

The Black Sea Region Endures Beyond the Theater of War - Pavel K. Baev



Many strategic surprises have come from the combat operations on the Black Sea theatre in the last 25 months, and they keep coming as the long Russo-Ukrainian war continues to evolve, while the prospect of peace is barely visible through its fog. In the domain of politics, one surprise is that the Black Sea region has not been completely transfigured into the theater of war, but endured, even if its key institution – the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) – barely functions in a few [working groups](#) and the [Parliamentary Assembly](#).

In military-strategic terms, the first major surprise was Russia's inability to execute the planned [amphibious operation](#) toward Odesa, for which [six landing ships](#) were added to the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) combat order from the Baltic and the Northern fleets. By mid-spring 2024, nearly all these ships had been [sunk or seriously damaged](#) by Ukrainian strikes, so the sea-lift capacity of the BSF is effectively eliminated. The second surprise was the sinking of the BSF's flagship [cruiser Moskva](#) by two hits with Ukrainian *Neptune* anti-ship missiles on 13 April 2022, even if the hostile impact is [still denied](#) by the Russian command. The third surprise was Russia's retreat from the [Snake Island](#) (Zmiinyi) after a series of Ukraine's attacks on supply ships and the radar installation. Further surprises include the missile strike on the [BSF Headquarters](#) in Sevastopol, the drone attack on the [Kerch Bridge](#), and the downing of [two A-50](#) early warning and control planes over the Sea of Azov.

For experts in maritime warfare, the main new feature of the on-going operations is the strikingly successful use of [naval drones](#) by Ukraine, which had no previous experience in employing this modern technology. What is often missed in the commentary, is that the effectiveness of deployment of the "wolf packs" of drones depends entirely on the availability of [real-time intelligence data](#) on the location of Russian ships. This crucial targeting information is gathered by various US assets, and after one intercept of the [MQ-9 Reaper](#) drone in mid-March 2023, Russia has stopped interfering with these operations. Detection of naval drones is difficult by the radars on ships and on land, but it would have much easier from the air – and it is the inability of the BSF to operate the air surveillance assets (such as the Il-38N maritime patrol aircraft) that leaves this threat unaddressed. The air-sea balance in the theatre looks distorted and even paradoxical: One party has absolutely superior numbers of combat ships and air platforms, but is essentially "blind", and the other party has only a fleet of home-made drones, but enjoys access to [high-quality intelligence data](#).

The progressive destruction of the surface combatants of the BSF and its forced retreat to the base in the busy commercial port of Novorossiysk [constitutes a victory](#) for Ukraine not only in the maritime domain, but also in the realm of geopolitics. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia sought to turn it into an ["unassailable fortress"](#) that dominated the strategic center of the Black Sea.

Penetrating Ukrainian missile and drone strikes have achieved more than just proving for fact that the S-400 surface-to-air systems provide far from perfect protection, so the Russian version of the “[A2/AD bubble](#)” doesn’t work. More importantly, they have granted credibility to the political proposition that [durable peace](#) cannot be achieved without full restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, [including Crimea](#).

The high intensity of naval warfare in the Black Sea might create an impression that commercial maritime traffic is severely affected; in fact, however, it continues and even expands. President Putin’s decision to break the “[grain deal](#)” in July 2017 was clearly a mistake, which he cannot admit – but consents to rectify. The [warning](#) about possible threats to the shipping in the north-western part of the Black Sea has been quietly withdrawn, and the [grain export](#) from Odesa has reached a stable and sustainable level. The agreement on a [joint de-mining operation](#) between Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey may be slow in implementation, but the BSF submarines have not attempted to lay mines in the new corridor. In return, the Ukrainian “wolf packs” of naval drones are not targeting Russian commercial ships, so the BSF is not compelled to organize and protect maritime convoys. One exception is the so-called “Syrian Express”, which used to operate such landing ships as [Caesar Kunikov](#) (sunk on 14 February 2024), and presently employs civilian ships, which are defined by Ukraine as [legitimate targets](#).

This remarkable resilience of commercial shipping constitutes a major proof for the durability of the Black Sea region in the war environment. Russian [export of oil](#) from Novorossiysk and grain export from the Azov Sea ports continue unimpeded, and it is only the continuing tightening of the sanctions regime that makes an issue for this traffic. The main beneficiary from this maritime commerce is Turkey, which cultivates [military-technical cooperation](#) with Ukraine and has significantly expanded trade with Russia. The latter has invited attention from the US and the EU authorities concerned with [possible circumventions](#) of the sanctions regime, and the measures taken by Ankara for addressing these concerns have irked Moscow to such degree that President Putin has opted for postponing his long-planned visit to some “[foreseeable future](#)”. In contrast, President [Zelensky’s visit](#) confirmed that Turkey is perfectly positioned to

facilitate peace negotiations, when conditions for ending the war would become ripe.

The centrality of Turkey in the future peace-making between Russia and Ukraine constitutes the best promise for the reinvigoration of the Black Sea region, in which one important participant is Georgia, which performs a difficult balancing act between its course toward [rapprochement with the EU](#) and the imperative to maintain stable relations with Russia. The resolution of the deadlocked Abkhazia conflict is a necessary condition for Georgia's prosperity, and Russian plans for building a [naval base in Gudauta](#) certainly endanger this prospect. The Abkhazians have [good reasons to worry](#) about the transformation of Russia's dominance into a de-facto annexation, and Turkey can use its newly-strengthened authority for convincing them that a broad autonomy in the Georgian state is a much better option.

Finally, the durability of the Black Sea region is illustrated by the continuing relevance of one of its unique political pillars – the Montreux Convention (1936). The provisions of this regime agreed in the inter-war period might appear ancient, and in the on-going long war, they seriously [impede](#) Russian naval operations and may cause some [irritation](#) in NATO. The Convention provides, nevertheless, a firm basis for Turkey's ability to perform a useful mediating role between Russia and Ukraine, while [honoring its commitments](#) as a responsible member-state of the Atlantic Alliance, which is preparing to celebrate its 75 anniversary. The end of the war may create opportunities for a verifiable demilitarization of the Black Sea region, codified in a new convention, which would answer the peaceful aspirations of all littoral states.



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