Sea, apart from a vague, rhetorical "support for Ukraine" and also vague exhortations for Turkey to assume its responsibilities.

But because Ankara's priorities are in fact the Eastern Mediterranean and the Turkish-Syrian border, east of the Euphrates river, there's no realistic horizon for NATO to come up with permanent Black Sea patrols disguised as a "freedom of navigation" scheme - as much as Kiev may beg for it.

What does remain very much in place is the guarantee of freedom of navigation in the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits controlled by Turkey, as sanctioned by the 1936 Montreux Convention.

The key vector, once again, is that the Black Sea links Europe with the Caucasus and allows Russia trade access to southern warm waters. We always need to go back to Catherine the Great, who incorporated Crimea into the empire in the 18th century after half a millennium of Tatar and then Ottoman rule, and then ordered the construction of a huge naval base for the Black Sea fleet.

By now some facts on the ground are more than established.

Next year the Black Sea fleet will be upgraded with an array of anti-ship missiles; protected by S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile systems; and supported by a new "permanent deployment" of Sukhoi SU-27s and SU-30s.

Far-fetched scenarios of the Turkish navy fighting the Russian Black Sea fleet will continue to be peddled by misinformed think tanks, oblivious to the inevitability of the Russia-Turkey [energy partnership](#). Without Turkey, NATO is a cripple in the Black Sea region.

Intriguing developments such as a [Viking Silk Road](#) across the Intermarium won't alter the fact that Poland, the Baltics and Romania will continue to clamor for "more NATO" in their areas to fight "Russian aggression".

And it will be up to a new government in Kiev after the upcoming March elections to realize that any provocation designed to drag NATO into a Kerch Strait entanglement is doomed to failure.

Ancient Greek sailors had a deep fear of the Black Sea's howling winds. As it now stands, call it the calm before a (Black Sea) storm.

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