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The Black Sea, the spectre of a new Iron Curtain?

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For thousands of years, the Black Sea has been a place of meetings and exchange. It has often been the natural border between empires. Now, together with the Baltic Sea, it is the place where East and West, the United States (through NATO), the European Union, Turkey and Russia still meet on open terrain.

As large as Sweden, the Black Sea is home to many NATO ports, some Russian and Turkish ports, and a handful of Georgian and Ukrainian ports. Since the end of the Cold War, it has also been the maritime space that has concentrated the greatest number of military conflicts: the Dniester War (1992), the Abkhazian War (1992-1993), the Georgian Civil War (1991-1993), the wars in Chechnya (1994-1996; 1999-2000), the Second South Ossetian War (2008), the Donbass War, which began in 2014 and which continues, following the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022.

Seen as a "Soviet Lake" for decades, Russia might have almost lost its influence in the Black Sea and its access to the "warm waters" would have been limited to the ports of Rostov, Novorossiysk and the coastline of Sochi, if it had not invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Indeed, with the enlargement of NATO and the European Union, the Black Sea has gradually become a "European lake", just as the Mediterranean Sea was once Roman. However, since 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, Moscow has transformed the region into a new territory to divide the Western and Eastern spheres of influence. It has become "a new Iron Curtain" waiting to be completed on land, which Russia promptly started on 24 February.

FROM 'BRAIN DEAD' TO CHANGING TIMES[1]

Consumed by globalisation, the fight against terrorism and technological advancement, the world of the 1990s and 2000s had other things to deal with than trying to rein in a Russia that was no longer led by reformers like Gorbachev or Yeltsin, but by leaders bent on rewriting history and undermining the post-

Cold War peace dividend. The idea of '*peace through trade*', a reinterpretation of the concept of *Wandel durch Handel*, dominated Western doctrine in defining relations with post-Soviet Russia, but also with China.

In 2019, only five years after Russia's annexation of Crimea, French President Emmanuel Macron called NATO, the security guarantor for the region's member states, "brain dead"[2] as if he were describing Europe's refusal to face reality in its own backyard. It has taken considerable '*effort*' on the part of China and Russia for Europe to wake up: three wars of occupation (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 and 2022), the '*New Silk Road*' strategy, tensions in the South China Sea, anti-democratic interference - notably in the 2016 US elections and the Brexit vote - the Covid-19 pandemic and Moscow's instrumentalisation of energy and food in 2022.

Indeed, this "*change of era*" was not triggered by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, nor by the threat of Russian missiles placed in Kaliningrad or Crimea - which have a range - from a few hundred to two thousand kilometres - that can reach London, Paris, Stockholm, Rome or Cairo - nor by Russia's use of anti-ship missiles in its operations in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, where it has demonstrated its ability to close Europe's access to the Red Sea and Asia via the Suez Canal.

It was rather more the threats to industrial value chains triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, energy shortages and an economic recession that prompted Europe to take extraordinary measures and to reverse course regarding its geopolitical interests.

[1] *Zeitenwende*, term used by Olaf Scholz in his speech on 27 February.

[2] Term used by the French President in his interview with *The Economist*, 7 November, 2019.

THE BLACK SEA, AN OVERLOOKED GLOBAL CHOKE POINT

In a world of "existential threats" such as climate change, in which Europe is expected to take the lead, we have failed to address the choke points of global energy and food supplies.

In this sense, the Black Sea is to the world of food and energy value chains what the Suez Canal is to trade, the Gulf of Aden is to oil trade, and the Straits of Malacca are to the Indo-Pacific region in terms of energy and trade. These are all key choke points in a global trading system optimised for efficiency, but with a conceptual configuration dating from the 1950s, focused on large-scale production, efficiency and specialisation. The Black Sea carries about 40% of the world's grain and a large proportion of mineral fertiliser and natural gas. For Europe, concerned with its economic prosperity, or for Africa, so dependent on fertiliser to feed its growing population, the Black Sea has until now appeared to be an uncharted chokepoint.

Now, as Russia instrumentalises a global food crisis, Africa is caught between a rock and a hard place: according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), "*nearly fifty countries depend on Russia and Ukraine for at least 30% of their imported wheat needs. This percentage even reaches 50% for twenty-six of these countries*[3]". Europe has enough food production to feed itself, but not enough to cover Africa's deficit. Injecting money alone cannot solve the problem, while Europe is the largest contributor to international development aid. In this context, it is perhaps understandable that most African states did not vote with Western countries at the United Nations to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine: in order not to risk their food and fertiliser supplies, they preferred to stay out of the confrontation.

On the energy front, Romania and Turkey have recently started to exploit new undersea gas fields, which could help alleviate the shortage caused by Russia. But this will only have tangible effects in a few years' time and the new resources may only have a regional impact - a prospect that some Europeans have enthusiastically

supported, but which also implies that there is no Russian sabotage of the capacities and assets of the other Black Sea countries.

WHO CARES ABOUT WHAT?

The spectrum of interests and concerns involving the Black Sea is very diverse and, at the same time, very Western. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation, established in 1992, should have ensured security and prosperity around the Black Sea, but it has not done so: three of the six states bordering the Black Sea are NATO members (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey) and two are also members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Romania).

The coastal states are concerned about security, high-tech weapons, connectivity, transcontinental energy networks, quality of life, finance and industrial capacity. But above all, they are concerned about issues of identity and values because, like in the 1920s and 1930s confrontation between communism and democracy, one side thrives on exploiting the naivety of the other, is preoccupied with rewriting history, and needs asymmetrical terms of engagement in order to sustain its own existence. At the same time, the others are preoccupied with development issues that now include climate change as part of economic growth prospects.

Ankara

Turkey, which controls access to the Black Sea, adventurous in its president's vision of engagement with Central Asia and the Middle East, Asia and Africa, must focus on confronting neighbouring Russia on the other side of the Black Sea. But also on an economy under stress, as rampant inflation and depleted foreign reserves and assets are pushing it to develop a mercantile trading system. In theory, it still cares about its rapprochement with the European Union, but since it already has access to the "single market", it is seeking to chart its own course as a middle power in the region. Prior to the war in Ukraine, Turkey had made some progress towards rapprochement with Russia, including the purchase of the S-400 air and missile

[3] Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on global food security and related issues within the mandate of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 13-17 June 2022.

defence system. However, the interests of the two countries remain divergent, whether it be over Libya, Syria or the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Bucharest

Romania, as the most stable and responsible political actor in the region, is trying to become the most important pillar of European engagement in the wider Black Sea region, becoming the regional stronghold in terms of security and defence, the connector in terms of multilateral engagements and initiatives. Economically, Bucharest would like to actively contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine (with which the country has borders, or with the Danube delta) and is keen to help Kyiv and Chisinau on their European path.

Sofia

Bulgaria now faces an uncertain future. In addition to the collapse of its government, it has been denied membership of the eurozone and has yet to find a sustainable solution for its gas supply. Although it has prospects for involvement in the Western Balkans, to bolster its own economy and to serve as a hub for engagement there, it may not have enough clout to succeed, compared to other countries in the region, such as Greece and Turkey.

Tbilisi and Kyiv

The future of Georgia and Ukraine remains uncertain. As long as the Russian occupation continues, based on existing treaties, they are, in practice, barred from joining the European Union or NATO. However, in Ukraine's case, Europe has sent a strong signal by granting it candidate country status and the EU can find ways to bring the territory - after the war is over - into the European fold.

This would probably be more useful to Ukraine in the short term than transposing the entire *acquis communautaire* while the war still rages. As the example of the Central and Eastern European countries shows, real convergence is difficult and often painful. The current strategy, confirmed by the recent G7

meeting, seems to be to implement a kind of Marshall Plan, which may prove crucial in setting Ukraine on a genuine European path.

Georgia's hopes for early EU membership have been dashed as it was denied candidate status for the time being at the 23-24 June European Council, "*The European Council is ready to grant candidate status to Georgia once the priorities set out in the Commission's Opinion on Georgia's application for membership have been addressed*", which says a lot about Europe's willingness to engage in the region.

THE BLACK SEA AND EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

With the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, the contours of Europe now form almost an arc from the Arctic Circle to the Persian Gulf. Along this line, countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Turkey and Georgia are buffers and, in rare cases, anchors of stability. In this context, the Black Sea has become the place of greatest instability and the terrain where geopolitical Europe can be put to the test.

The European strategy for the Black Sea was structured in particular by the "*Black Sea Synergy - A New Regional Cooperation Initiative*", launched in Kyiv in 2008 and which is part of the neighbourhood policy. It focused on good governance, the environment, security and energy. The European Parliament has also addressed the issue, adopting in 2011 the resolution on an EU Black Sea Strategy, recalling that "*the Black Sea region needs active policies and sustainable solutions to address the significant transnational challenges it faces*".

Currently, as the war in Ukraine continues, the key could be the joint quest for autonomy. For a geopolitical Europe to emerge, Europe must be active and have capabilities in the Black Sea, which lies ahead of many opportunities and challenges. The militarisation of Crimea since 2014 has allowed Russia to increase its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and support its operations in Syria. Europe must therefore both deal with the turmoil in the Eastern Mediterranean and

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begin to actively engage in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf. These four bodies of water are coveted by both Russia and China, who seek to control them and make them fit their vision of the world.

For, beyond strategic considerations and spheres of influence, what is at stake in the Black Sea, in the context of the war in Ukraine, is a battle for values.

Can we imagine a world run by a mafia, that is in possession of nuclear weapons? A world in which the rule of law and the protection of human rights and the security of the population are optional? A more isolated world, like Iran and Afghanistan?

This is the vision that Russia is proposing, and it stands in opposition to the order that has dominated international relations since the fall of the Berlin Wall. We should be concerned about this, because Russian propaganda narratives are ravaging the South, as the case of the food crisis demonstrates.

The fact that Russia is playing with the Afro-Indian and Muslim worlds should be a wake-up call to the West. Beyond short-term geopolitical allegiances, the worldview in these societies will be significantly and

permanently affected by narratives that will keep the world divided for decades to come. As Europe strives to maintain inclusive conversations in global economic fora, in the hope of building a global partnership for development and the fight against global warming, many countries' quest for a third way could very well fall prey to Russia's efforts to undermine it. A "new iron curtain" is looming on the horizon, encircling Asia from the Black Sea to the China Seas. The question is whether Europeans will use the true potential of the Black Sea region to promote the values of freedom and democracy.

Allowing the conflict in Ukraine to end in a compromise favourable to Russia would be the final blow to the world order that Europe hopes to build. At the end of the war, decisions on Ukrainian territorial waters in the Black Sea could, moreover, set a dangerous precedent for the South China Sea.

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