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The Black Sea

Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

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Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>
e-mail: Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>
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US ROLE IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

Volodymyr Dubovyk

Odesa I. Mechnikov National University

The US remains the only true superpower with a global reach. In reaching out to the Black Sea, the US has a variety of tools and levers: diplomatic, political, economic, and military. It acts here unilaterally and also as a team member. Does the Black Sea area belong to the list of priorities for the US? The range of interests in play for the US here is wide: security, geopolitics, energy, values promotion, military projection, and more. It has some eager regional partners to work with, but also an influential and ambivalent partner in Turkey, as well as an adversarial counterpart in Russia. The occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 has added some new features and urgency to the US role in the region.

Today the United States of America is the only true superpower remaining. One might refer to the fact that American hegemony has never really existed or that Pax Americana has remained a pipe dream for some and a scarecrow for the others. Also, the world is far from being unipolar. There are various other players continuously contesting the limits of American power. One might suggest that the gap between the US and the others is shrinking. For the time being, though, such a gap remains real and visible.

In addition to the availability of power, resources, and potential, there has always been and is a question of how to pursue them. Should America stay a global power, with its interests and actions reaching out to each and every corner of the world? Should it be the ultimate power broker, an arbitrary authority on a great variety of international disputes? Or should it, instead, engage in the act of “selective commitment”, while carefully listing the priorities for itself and discarding some other issues that do not have direct impact on American interests? If that is the case, then the question presents itself: What are those priorities? Finally, perhaps, as many Americans seem to think these days (including its current president), it is time for

America to come home, to retreat from the world affairs. But is this even possible?

These questions might seem purely theoretical, and yet they are very timely and topical. Given the unique character of the US global presence, they are something of interest to the rest of the world. Far too often, we have seen that American presence being withheld creates a vacuum, a niche for a while, but ultimately invites a new player in.

Where does the Black Sea region stand in the dropdown menu of US interests? Is it a priority or an insignificant area? How can we even measure this? How does the US role here correlate with a whole bunch of the adjacent areas, with the immediate vicinity? Can we say that the American role is bigger in some spheres than the others? Is there an evolution of the US regional role? There is a whole set of questions that we face in addressing this theme of the US role in the Black Sea region.

US History of Involvement

It would be fair to say that the Black Sea was hardly in the epicentre of the confrontation in the Cold War times. There were some

elements of containment in the area dating back to the Truman doctrine and G. Kennan's long telegram, while American strategic assets were positioned in Turkey. But that did not make the region a forefront in the competition of the two superpowers and their respective blocs. In the first years after the end of that old Cold War, the relevance of the area to the US and a rationale for its presence here had decreased.

Everything seemed fine and did not call for American intervention. The general euphoria about the end of the Cold War and "end of history" was in the air here too. There was this expectation that somehow the actors in the region would get along just fine. BSEC was formed in 1992 to embody positive expectations. States of the region were either part of the long-standing Euro-Atlantic community (Turkey) or seemed destined to become full-fledged democracies, and as such friends of the US. There were, of course, the early alarm bells, such as the conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. And yet there was little evidence that these conflicts would turn the entire region dangerous and unstable.

As people in Washington took their time and often struggled with elaboration of the US international policies for the post-bipolar world, the wars in former Yugoslavia raged. They ultimately brought the reluctant American power to the Balkans, for the first time in the US history. This happened just around the corner from the Black Sea. It reminded everyone that American political, economic, diplomatic, and, of course, military power remains pretty much indispensable.

With that step closer towards the Black Sea, the appetite for a bigger role here

might have emerged in Washington. The Clinton administration offered its doctrine of the enlargement of the community of democratic and market-economy countries¹. The secretary of state at the time, Madeleine Albright, spoke about some key states in various parts of the world, with Ukraine being one of them. The regional grouping GUAM, which had just emerged in the Black Sea region, enjoyed, for a while, the support and interest of Washington. This clearly unnerved Moscow, so the contours of the potential competition here were drafted.

It was to be seen whether there would be more continuity or change with George W. Bush administration coming into the White House. But 9/11 dramatically altered the landscape of American global policies and shaped it for the years to come. On one hand, it immediately relegated everything not related directly to the wider Middle East to secondary concerns. On the other, the new epicentre of American presence was in close proximity to the Black Sea region. This firmly placed the region in the centre of a bigger arch of instability.

It also led to the establishment of the American military bases in the region. More precisely, in addition to the bases south of the Black Sea, in Turkey, the new ones were established north of the Black Sea, in Romania². It should be noted that they were here exclusively for the purpose of the force projection to Afghanistan and Iraq, and did not have immediate function for the region as such. Over time, however, the need for the force projection to the Middle East has somewhat diminished, but the bases have stayed.

Another strategic development was the creation of the elements of the anti-missile defence in the region. Originally planned

1 C. Krauthammer, *The Clinton Doctrine*, "CNN", 29 March 1999 [https://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/1999/03/29/doctrine.html].

2 *US Bases in Romania*, "Global Security" [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/romania.htm].

for Poland and the Czech Republic³, they ultimately ended down on the shores of the Black Sea. Again, Moscow was unhappy about that. These elements are not directed against Russia, although they can be rearranged to serve a different purpose – a small but noticeable step to increase the US military profile in the region.

The “colour revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine had a meaning for the American role in the region. Washington had provided support for Tbilisi and Kyiv. Both served as some sort of “poster boys” for everyone else in the region to emulate their experience. Much was riding on their ability to implement decisive reforms and break with sticky post-Soviet experience. The opportunity was pretty much wasted and this led to the disillusionment in Washington, followed by certain distancing. There was this acknowledgement that nothing in the region is predestined, linear, and that backlashes happen. More patience was required, as well as the ability to stay and be engaged in a longer game.



The Black Sea region has suddenly manifested itself as an arena of acute tension. This required an American response

The Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 was all but ignored by the United States, as well as by other Western powers. It did not become a wake-up call. Instead, in wake of this aggression both the United States and NATO initiated a reset of relations with the

Russian Federation. For Washington to have Russia on board for securing uninterrupted supply to their forces in Afghanistan was apparently a bigger priority. In the meantime, for Russia to get away with that aggression with no repercussions whatsoever was really emboldening. It was a sign that it could plan something even bigger, including in the Black Sea region.

Developments in 2014 and Beyond

The events of 2014 have been cataclysmic for the region. The occupation of Crimea, the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, was something that Washington simply could not ignore. The Black Sea region has suddenly manifested itself as an arena of acute tension. This required an American response. The United States had to take a stand and they did. It was clear that a direct US-Russia confrontation was not something that Washington would be looking for. In fact, the avoidance of a new Cold War was probably the top priority for the United States. The “red lines” were drawn in an unambiguous way. This was tricky enough: to support Ukraine in a meaningful way, to step into the region in some form, and yet to not let relations with Moscow deteriorate to a state of direct confrontation.

Unlike some of the regional players, the US has always seen the region as something bigger than a mere water basin. While some states were suggesting that maritime security equals regional security, the US took a much broader view on the issue. It has opted for a concept of a wider/broader Black Sea area⁴. This concept included a number of adjacent areas (most notably the Caspian Sea region) and an intricate

3 *After Long Wait, U.S. to Unveil European Missile Shield*, “Reuters”, 11 May 2016 [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-shield-timeline/after-long-wait-u-s-to-unveil-european-missile-shield>].

4 M. Çelikpala, *Security in the Black Sea Region, Policy Report II*, Commission on the Black Sea, 2010, p. 10 [https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/GP_Security_in_the_Black_Sea_Region.pdf].

patchwork of relations between the players (some of which were not littoral states) in the picture. Ever since that conceptual divide emerged, the players in the region have taken their sides accordingly. Those who, for whatever reasons, were not welcoming American presence here advocated against the broader framework, and those who were interested in the US presence to alleviate the pressure coming from the local powers, embraced the notion of the wider Black Sea region.

From the geostrategic point of view, the US has always been aware of the density in the region. There are many players, and there are two strongest – Russia and Turkey – that might compete for domination or might choose to have a condominium. Either way, they are not interested in having bigger outside players here. This has left a limited opportunity for the US, a tight space for them if they ever decided to enter. This is exactly what distinguishes a true superpower from any other: If it chooses to enter, it might well find a way to do so, mobilising adequate strategy, will, and resources.

What would be the primary reason for the United States to enter, though? Would it be simply to protest the act of aggression and violation of the international order, to uphold that order, to offer support to the aggression's victim? That might be enough for those looking through the idealistic prism, for the adherents of moral, righteous international policies. But that would fall short for those looking for more grounded, pragmatic reasons. In other words, the rationale should be convincing enough even to those who will be wondering, "What is in it for us?" Simply put, there must be an understanding, a broad one and supported by various segments of establishment and public in the US, that American interests are involved and that this is what dictates the attempt for a more active engagement in the region.

An argument should be made that American interests are involved. Let us go back to the Russian aggression being an affront against the international order. There is more to it than just ideational, normative concern, the moral outrage. This is, indeed, a major blow to the international order. It is exactly this liberal international order that the US has constructed, maintained, nourished, and protected for decades. It has done so for a reason. American leadership is encrusted in the concept. American interests are at stake. If Washington lets someone undermine it, lets it slide, that would endanger American global weight, authority, reputation. No wonder that we are already hearing talks about a need for a substitute to this international order. Even President Trump would say that the existing order is tilted against the US. For those who believe otherwise, the Black Sea region becomes one of those arenas to defend that order.



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A need to push back Russian influence in the post-Soviet, post-socialist space has never been fully and openly embraced by any of the post-bipolar presidential administrations. Moreover, a view has often prevailed in Washington calling for the recognition of Russia's special role in this space. There is nothing new in seeing Russia trying to solidify its sphere of privilege in this space. It has used a wide toolkit of measures to do that over the years – ranging from economic to political to information

and more. However, blatant acts of violent aggression are new in its instrumentarium. They call for a different kind of response. It is better to respond in the area where the act of occupation has taken place, the Black Sea region.

New Strategies?

The United States faces a mixed terrain in the region when it comes to ranking the countries by their attitude. There is clearly an adversarial power – Russia. The US and Russia see each other’s moves in the region with anxiety. American vessels here are trailed and met by close and irritating Russian following⁵; US initiatives are met with resistance. There is hardly another region in the world where Washington and Moscow are so pitched against each other as they are here in the Black Sea region.



It is Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia that are most friendly to the US in the region. This friendship is, of course, not of an altruistic nature

There is a highly ambivalent and volatile relationship with another major actor – Turkey, with a myriad of factors shaping it. It is also very dynamic. At the moment, this is a relationship that still has elements of cooperation and partnership, but also, obviously, elements of mistrust and disagreement. Here, perhaps, was the most noticeable change in the post-bipolar times. The end of the Cold War saw the United States and Turkey firmly in one camp, but that was to change in strides and has

come to the current uneasy relationship. Naturally, in planning its regional activities, Washington cannot see a trustworthy and reliable partner in Ankara. That the feeling is reciprocal makes it even more hurtful for the relations between the countries.

There are several countries in the region that either depend on Russia too much (Armenia), are too weak to pursue a consistent course on that matter (Azerbaijan, Moldova), or are simply opting for a delicate balancing (Bulgaria). This is far from making them US opponents, but also far from making them US allies. Bulgaria is probably the most interesting case here, as it is engaged in some manoeuvring while trying not to upset all of those influential international players.

It is interesting to see how being a member of the EU and NATO does not necessarily predetermine a certain state’s position. If Turkey is a somewhat specific case, then Bulgaria and Romania are good subjects for comparison. Whether it comes to the reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine or willingness to work with the US in the region, Sofia and Bucharest are clearly in two different baskets, despite having a common history in joining the EU and NATO.

It is Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia that are most friendly to the US in the region. This friendship is, of course, not of an altruistic nature. These countries share the need for American presence in the region. They ask for American assistance and, in return, promise help in advancing US interests. More precisely, American interests match interests of these particular regional actors. While the ongoing US cooperation with these three countries is appreciated, it is hardly enough for Washington to see them as a viable, sufficient anchor for the US

5 E.g. B. Minick, *Russian Warplanes Simulate Attacks on US Navy Ship Steaming in Black Sea*, “International Business Times”, 25 December 2019
[<https://www.ibtimes.com/russian-warplanes-simulate-attacks-us-navy-ship-steaming-black-sea-2892043>].

in the region. The United States probably needs a somewhat broader base for a more successful stance in the region (and here again the role of Turkey is critical).

It is notable how NATO, with its three member states in the region, can hardly be seen as a vehicle for the implementation of the policies of the United States. This is definitely different from the times of the Cold War. Moreover, it is also different from what is happening in the Baltic region. There is a consensus there about a need to secure protection of the NATO member states in that region from ongoing Russian pressure and potential Russian aggression. There is no such consensus on the ground in the Black Sea region. When it comes to the formal position of the Alliance, there is hardly any ambiguity: It speaks in one voice. But as one descends to the level of particular member states in the region, there is a plethora of views and sentiments. They all formally decry occupation of Crimea, but do so in a variety of tonalities. Even more so, they are split with regard to the subject of American presence in the wider Black Sea region.

One powerful tool that the United States has always had at its disposal, and not just here in the Black Sea region but also throughout the world, was leading by example. This has been backed up by resources for everyone to use if deciding to walk along path of reforms, liberalisation, democratisation, and fight against corruption. This remains the realm where the United States can help their counterparts in the region. The track record of the US partners in this respect remains mixed at best, though. Much of American assistance has not been used to produce positive results. Moreover, the United States under President Trump has lost some of its own capacity to lead by example, while sending mixed signals. That being said, this channel of cooperation remains open and promising.

Finally, there is still a playing field for the United States to have a role in the sphere of energy policy. There is an interesting dynamic in terms of the US working to minimise the dependence on Russia on the part of the countries in the Baltic–Black Sea zone – from Poland and the Baltics through, perhaps, Belarus to Ukraine and beyond. American energy corporations remain powerful and competitive enough. Much has changed since the times of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) inception, when it seemed that America was having an upper hand and Russia was losing out. The picture was rather different from the recent one. Yet, this is a multi-act play, where the United States (as a state and US-based corporations) is one of the main characters.

All in all, the US role in the region has evolved over the years. It remains a powerful and motivated player, even when not everything is going its way. There are certain avenues for the US to extend its role in the region, but also certain limitations for its regional role. American resources remain Washington's asset in the regional play, yet often countered by positions and resources of other actors who are either ambivalent or outright adversarial. One thing is clear is that the United States is not abandoning the Black Sea region and is prepared to stay here.

Volodymyr Dubovyk is an associate professor and director of the Centre for International Studies, Odessa I. I. Mechnikov National University (Ukraine). He has conducted research at the W. Wilson Center (1997, 2006–2007) and at the University of Maryland (2002), and taught at the University of Washington (Seattle) in 2013 and at St. Edwards University/University of Texas (Austin) in 2016–17. He is the co-author of "Ukraine and European Security" (Macmillan, 1999) and has publications on US–Ukraine relations, the US, and Black Sea security.

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