



## POLITICAL THREATS TO ENERGY SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA

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*The International World Order is the system of states we function in. It has been the dominant narrative, especially since 2014, that revisionist powers are trying to challenge and destabilise the order and replace it with one where they influence geopolitical outcomes exclusively in their favour and exert much more power than they would be able to in the current international system. This competition for strategic dominance is often called Great Power Competition having the US as the centre and the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China as challenger great powers. The overall purpose of the current study is to succinctly analyse Russia's approach to grand strategy and understanding national interest, and to apply the mentioned aspects to the energy realm specifically, all the while being geographically focused on the Black Sea.*

*Keywords: Black Sea; energy security; NATO; Russian Federation; hard power;*



## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the Kremlin has been successful in achieving important strategic goals as they relate to the Black Sea, positioning itself advantageously in the geopolitical theatre. The most recent victory is the fact that a bilateral meeting framework with Washington was secured, the first step materialising on 20 May 2021 when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met in Reykjavik, on the sidelines of the Arctic Council. Moreover, a Russia-USA Summit took place mid-June 2021. *Hard power* with an emphasis on influence campaigns has been the instrument of choice in Russia since the 1920s and there is clear evidence that it is effective in achieving the political goals of the Kremlin, in spite of numerous messages from the EU and the White House that Russian aggression will not be tolerated, that further economic sanctions will be imposed and that the international system will not tolerate “*revisionist behaviour*”. In essence, this is probably the biggest challenge, namely how the transatlantic community and, implicitly, regional actors can effectively manage such posture without crossing the threshold of war.

The study focuses on the energy element of security, which will be analysed from a Russian perspective. Thus, the article analyses Russia’s approach to *grand strategy* and *understanding of national interest*, exploring the impact of the two concepts in the energy realm specifically, all the while being geographically focused on the Black Sea. Moreover, the study is aimed at outlining why energy and the Black Sea play such a vital role in Russian strategic output.

Not understanding or not addressing the mentioned aspects in a more targeted way could lead to an increased energy security dilemma in the Black Sea and inherently to strategic instability in the region

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as well as beyond. Furthermore, focusing on exclusively military means could lead to escalation, miscalculations and, ultimately, conflict.

The methodology combines various sources, including strategic guidance documents, official Russian policy statements, official speeches and declarations, interviews of Russian political decision-makers and writings by Russian and international military analysts and academics.

This paper takes a narrow, security-focused perspective on energy, in general, and on oil and gas, in particular. Because of the nature of Russian strategic structure, the article also explores the developments in the maritime domain. Throughout the article, energy security is to be understood as the *“provision of affordable, reliable, diverse, and ample supplies of oil and gas... (and) adequate infrastructure to deliver these supplies to market”* (Cooper, Kalicki, Goldwyn, 2005).

## THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The complexity of the Black Sea strategic environment is often mentioned by practitioners of security, political decision-makers and academics alike. This complexity is due in large part to the energy dynamics. From a security standpoint, the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit Communiqué expressed the changing structure of the international system and implicitly of the Black Sea strategic space: *“Russia’s recent activities and policies have reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and changed the security environment”* (NATO, 2016, art. 9). Regional stability was mostly affected by Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. This event strongly altered the course of international patterns of engagement with the Russian Federation, however, it was not the only catalyst for change. Regional *hard power* dynamics today in the Black Sea is dominated by the Russian Federation and NATO. The Alliance includes three littoral states: Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. Finally, the Black Sea represents a *Great Power Competition* theatre, one where one of the powers already had a territorial victory. *Great Power Competition* is, in essence, a race to become the power capable to shape the future of the region as well as the most influential actor in the international system, one that shapes outcomes and influences other actors behaviour to its advantage. The innate intricacy of the strategic environment is obvious

in the non-homogenous allied and partner range of national, regional and even global perspectives. Everyone can agree the environment is complex. However, not many can agree on a comprehensive strategy. There is no consensus yet within NATO as to how to engage Russia in the Black Sea and there is no NATO Black Sea Strategy.

The constellation of stakeholders in the Black Sea is diverse from multiple points of view: cultural, ethnic, economic, political and religious. During the Cold War, the Black Sea was a frozen area and the macro level control of the bipolar system ensured strategic stability. The Soviet Union dominated the Black Sea and NATO was deterring through the Republic of Turkey. After a period of transformation and structural geopolitical shifts following the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea is once again a laden strategic theatre for Europe, for the transatlantic community, and, implicitly, for the international system in its entirety. Given the key role the Black Sea plays in Russian *grand strategy* paired with a lack of a comprehensive, tailored NATO strategy towards different areas, the Black Sea runs the risk of becoming either a geopolitical space dominated by one great power or a conflict generator. Both situations would be damaging to the International World Order. However, the mentioned situations are preventable.

In the context of the present article, the analysis will focus on one stakeholder, mainly, the Russian Federation. The reasoning is grounded in the reality that, at present, Russia dominates the Black Sea from a military viewpoint and the paper is aimed at underpinning how this dominance affects energy security in the area.

Russia has a unique geostrategic position, *“unlike any other nation in the world”* (Covington, 2016, p. 7). The Kremlin and Russian military decision-makers will think about how to defend the country in a way that meets the requirements of this unique strategic environment and in line with the political goals of Russian leadership. In this regard, the words of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are illustrative: *“Many different opinions have been expressed in this connection including the fear that we have a distorted view of the international situation and Russia’s international standing. I perceive this as an echo of the eternal dispute between pro-Western liberals and the advocates of Russia’s unique path”* (Lavrov, 2016). Russian strategic thinking is built



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*What the West defines as Russian hybrid warfare is in fact “a single form of warfare that couples the ambiguous, non-attributable means of war to <non-ambiguous> means of war – conventional and nuclear forces”. Conventional military and non-military structures are under the same leadership, employing a single overarching strategy to achieve a set of objectives defined by national interest.*

on strong pillars, pillars which the Russian leadership understands very well and cultivate. The General Staff is the brain of the armed forces, the General Staff Academy and other academies and universities support it in institutionalising this culture of strategic thought into their officer corps. Russian Armed Forces act in concert with the nation’s security services and other government ministries. The holistic approach is typical to Russian attitude toward defence planning and represents a very powerful advantage vis-à-vis any other power, alliance or competitor. There is no separation of powers in the state’s structure, thus fostering a cohesive grand strategy and an effective operational approach as well as the capability to act as a whole nation at war. What the West defines as *Russian hybrid warfare* is in fact “a single form of warfare that couples the ambiguous, non-attributable means of war to <non-ambiguous> means of war – conventional and nuclear forces” (Covington, p. 9). Conventional military and non-military structures are under the same leadership, employing a single overarching strategy to achieve a set of objectives defined by national interest. This is different from the US “seamless integration of multiple elements of national, and military power – diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military” (DoD, 2018). Vladimir Putin announced at the beginning of his presidency that he would consolidate political powers in Russia into the so-called “power vertical”, also referred to as the “l’état, c’est Putin” model (Bremmer, Charap, 2006, p. 83). In this governance model power is concentrated “in the executive at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of the federal government and the once-powerful regional bosses” (Ib., p. 84).

*Russia’s National Security Strategy to 2020 defines the “national interests of the Russian Federation” as “the aggregate of the internal and external needs of the state in ensuring the protection and stable development of the individual, society and the state” (Giles, 2009). A threat to national security is considered “the direct or indirect possibility of damage to constitutional rights and freedoms, quality of life, sovereignty/territorial integrity, stable development of the Russian Federation, defence and security of the state” and the “system of national security” encompasses “the forces and means which ensure national security” (Ib.).*

In order to operationalise the strategy, Russia has steadily increased its capabilities as well as operations of air, sea, and land forces in the region. The Russian Navy has been modernised and the Black Sea Fleet has undergone major technological developments. Russia has also leveraged the increased capabilities in real combat, for example in the intervention in Syria, when the Black Sea served as main access road for troop and equipment transport.

If post-Cold War Russia entered a period of decline both militarily and economically, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia has built credible combat power and invested heavily in modernising its armed forces, implicitly the Russian Navy. Not few in western circles warn about the Russian *A2/AD fortress* in the Black Sea. From the Russian shores this is viewed as sound defensive posture to deter NATO as well as to project power beyond the region. Tzar Ivan the Terrible referred to this posture as attrition and attack of supply lines in periphery/buffer zones.

### THE ROLE OF ENERGY IN RUSSIAN STRATEGIC OUTPUT

According to official doctrine, the Black Sea is designated as being one of high strategic importance because it plays a crucial role in the ultimate political objective of the Kremlin: *“Foreign interest in energy reserves to which Russia feels it has a moral, if not necessarily a legal right, is treated as a potential threat”* (Ib., p. 8). A significant amount of resources are in the Black Sea and the Wider Black Sea Area. The energy sector in Russia is state owned. To add to the power of the energy companies, in July 2007, Russia’s Duma passed a bill that would allow energy companies Gazprom and Transneft the right to create private, internal armies. In Russia, energy companies are in effect protected by private armies. Transneft controls Russia’s oil pipeline infrastructure while Gazprom embodies the Russian natural gas monopoly (Hurst, 2010, p. 62). Gazprom is one of Russia’s most important instruments of state power and, sometimes, a very feared weapon. In political science, *“traditional militarisation theory argues that as the armed forces increase their influence in government, because of an increase in their capabilities, the state becomes more likely to adopt an aggressive*



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*foreign policy that can lead to war"* (Schofield, 2007). It is not the case in Russian strategic thinking. Soviet and later on Russian *grand strategy* have been a sort of art in itself, carefully crafted by taking into account not only military capabilities, technologies and political ends, but also an enemy's cultural sensitivities, values, level of education, religion and socio-demographic as well as well as socio-economic make-up. It would be reductive to limit the role of energy in Russian strategic thinking by deeming it to be militarised or labelling it as *hybrid warfare* or *grey zone combat*. The Russian Federation Security Strategy calls on energy as being a pillar of overall Russian security: *"One of the main long-term directions of national security in the economic sphere is energy security"* (National Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000). The same document also explains what that means in Russian perspective, what conditions have to be met: *"Essential conditions of national and global energy security include multilateral cooperation in the interests of creating markets for energy resources that correspond to WTO principles, the development and international exchange of promising energy-saving technologies, and likewise the use of ecologically clean, alternative sources of energy"*. It continues by outlining what is understood by energy security: *"The main aspects of energy security are the stable supply of sufficient standard quality sources of energy; the effective use of energy resources by increasing the competitiveness of domestic producers; the prevention of possible fuel-energy resource deficits; the creation of strategic stocks of fuel, reserve capacities and standard equipment; and ensuring the stable functioning of the system of energy and fuel provision"* (Ib.).

President Putin has been able to use energy as a very damaging political tool against the states in the post-Soviet space. It is worth noting that inflicting damage is not a guarantee of victory. Often Russia uses energy in order to obtain desired political outcomes or to punish countries, especially states in its *"near abroad"*, if the Kremlin concludes that they have not acted in line with Russian interests. State control over the supply of energy is a major source of leverage for the Kremlin: in January 2006 Gazprom cut off energy supplies to Ukraine and then turned them back on a day later, in February 2008 Gazprom accused Ukraine it had accumulated over \$1.5 billion in debts



for supplies from 2007, the tension peaked, contradictory statements from both ensued, and it all culminated with Gazprom cutting oil and gas supplies in half (Grigas, 2012). Pipelines were turned back on to maximum power after Russia reached an agreement to its liking regarding supply intermediaries like RosUkrEnerg, which eventually got eliminated. The Kremlin was successful in reaching a political goal. In the winter of 2008 to 2009: *“Gazprom cut off all supplies for Ukraine’s use on January 1, after weeks of negotiations on outstanding debts and prices for 2009. Gazprom proposed to raise the price to \$250 from \$179.5. Ukraine said it was prepared to pay \$201 and wanted to raise gas transit fees. Gazprom then raised the price again to \$458”* (Reuters, 2009). This mode of operation goes further back to the early '90s, when Russia turned off energy supplies to the Baltic states, then not yet EU nor NATO members, in an attempt to influence and destabilise their pursuit for integration with the Western security and political structures. In 1992, the same tactic was used in response, some say in retaliation, following demands by the Baltic states for Russia to remove its remaining military forces from the region.

It is very important to understand that to a centralised energy economy under state monopoly, the end is obtaining, maintaining and strengthening geopolitical power, not so much economic profits and market valuation. The long game is protecting and furthering Russian national interests. The Russian approach sees energy as a military means to an end, a weapon with a strong coercive effect.

Russian national interests have several components: *“Russia’s five core interests include defence of the country and the regime, influence in the near abroad, a vision of Russia as a great power, non-interference in domestic affairs, and political and economic cooperation as an equal to other great powers”* (Radin, Reach, 2017). Access to abundant energy resources gives Russia power. Power after all is *“having the ability to influence another to act in ways in which that entity would not have acted otherwise”* (Wilson Center, 2009, p. 114). Russia is exercising its power because it can and it will continue to do so until it no longer serves its interests or the price to pay is too high. The price for example is sanctions, but even from this vantage point, Russia is playing, so to speak, a very smart political game and calls US’s bluff. Russia is working



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with some Western countries on building pipelines that will facilitate even more Russian energy exports to Europe and by doing so it not only generates revenues but it also fuels tensions between allies. In turn, tensions eventually translate into policy as well as consequences for the European security structure. The typical example for this is Germany and the Nord Stream II Pipeline that, in essence, is a direct hit to Ukrainian energy revenue.

Due to its vital role in Russian strategic output, energy has serious effects on the power dynamics internationally, regionally, on the maritime security regime in the Black Sea and, implicitly, on the international system. The oil and gas pipeline architecture in the Black Sea includes Russian controlled Blue Stream and Turk Stream (Gazprom).

## **ENERGY SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA – THE MILITARY DIMENSION OF RESOURCE COMPETITION**

The effects of political threats on energy supply in the Black Sea have long had a destabilising effect on the region. In *Russian National Security Concept*, energy, just as much as any other vital interest of the state is defended by the armed forces: “*The interests of ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation predetermine necessity of a Russian military presence in certain strategically important regions of the world in appropriate circumstances*” (Russian National Security Concept, lb.).

At global level, the Black Sea is an arena for great power competition with both Russia and China. *Great Power Competition* is not warfare. It is a contest in the international system and the winner will be able to shape/decisively influence the structure of the system through “*security architectures, as well as norms and practices worldwide, including trade and investment regimes and the development and regulation of new technological infrastructures*” (Wilson Center, 2021). A veteran of NATO, retired US General Ben Hodges wrote about the high potential for conflict in the event there is no effective strategy for the Black Sea: “*Great power competition prevents great power conflict. Conversely, failure to compete and to demonstrate*

*and protect interests, in all domains, can lead to power vacuums and misunderstandings that can, in turn, lead to an escalation of tensions and actual conflict” (Hodges, 2021).*

At regional level, in the Black Sea, Russia needs to counter a military alliance, NATO, as well as two states that are EU members: Romania and Bulgaria. From a Russian perspective, these are all threats even if some countries are closer to the Kremlin than others. Energy security is directly tied to the military. Russian (Soviet and modern Russia) naval strategy historically relies on strategic deterrence and layered defence. Its strategic defence force remains about nuclear-capable ballistic missile submarines able to threaten the homeland of aggressor countries. The layered defence is provided by increasing defensive circles from the coast to hundreds of miles out to sea. After a period of decline post-Cold War, the Russian Federation has embarked on a modernisation of the armed forces. Geopolitically, Russia has also been very active after the rise to power of Vladimir Putin and, slowly, the military power balance in the region shifted in its favour. The 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent build-up of combat capabilities as well as military infrastructure in the region worked as a force multiplier in shifting the military balance. If the annexation in itself is viewed through fundamentally different vantage points by the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and by the transatlantic community, on the other hand, the Kremlin was very transparent about its intentions to militarise the Crimean Peninsula. The legitimisation of the military build-up came under the pretence of defending itself from an ever expanding, aggressive NATO and, what the Kremlin perceived as American influence.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that all official Russian documents consistently reiterate the five core interests that guide Russian Foreign Policy: defence of the country and the regime, influence in the near abroad, a vision of Russia as a great power, non-interference in domestic affairs, political and economic cooperation as a partner equal to other great powers (Radin, Reach, Ib.). All the mentioned core interest are directly tied to the Black Sea. The Chief of Russia’s General Staff, Valery Gerasimov concluded in 2016: *“Several years ago the Russian fleet’s combat capabilities were in stark contrast*



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*It is important to talk about NATO in the Black Sea because only through NATO can stability be preserved in the region. A Black Sea NATO Comprehensive Strategy will hopefully become reality at some point, most likely in a more distant future. Nonetheless, in order to engage Russia effectively, NATO will need to widen its definition of energy security and move past calling it an emerging or hybrid threat.*

*with that of the Turkish Navy. Some even said that Turkey was in full command of the Black Sea. Now it's different” (TASS, 2016). General Gerasimov furthermore pointed out that the Black Sea Fleet had been reinforced by submarines carrying the Kalibr missile system. The Kalibr missile system is very important to the Russian navy since it provides for long range nuclear capabilities that can reach land based enemy states (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2021).*

The diplomatic posture changed in the Black Sea. There have been very tense moments at times, like November of 2018, which was quintessential coercive naval diplomacy: a maritime operation was carried out by the Russian Federation coast guard vessels under the Flag of the Federal Security Service in order to seize three Ukrainian vessels and detain the crews. At the same time, Su-25 fighters and Ka-52 combat helicopters from Crimea provided “*a showy enforcement of the blockade of the Kerch Strait leading into the Sea of Azov*” (Cenciotti, 2018).

A hindrance for NATO in the Black Sea is, firstly, the lack of a comprehensive Black Sea approach and, secondly, the fundamentally different way the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and the transatlantic community, on the other hand, view the world order and its moving parts, one being energy security. It is important to talk about NATO in the Black Sea because only through NATO can stability be preserved in the region. A Black Sea NATO Comprehensive Strategy will hopefully become reality at some point, most likely in a more distant future. Nonetheless, in order to engage Russia effectively, NATO will need to widen its definition of energy security and move past calling it an emerging or hybrid threat. If NATO is looking to build an effective approach, then, especially in the Black and Baltic Seas, it will need to plan on including energy transport routes and maritime extraction sites as part of the big picture maritime security framework. It will also need to increase political/cultural understanding efforts. According to Ukrainian Energy Ministry, the country lost 80% of oil and gas deposits in the Black Sea and a large portion of the port infrastructure because of the annexation of Crimea (Cohen, 2019). There are concerns about the freedom of navigation in both the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. These are maritime issues and energy security issues at the same time.

Earlier this year at a news conference in Cairo, when asked about the Black Sea, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called US presence there “regular occurrence”. Mr. Lavrov also declared: “Questions are being asked about what Russia is doing on the border with Ukraine. The answer is very simple: we live here, this is our country” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

*Hard power* must stay, but it should be complemented by NATO political efforts as well as educational effort. NATO and the USA, on bilateral basis, have a pronounced presence in the Black Sea. Romania, for example, is a pivot of the security architecture in the Black Sea. Now, more than ever, when Turkey is having its own strained relationship with some of its allies, Romania can become the anchor, the platform from which trust building measures and resilience building programmes originate. For Romania, NATO membership has meant a permanent break with the turbulent past and a guarantee that such times will not be returning. This speaks to the concept of including energy in a NATO Black Sea Strategy. It does not mean NATO will weaponize energy, it will mean that the concept of energy security will be widened to include deterrence and the pursuit of strategic dialogue with Russia.

George Kennan noted in his 1951 paper on American diplomacy: “I see the most serious fault of our past policy formulation to lie in something that I might call the legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems. This approach runs like a red skein through our foreign policy of the last fifty years” (p. 82). This is good advice from one of the most decisive figures of the Cold War.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to underscore some of the key motivations behind Russian Strategic thinking, especially in relation to energy. The focus on the Black Sea is in part due to the strategic importance the Black Sea has in Russian strategy thinking and in part due to the fact that the Black Sea is home to a significant amount of natural resources, especially oil and gas. It is very important to discuss it because energy is not an exclusively commercial element, but also an element of maritime security and the freedom of navigation.



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*Energy is not an exclusively commercial element, but also an element of maritime security and the freedom of navigation. If the Black Sea is not given more strategic attention by both NATO and the EU, it runs the risk of becoming the most vulnerable area in European security. Moreover, European security itself is currently undergoing a period of structural changes.*

If the Black Sea is not given more strategic attention by both NATO and the EU, it runs the risk of becoming the most vulnerable area in European security. Moreover, European security itself is currently undergoing a period of structural changes. The EU seeks to define its role as a security and defence actor, within the EU Strategic autonomy process. Two EU member states, Bulgaria and Romania, are Black Sea littoral states. Inadvertently, the overarching debate over how the EU intends to proceed in the realm of defence will affect future military/security dynamics in the region. It is the right time to have such a discussion. Key for NATO will be to move faster towards a common, comprehensive Black Sea strategy, ensuring its complementarity with EU efforts, not duplication. The lack of consensus among allies is an asymmetry that competitors are leveraging and will continue to do so. It is a vulnerability that the Russian Federation is capitalising on, as it does so in its military cooperation with Turkey and the energy cooperation with Germany.

This aspect will be hard to manage but necessary to address, as the then Chief of General Staff, now Romanian Minister of Defence, General Nicolae Ciucă declared in 2017 at the Defence and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest: *“the security situation from the Baltic Sea through the Black Sea and into the Mediterranean is not seen merely as a regional issue, but it is of concern to the entire Alliance. Considering the threats towards the Eastern Flank as a whole, NATO deterrence and defence posture rely on coherence and consistency”* (Ciucă, 2017). Consensus is only built with effort, effective communication and transparent consultation, it takes time. The longer the transatlantic community will wait to develop a Black Sea Strategy, the more the risk for conflict or miscalculation will increase.

Energy is vital to the Russian Federation. That is the reason why the security establishment will plan to defend and promote the energy sector regardless of NATO posture. Energy means power to the Russian Federation, power in all dimensions: political power because it allows Russia to directly and indirectly influence policy in other states and the EU, military power because energy fuels the Russian revenue stream, exports and therefore the GDP, which in turn will partly

be reinvested in arms technologies, military personnel, military reform and, finally, diplomatic power because, through energy, Russia projects power and it secures the continuation of its global reach. It will be very challenging for the transatlantic community to reach a consensus on how to engage Russia in the Black Sea because the interests are varied. However, it can be done, and it has to include transparency and very well thought through strategic messaging.



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Energy means power to the Russian Federation in all dimensions: political power, military power and, finally, diplomatic power.





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