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The Black Sea Region and the Eastern Mediterranean at the Crossroads of Russia and Türkiye's Interests: A Political and Historical Analysis

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Abstract. The Black Sea region (BSR) and the adjacent Eastern Mediterranean (EMR) have repeatedly become focal points of global political developments. In recent years, issues surrounding the Syrian conflict, which can be described through the metaphor of the 'Syrian knot,' the Israel — U.S. — Iran conflict unfolding in 2025, Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine, and a host of related issues have returned these regions to the center of global and regional competition in the emerging world. The aim and objectives of this study are guided by the authors' search for answers to several questions: Do these two regions form a single geopolitical entity? What geography, and therefore geopolitics and historical experience, determine the answer to the first question? What is the degree of compatibility and conflict between the interests of Russia and Türkiye in the Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean as leading regional powers? With this in mind, this study examines the fundamental motives of the two states' policies within a logic of rivalry and competition and provides a forecast for the near-term development of bilateral relations in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean (BSEM). Taking into account the geopolitical interplay of global players in the BSEM, a dual system of containment has been established by the collective West against Russia and Türkiye. Ankara serves as a constraint on Russia's Black Sea policy, while a similar sanitary belt, similar in its implementation methodology to the "British balance in Europe," has been created in the Eastern Mediterranean around the Republic of Türkiye. Based on these questions, the authors drew on geopolitical, historical, and civilizational approaches. They focus on the problem of maintaining Russia's military and political position in the Eastern Mediterranean after the 'rapid collapse' of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. It has been established that the system of double containment built by the West allows us to expect that the logic of simultaneous rivalry and cooperation (but not alliance) between Türkiye and Russia in the Black Sea region, which was semi-closed due to the Montreux Convention of 1936, can be transferred with a high probability to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Key words: Russian-Turkish relations, cooperation, conflict, Turkish balance, chronopolitical cycles, dual containment

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Черноморский регион и Восточное Средиземноморье на пересечении интересов России и Турции: политико-исторический анализ

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Аннотация. Черноморский регион (ЧР) и примыкающее к нему Восточное Средиземноморье (ВС) неоднократно становились центрами развития глобальных политических событий. В последние несколько лет проблемы вокруг сирийского конфликта, которые можно обозначить через метафору «сирийский узел», разворачивающийся в 2025 г. ирано-американо-израильский конфликт, специальная военная операция (СВО) России на Украине и комплекс производных вопросов вернули эти районы в центр мировой и региональной конкуренции формирующегося мира. Цель и задачи исследования подчинены поискам авторами ответа на несколько вопросов. Образуют ли эти два региона одну геополитическую целостность? Какая география, а следовательно, и геополитика и исторический опыт обусловливают ответ на первый вопрос? Какова степень совместимости и столкновения интересов России и Турции в Черноморском регионе и Восточном Средиземноморье как ведущих региональных держав? С учетом этого в исследовании изучены фундаментальные мотивы политики двух государств в логике соперничества и конкуренции и дан прогноз развития двусторонних отношений на ближайшую перспективу в Черноморском регионе и Восточном Средиземноморье (ЧРиВС). С учетом геополитической игры глобальных игроков в ЧРиВС выявлена двойная система сдерживания, выстроенная коллективным Западом в отношении России и Турции, где Анкара является элементом ограничения политики России в Черном море, но при этом в Восточном Средиземноморье вокруг Турецкой Республики создан схожий по методологии реализации санитарный пояс в духе «британского баланса» в Европе. Исходя из поставленных вопросов, авторы опирались на геополитический, исторический и цивилизационный подходы. Авторы ориентируются на проблему сохранения военно-политических позиций России в Восточном Средиземноморья после «быстрого падения» режима Башара Асада в Сирии. Таким образом, выстроенная Западом система двойного сдерживания позволяет рассчитывать, что логика одновременного соперничества и сотрудничества (но не союза) Турции и России в полузакрытом за счет Конвенции Монтрё 1936 г. Черноморском регионе с большой вероятностью может быть перенесена на Восточное Средиземноморье.

Ключевые слова: российско-турецкие отношения, сотрудничество, конфликт, турецкий баланс, хронополитические циклы, двойное сдерживание

Вклад авторов. Ирхин А.А.: научное руководство исследованием, концептуализация, разработка методологии исследования. Никифоров А.Р.: концептуализация, разработка методологии исследования. Москаленко О.А.: сбор и аналитическая обработка материалов, подготовка текста и графических материалов. Демешко Н.Э.: сбор и аналитическая обработка материалов, подготовка текста и графических материалов. Все авторы ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

Events in the Syrian Arab Republic in December 2024 confronted Russia with a fundamental challenge regarding the maintenance of its military-political and other forms of presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region (EMR). Syria's role as an ally of the Russian Federation could hardly be overstated: it served as a refueling hub for Russian aircraft and naval vessels, a key sphere of influence in the Middle East, a Russian 'window to Africa,' a means to influence and simply participate in global maritime trade, and more. Geopolitically, the situation reflects a drive to push Iran and Russia out through the combined efforts of the US, Israel, and Türkiye, contrasting with the balance of power envisioned by the Astana format, which pitted Russia, Iran, and Türkiye against Israel, the US, France, and their proxies

While the 2014 reunification of Crimea with Russia halted the country's displacement from the Black Sea region, it represented only an intermediate step in advancing its national interests across the world's oceans. It is important to note that in the 21st century, the security of maritime routes remains central to state foreign policy, as a nation's capacity for international competition often hinges on its ability to derive benefits from the global maritime transport system. Today, global power centers pursue economic, military-political, and cultural expansion largely via the seas, making both the seas and maritime routes crucial elements of geopolitical competition (Degterev & Aghazada, 2023, p. 7).

The primary regional powers (within the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region) are the Republic of Türkiye and the Russian Federation. Since the mid-2000s, both countries have been undergoing similar processes of imperial resurgence, revisiting the outcomes of world wars lost to the collective West—Russia regarding the Cold War, and Türkiye regarding World War I. At present, Russian-Turkish relations are characterized by a complex mix of political-economic contradictions and simultaneous cooperation. In the context of imperial resurgence, this also involves the convergence of two macro-regions within the same Eurasian space, implying rising interstate competition that threatens to escalate into conflict in the near future. This complex subsystem of international relations has historically extended beyond bilateral ties, encompassing broader bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral dimensions. The 'invisible threads' binding this subsystem are the Black Sea (Turkish) Straits, which serve variously as the basis for military-political alliances, complex compromises, or direct clashes. It is these straits that connect the Black Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean.

In today's changing world, Türkiye pursues a multi-vector foreign policy. In this geopolitical game, Türkiye attempts to hedge its bets by aligning with two sides simultaneously. Ankara seeks to become part of the collective 'Non-West' while remaining at the forefront of the collective West; it aspires to join BRICS without calling into question its membership in Euro-Atlantic structures (Irkhin, Moskalenko & Demeshko, 2025, p. 33). The Russian Federation employs similar strategies: despite an existential conflict with the West over Ukraine, Moscow attempts to restore relations with key Western capitals.

The *aim* of the study is to examine the current role of the Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean in the policies of Türkiye and Russia, taking into account the system of cooperation and contradictions within which they interact.

The *research methodology* is based on the application of geopolitical, historical, and civilizational approaches.

A geopolitical perspective defines Türkiye as a peninsula situated between the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins, which creates objective conditions for the geostrategy of the Turkish elite, who view the Black Sea and Caspian Sea region as a unified geopolitical space, and drives Ankara to foster a favorable and controlled environment in that area. The picture looks different in the Turkish language: on Turkish political maps, Türkiye is a peninsula lying between the "White" (Mediterranean) Sea (*Akdeniz*) and the "Black" Sea (*Karadeniz*). The terms used for these seas do not merely denote colors; they carry deeper semantic and metaphorical significance. In Turkish

semantics, the White (Mediterranean) Sea represents a realm of opportunity, hope, wealth, and prosperity, whereas the Black Sea is perceived as dangerous and hostile. Notably, the Turkish language possesses distinct synonyms for the colors themselves: *ak* and *beyaz* for white, and *kara* and *siyah* for black. The current eastward shift in Turkish policy, projecting the 'Turkic World' (*Türk dünyası*) toward the Caspian Sea (referred to in Turkish as the *Hazar denizi*), adds a historical dimension to Türkiye's political geography in Eurasia. It also revives historical memories of the earlier westward migrations of Turkic tribes and the subsequent military and economic ties they established.

Ankara is able to view the Black Sea and Caspian Sea region as a cohesive geopolitical space because Türkiye's flanks now extend from the Balkans to the Caucasus.

More than two and a half centuries ago, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca between the Russian and Ottoman Empires secured Russia's access to the Black Sea and marked the beginning of the struggle for a permanent presence in the region. The Black Sea straits provided Russia with the opportunity to influence the balance of economic interests and military-political forces in the Mediterranean and the world's oceans. The economy of the Russian Empire's southern expansion vector was bolstered by a geopolitical synthesis of the steppe and the coastline, providing access to the Mediterranean (Novorossiya); the export of grain via Black Sea ports to the Mediterranean drove economic expansion, thereby realizing the geopolitical and geoeconomic logic of the Russian tsars.

Novorossiya, as part of the 'Russian World,' represents continental Russia's aspiration to gain access from the 'turbulent' Black Sea to the Mediterranean,a "sea of opportunity and prosperity." The 'Turkic World' project reflects the ambition of modern, peninsular Türkiye, which enjoys more favorable natural conditions for development, to secure strategic depth within the Eurasian landmass by establishing a firm foothold in the Caspian Sea region (Demeshko et al., 2023). Novorossiya and the Turkic World constitute converging geopolitical projections pursued by Moscow and Ankara in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region. Issues related to the development of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region, as well as Russian-Turkish relations, are being addressed by a number of Russian academic institutions (such as INION, the Institute of Europe, and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences), various universities in southern Russia that naturally focus on regional topics (including V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University, Sevastopol State University, and Kuban State University), and foreign think tanks, primarily Western and Turkish ones.

A number of high-quality Russian monographs on this subject published in recent years merit attention: collaborative works edited by Degterev & Aghazada (2023), A.A. Irkhin (2024), and A.G. Gadzhiev (2023). Additionally, Turkish colleagues from Kent University (Istanbul), under the academic supervision of Professor Hasret Çomak, have also released several monographs on Türkiye's Black Sea and Mediterranean geopolitics (Çomak et al., 2017). In 2025, a monograph titled *The Black Sea Factor in Post-Cold War Turkish-Russian Relations* was published by a Turkish researcher trained at RUDN University (Tatlıoğlu, 2025).

It appears that the Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean can be combined into a single region for the purposes of political science research (Ilyin, 2019), taking into account the factor of maritime communications and the interests of the key regional and geopolitical actors involved—Türkiye and Russia. The historical component of the study demonstrates that, at various times, these regions were united within a single imperial space and coexisted in a state of mutual influence as a contested zone between thalassocracy and tellurocracy, specifically, between the states of the Rimland and the Heartland, in accordance with the theories of H. Mackinder and N. Spykman. When Heartland powers were strong, they would advance beyond the Dardanelles to establish Mediterranean footholds for projecting power into the southern oceanic sphere. Conversely, the strengthening of Western Rimland powers, typically led by Great

Britain, would trigger an offensive against the Heartland via the Bosphorus Strait. Furthermore, following World War I, Britain initiated, and the United States subsequently completed after World War II, the creation of a system designed to encircle and contain Türkiye. This was achieved by transferring disputed Aegean islands (the Dodecanese) first to Italy and then to Greece, thereby confining their ally within spatial and political parameters controlled by the major Western powers. Consequently, Türkiye and Russia found themselves caught in the 'vise' of a dual, direct encirclement driven by the Anglo-American 'Anaconda' logic: Russia is contained by Türkiye in the Black Sea region, while Türkiye is contained by Greece and Athens' other Western partners in the Eastern Mediterranean. Methodologically, this situation creates a sphere of shared interests for Ankara and Moscow in both the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

In this chain of political events dating back to the last century, events whose momentum undoubtedly persists today, one can discern a methodological error on the part of the West, originally committed by Great Britain: the Montreux Convention, concluded with significant assistance from London, if not under its direct auspices. Italy emerged from World War I as an Entente ally, albeit a highly dissatisfied one, and this discontent paved the way for the rise of Benito Mussolini. He sought to revise the war's outcomes, even though Rome already controlled key islands in the Eastern Mediterranean and the prevailing Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which regulated naval passage through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, posed no obstacles to the Italian navy. However, the greatest challenge to London was Italy's vision for the Mediterranean's future, embodied in the slogan "The Mediterranean for Mediterranean powers" and the concept of a "Greater Mediterranean" (GM). In geopolitical terms, this implied that there was no place for Britain in the Mediterranean. It was an intellectual challenge that upended the logic of 'Global Britain,' a nation striving for control over the world's oceans. The Montreux Convention was signed in 1936, yet notable great powers—Italy, Germany, and the United States—were absent from the list of signatories, each for its own reasons. Today, this convention, which has been in effect for 90 years, stands as an obstacle to Great Britain's efforts at imperial 'resuscitation.'

Based on the most obvious littoral principle, the territories and states comprising the Black Sea—Eastern Mediterranean region include Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Moldova (the Black Sea region); Greece, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Israel, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), and the Republic of Cyprus; as well as critical maritime routes: the Black Sea Straits and the Suez Canal (the Eastern Mediterranean).

However, this area is the site of the major dividing lines between Russia and the West described by H. Mackinder: "The natural outlet from the Heartland was the sea route through the Straits of Constantinople. We have already seen how Rome pushed its frontier across the Black Sea and turned Constantinople into a local base for its Mediterranean naval power while warring against the Scythian steppe nomads. Under Tsar Nicholas, Russia sought to employ this tactic in reverse: by controlling the Black Sea and its southern outlet, it aimed to project its land power toward the Dardanelles. Predictably, the result was that Western Europe united against Russia" (Mackinder, 2023, p. 238). Thus, according to H. Mackinder, Russia is the holder of the Heartland territories, while Türkiye is situated on the boundary between the Heartland and the Rimland.

Around the same time as Halford Mackinder, the Russian geopolitician A.E. Vandam (Edrikhin) wrote that the Russian people's "complete remoteness from global trade routes, that is, the sea, and the country's harsh climate condemn them to poverty and make it impossible to develop their entrepreneurial energy. Consequently, obeying the laws of nature and racial instinct, they strive inexorably southward, advancing from both flanks of their long front line. China, Persia, and Asia Minor lie in the path of this advance" (Vandam, 2022, p. 169). The Russian geopolitician analyzes the British logic and posits that they would act against the Russians to achieve two objectives: first, to destroy Russia's merchant and naval fleets and, having severely weakened the

country, push it back from the Pacific Ocean into the depths of Siberia; second, to seize the entire belt of South Asia between 30 and 40 degrees north latitude and, using this base, gradually drive the Russian people northward. "Since, according to the laws of nature governing all living things, the cessation of growth marks the beginning of decline and slow death, the Russian people, locked tight within their northern latitudes, will not escape this fate" (Vandam, 2022, pp. 169–170).

The Western logic of confining Russia to northern latitudes and cutting it off from maritime routes has been evident for several centuries.

Regarding Anglo-French wars for control of the World Ocean, including future ones, British geopolitician P.H. Colomb noted that history offers only one example of absolute command of the sea: the position held by Great Britain and France during the Crimean War. He attributes this, in part, firstly to the "peculiar location of enemy seaports on the shores of seas that narrow into straits—the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, the Sound, and the Belts—which are so easily guarded" (Colomb, 2003, p. 262), and secondly—though no less importantly—to the power of steam: "It is fair to say that had the Russian navy utilized steam to the same extent as the Allies, it is quite possible that the influence of fleets hostile to Russia could have been challenged to some degree, even in the Baltic and Black Seas" (Colomb, 2003, p. 262). In effect, the British admiral highlights the necessity of the British navy's technological superiority for conducting naval operations of this kind, while specifically singling out the Baltic and Black Seas.

A retrospective analysis of the development of the Black Sea and Baltic regions reveals the interconnection between them within the context of the rivalry between competing imperial systems, as well as the developmental phases that account for both their unity within a shared space and their separation and confrontation.

Throughout history, imperial powers operating in the Black Sea region, from the Roman to the Ottoman and Russian empires, have sought to control the Black Sea Straits and Crimea as two pivotal points (Nikiforov, 2008). However, if the established pattern of regional imperial control over both the Crimean Peninsula and the Bosporus and Dardanelles collapses and a non-regional global power gains control over one or both of these key points (the Straits and/or Crimea), then the very statehood of Türkiye and Russia faces an existential threat in the short term. Within this logic, Russia's drive to control the Black Sea Straits is historically grounded in the policies of Russian sovereigns regarding the "Eastern Question," while Türkiye's aspirations to reclaim Crimean lands hark back to Russo-Turkish relations in the second half of the 18th century. However, within a realist paradigm, the modern elites of both nations seek to preserve this imperial formula, anchored by the constant variable of the 1936 Montreux Convention. This arrangement allows Türkiye to maintain significant autonomy from its Western NATO partners regarding the Black Sea region. Indeed, under a hypothetical scenario where Crimea fell under the control of one or more non-regional powers, Türkiye would subsequently lose control over the Straits. This follows a formula derived by one of the authors of this text: whoever controls the Black Sea (Turkish) Straits controls the southern and central Black Sea basin, while whoever controls Crimea controls the northern and central parts of the Black Sea and the surrounding littoral regions. Thus, a tacit condominium or joint management of the region has emerged between Russia and Türkiye. Scenarios in which Türkiye gains control over the Crimean Peninsula, or Russia over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, run counter to two and a half centuries of historical experience regarding the coexistence of Russia and Türkiye in the Black Sea, experience that has shaped the modern balance of interests and contradictions (Irkhin, Moskalenko & Demeshko, 2024).

The research question the authors address is as follows: can Russia and Türkiye amidst their respective imperial revivals, transfer the coexistence formula established in the Black Sea region to the Eastern Mediterranean? After all, imperial revival entails the creation of two macro-regions that largely overlap, thereby generating a highly competitive environment. Given the diverse array of challenges posed to Türkiye and Russia by the West (of which Türkiye itself is a part) and its allies, the Eastern Mediterranean

also offers an opportunity to reach a compromise and replicate the cooperative logic developed in the Black Sea region. In that region, Ankara successfully advances its interests through the 'Turkish balance' mechanism, while Russia is able to shape a favorable balance of power by drawing upon its imperial and Soviet traditions and geopolitical standing.

Addressing the study's objectives requires identifying and comparing the historical and geopolitical development cycles of the Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean. Both geographically and in terms of cultural history, the Eastern Mediterranean is an integral part of the Greater Mediterranean region, forming a unified politico-geographic entity with its other sub-regions (Okunev & Zakharova, 2022). At the same time, it constitutes a geographically enclosed space: on one side, it is separated from the western parts of the Mediterranean by the Balkans, Libya's Cyrenaica, and the island of Crete situated between them; on the other, it connects to the Black Sea via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits (though, when viewed from the Eastern Mediterranean, the order of passage is reversed). In this context, the EMR is clearly divided into two unequal parts: one formed by the European coast of the Aegean Sea (hereinafter referred to as the 'Small Northwestern Arc'), and the second comprising the areas adjacent to the Mediterranean coast of Asia Minor, the Middle East, and Egypt (hereinafter the 'Large Eastern Arc').

Can the Eastern Mediterranean be viewed as a distinct region (or sub-region) of the Mediterranean? In a physical-geographic context, the answer is unequivocally yes. To answer this question affirmatively in a politico-geographic context, however, it is necessary to identify a geopolitical rhythm specific to the Eastern Mediterranean, one that reveals patterns in its political development and enables the formulation of well-founded geopolitical forecasts. Research into the regional rhythm of political development in the Black Sea region, adjacent to the Eastern Mediterranean, has made it possible to establish the cyclical nature of its geopolitical evolution, identify the corresponding cycles (which largely align with the civilizational epochs of the region's history), and examine the successive phases of these cycles (Nikiforov, 2008, pp. 61–62).

The Eastern Mediterranean is not merely a territory adjacent to the Black Sea region. The straits, which can be viewed equally as an integral part of the Black Sea basin and the Eastern Mediterranean, link the two bodies of water into a kind of "system of communicating vessels." For millennia, the Eastern Mediterranean served as a staging ground for the colonization of the Black Sea region by proponents of thalassocracy. Conversely, the establishment of a foothold on Black Sea shores by tellurocratic powers invariably implied further expansion, necessitating the creation of bridgeheads in the Eastern Mediterranean. This pattern has held true from the semi-legendary campaigns against Constantinople led by Oleg the Seer right up to contemporary Russian efforts to secure a presence at bases along the Syrian coast.

The geopolitical dynamics of the region over the last two and a half millennia fit into two complete cycles, each lasting approximately 1,100–1,200 years. The remainder of the period under review corresponds to the beginning of a third cycle (comprising a completed first phase and an incomplete second phase). Both completed cycles consist of three successive phases:

1) a confrontation between two geopolitical entities: one occupying the European part of the region (the Small Northwestern Arc), and the other the Asian part together with Egypt (the Great Eastern Arc). In the first instance, this phase lasted no more than 200 years; in the second, about 450 years; and in the current cycle, it has spanned a period of no more than 100 years,

2) the region's descent into a state of political fragmentation. In the first instance, this phase lasted about 300 years; in the second, about 350 years. The region is currently in this phase of the third cycle, which has lasted approximately 100 years,

3) the unification of the region under the rule of a single political force. During the first cycle, this phase lasted about 700 years; during the second, about 300 years.

If the described periodicity is indeed real, the region faces another period of political consolidation

in the future; the timing and duration of this period will depend on the length of the current phase. However, this is a long-term strategic forecast that is clearly not for the coming decades, and possibly not even for the current century.

Nevertheless, further development and refinement of the proposed model could well align the timeframes of forecasts based on it with the horizons of (geo)political planning and clarify the region's geopolitical profile.

For instance, it is easy to observe that the nature of the confrontation within the region has always been civilizational. It is precisely the clash of civilizations rooted at the region's poles that defines not only the content of the initial phase of each geopolitical cycle but also effectively shapes the parameters of all subsequent phases. A. Toynbee noted this characteristic of the region—a historic meeting point for bearers of distinct civilizational traditions—asserting that the emergence of two world religions, Christianity and Islam, resulted from a synthesis of Greco-Roman and Syriac elements; more precisely, it was the Syriac civilization's response to the Greco-Roman invasion (or "challenge"). Christianity emerged as a non-violent response, whereas Islam emerged as a violent one (Toynbee, 2011, p. 207). Interestingly, in the subsequent geopolitical cycle, the region became the epicenter of a struggle between the adherents of the very religions it had spawned; in the cycle that followed, the religious nature of this conflict persisted but was "diluted" by the secularized concept of civilization, allowing it to be interpreted as a clash between East and West.

The contemporary political landscape of the region is characterized by the intersection of interests among Western (Western Christian), Orthodox (Russian), and Islamic civilizations—with the latter represented within the Mediterranean-Black Sea (MBS) region by two constituent sub-civilizations: the 'secular' (broadly Turkic) and the 'fundamentalist' (broadly Arab) versions. The State of Israel occupies a somewhat distinct position in this configuration; while it cannot be classified as Western without certain caveats, it undoubtedly aligns with that cultural-historical bloc today.

The multiplicity of actors representing diverse civilizational traditions, whose interests converge in the region, precipitated the short duration of the first phase of the MBS region's modern geopolitical cycle and plunged the area into a state of political fragmentation.

It is instructive to compare the geopolitical rhythms of the MBS region with the geopolitical cycles of the adjacent Black Sea region. The identified Black Sea cycles span 700–800 years; they are defined less by civilizational confrontation (though they undoubtedly acquire a civilizational character as they evolve) than by the clash and interaction between maritime and terrestrial geopolitical forces. This is because the Black Sea region lies at the interface of the greater Mediterranean region and inner Eurasia (Mackinder's Heartland[1]). In contrast, the MBS region is not only fully situated within the Mediterranean sphere but also serves as a node in the territorial belt, termed the 'cradle of human civilizations', that Nicholas Spykman designated as the Rimland' (Spykman, 2022).

However, regarding a maritime invasion of the Black Sea region, the EMR serves as a base, providing strategic depth for such an incursion. Moreover, clear overlaps are evident when comparing the geopolitical cycle phases of these adjacent regions. For instance, the phase of Greco-Persian confrontation within the EMR aligns quite precisely with the first phase of the initial Black Sea cycle, a period marked by the clash and interaction of maritime and terrestrial forces in the Black Sea area. Shortly after establishing hegemony within the EMR, Rome extended its control to the shores of the Black Sea.

During its conflicts with the Arabs and, later, the Turks, Eastern Mediterranean attempted—often successfully—to bring the Black Sea region under its exclusive sway. However, having lost its monopoly over the Straits, it allowed the Italian merchant republics of Genoa and Venice to break through into the Black Sea. In the subsequent phase, the Black Sea region became a buffer of sorts, shielding the Ottoman Empire's territories from the northeast. Although the Black Sea ceased

[1] For further details, see: (Mackinder, 2023, pp. 103–324).

to be a 'Turkish lake' somewhat earlier than the EMR did, these two events occurred in close chronological proximity and as part of the same political processes.

A strong geopolitical foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean (primarily firm control over the Straits) serves not merely as a precondition for expansion toward the Black Sea region but renders such expansion inevitable. A comparison of the geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea region reveals that, while the regions operate autonomously, they clearly exert a mutual influence on one another. The Eastern Mediterranean's impact on the Black Sea region is more frequent and decisive, whereas the reverse influence tends to be passive. It remains to determine the relationship of both regions to the broader 'Greater Mediterranean' context in which they are situated.

It is noteworthy that the political rhythms of the Mediterranean region are not characterized by cyclical patterns. Instead, one observes linear processes, initially unfolding along a latitudinal axis, that culminated in the region's unification under Roman rule. Following the Arab conquests, the Mediterranean Sea emerged as a frontline between opposing civilizations, shifting the orientation of political processes primarily to a longitudinal (north—south) axis.

Nevertheless, the trend towards Mediterranean unity never fully vanished, and the Mediterranean Sea itself can hardly be regarded as a reliable natural boundary. As Halford Mackinder observed, "in effect, the southern boundary of Europe was and remains the Sahara, not the Mediterranean, for it is the desert that separates the black man from the white" (Mackinder, 2023, p. 64). The geopolitical dynamics of the Mediterranean as a whole cannot be reduced to the mere sum of processes occurring in its individual sectors. A theoretical synchronization of the developmental cycles of the Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean highlights the differing content of these cycles in each area, as well as the periods when they merged into a unified space. It also illuminates their mutual interaction amidst the competition between maritime and terrestrial expansionism, whereby a *tellurocracy*'s control over the Black Sea invariably drove it into the Eastern Mediterranean and, subsequently, out into the waters of the World Ocean. At the same time, the *thalassocratic* power, having secured control over the World Ocean, sought to penetrate the Black Sea and push further East, thereby depriving the Heartland of its stability and strategic depth.

By the time the arguments for this publication were being formulated, there had been a complete rebirth of 20th-century geopolitical thinking regarding the foreign policy fault lines between powers in the Baltic-Black Sea — Caspian region.

It is important to note that any geopolitical framework explaining the present and the near future operates within specific historical timeframes and a corresponding balance of power, both regionally and globally. However, the pace of military-political events between 2022 and 2026 accelerated dramatically, particularly in regions critical to Russian-Turkish relations. These relations are themselves embedded in the coalition dynamics of the collective West and the Non-West. Since December 2024, a process of coalition-driven displacement and the erosion of Russian positions has been observed along Türkiye's flanks, specifically in the Black Sea region and Transcaucasia, amid a chain of events: the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the Iran—Israel conflict. The latter led to a simultaneous weakening of Iran and Russia in the South Caucasus and a subsequent strengthening of Türkiye and its ally, the United States—a trend likely to continue in both geographical and substantive terms. Conversely, the dynamics of the US—Israel—Iran conflict that began in February 2026 revealed the limitations of the collective West's capabilities, leading to further rifts in its position. This trend, too, appears likely to persist.

Prior to December 2024, Ankara and Moscow shaped the agreements that defined the military-political climate of the Black Sea region and Transcaucasia. Now, however, this formula has narrowed to the waters of the Black Sea itself, with the Montreux Convention serving as the pivotal factor in these highly dynamic arrangements.

Türkiye has exploited Russia's preoccupation with the special military operation (SMO) to disrupt the balance of bilateral relations by displacing Russian military-political positions from bases in Syria and the South Caucasus alike. By realizing the Zangezur Corridor project, Ankara would simultaneously resolve several geopolitical issues: the lack of connectivity within the geopolitical space of the Turkic world and the advancement of its 'Middle Corridor' transport route deep into Eurasia. Naturally, this comes at the expense of Russian interests—specifically, the ideological standing of the 'Russian World' and Russia's "North—South" project for access to southern seas. However, US geostrategy has intervened in this dynamic; by gaining control over the Zangezur Corridor, the US would shape a controlled process of Türkiye's imperial resurgence and the development of the 'Turkic World' geopolitical project. Türkiye's status as a major power finds itself caught in a Western pincer movement between the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean and the Zangezur Corridor in the South Caucasus.

For Russia, the Black Sea region and its waters constitute part of a complex of geopolitical issues linked to the security of the Russian Black Sea coast. During periods of relative weakness, the region opens a gateway for hostile naval forces to penetrate deep into the country's interior; conversely, when Russia is in a position of strength, the region provides access to—and a springboard for expansion into—the Mediterranean basin and the World Ocean. Over the past two centuries, every instance of the weakening or territorial fragmentation of historical Russia has been linked to the loss of positions in the Black Sea region (the Crimean War) or the loss of the greater part of the Black Sea coast (World War I, World War II, and the aftermath of the Cold War), followed by a struggle to regain them.[2] Had the Russian Black Sea Fleet been ousted from Crimea in 2014, a 'domino effect' leading to Russia's total expulsion from the Black Sea region would evidently have been triggered; this explains the logic behind the political decisions made by Vladimir Putin (Irkhin, 2024, p. 250).

The Emerging New Global Logistics in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean Regions: Russia's and Türkiye's Interests

The history of Russia and Türkiye reveals a persistent drive by both powers to gain influence over regional and global logistics and trade. The very emergence of these two states is linked to two vital trade routes: the "Route from the Varangians to the Greeks" and the "Great Silk Road." While Keivan Rus' successfully leveraged its geographical position for regional trade between Northern and Southern Europe over a long historical period, from its inception to the Mongol conquest, the situation shifted after the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople. According to American researcher G. Friedman, the Ottomans gained control over key points along the Great Silk Road and raised tariffs on the transport of spices and other goods to Europe; this compelled Europeans to seek alternative trade routes to the East, ultimately ushering in the Age of Discovery (Friedman, 2016, p. 60).

In the post-Yalta world, both powers are seeking to revive their pivotal logistical roles in global trade, taking into account the global shifts. Russia is developing the logistics of the Northern Sea Route, revitalizing Novorossiya, and pushing toward the southern seas via the "North—South" transport corridor, a route where the South Caucasus and Iran serve as key territories. In Aprin, a suburb of Tehran, the railway lines of Russia's "North—South" project and China's Belt and Road Initiative converge; this junction signals a synchronization of the efforts by Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran to establish a new geoeconomic logistics framework independent of the West.

Türkiye is structuring its logistics to extend deep into Eurasia through the "Middle Corridor," which connects East and West. This competition over new global logistics patterns is driven by political and geopolitical considerations. In particular, synchronizing the maritime "Blue Homeland" concept with the land-based vision of the 'Turkic World' (reflecting Türkiye's aspirations

[2] For details on the change in the length of the Russian Black Sea and Sea of Azov coast, see: (Irkhin, 2024, p. 95).

for leadership within that sphere) underpins the ideological dimension of this expansion and reinforces the Republic's significance in global logistics; it offers the elites of the South Caucasus and Central Asia access to Türkiye's port facilities for the onward shipment of goods across the world's oceans.

The Story of a Future Compromise

A common challenge now facing both Russia and Türkiye is their respective imperial revivals, occurring against a backdrop where the macro-regions of interest to both powers largely overlap. Under these circumstances, a military clash between them appears virtually inevitable. The outcome of this conflict will shape a new balance of power and regional equilibrium.

However, Türkiye and Russia are not competing in a vacuum. The resolution of the "Syrian question" in December 2024 also makes a clash between Türkiye and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean inevitable. Meanwhile, five or six geopolitical projects are being pursued concurrently in the Greater Black Sea Region: the Greater Black Sea Region (USA), the Three Seas Initiative (UK), the Belt and Road Initiative (China), Novorossiya (Figure 1), the Turkic World (Figure 2) and the Blue Homeland (Türkiye), and the Persian World. Tehran will be compelled to turn to the latter project (while maintaining its national statehood) following renewed attempts to dismantle its state in June 2025 and February 2026. The US acquisition of control over the Zangezur Corridor should be viewed as one of the outcomes in the implementation of the Greater Black Sea Region project, originally proposed by Washington in 2004, possibly an intermediate one.

Russia's Black Sea geopolitical formula rests on two factors. The first holds that the loss of control over the Crimean Peninsula would entail the loss of the Caucasus; consequently, Russia must retain the northern Black Sea littoral. The second condition posits that the loss of Crimea and the Caucasus would trigger processes leading to Russia's disintegration along the lines of territories annexed as far back as the reign of Ivan IV, which enabled the Muscovite Tsardom to attain the status of an empire.



Figure 1. The Novorossiya Project

Source: compiled by A.A. Irkhin, A.R. Nikiforov, O.A. Moskalenko, and N.E. Demeshko, overlaying a map of the Novorossiya Governorate (comprising 12 "uyezds"): Vilbrekht A.M. Russian Atlas, Consisting of Forty-Three Maps and Dividing the Empire into Forty-One Governorates (1800) // Geoportal of the Russian Geographical Society. (In Russian). URL: https://geoportal.rgo.ru/record/5976?ysclid=ml3movct4e527238652 (accessed: 12.06.2026).

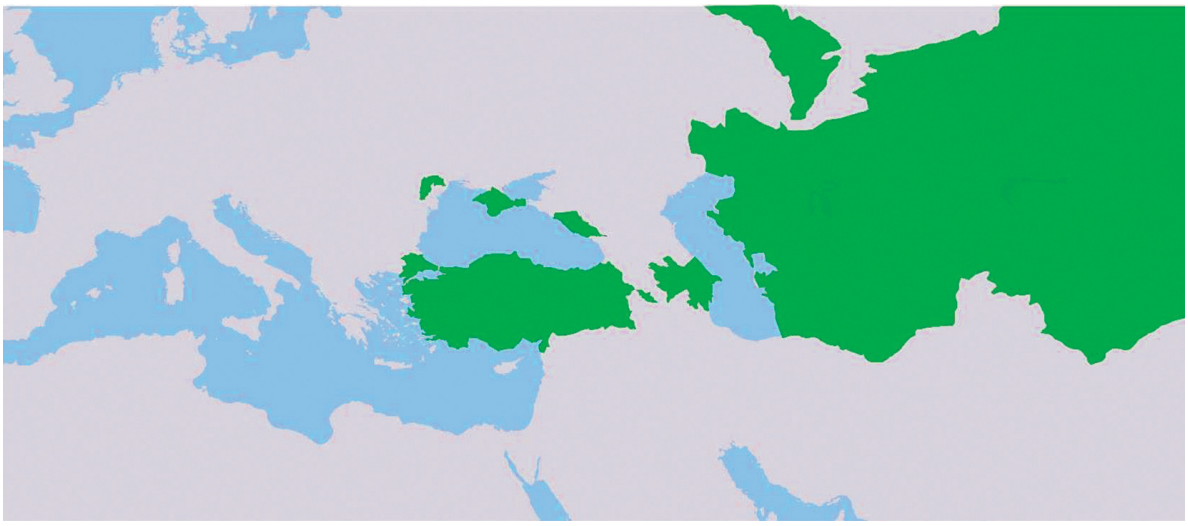


Figure 2. The Turkic/Turkish World Project

Source: compiled by A.A. Irkhin, A.R. Nikiforov, O.A. Moskalenko, and N.E. Demeshko.

In formulating its own Black Sea geopolitical strategy, Türkiye needs to bear in mind two potential extremes: the Black Sea could either become a 'Russian lake,' or a new Treaty of Sèvres could be signed. For the time being, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is maneuvering between these scenarios, aided by the 1936 Montreux Convention.

Extending the logic of V.M. Molotov's 1945 metaphor—in which he stated that there was a desire to "hold the Soviet Union by the throat using Turkish hands" in the Black Sea Straits (at a time when the USSR was seeking a base in Tripolitania[3] to secure at least some presence in the Mediterranean)—one could say that just a couple of years later, "hands closed around the Turks' throats as well," when Greece acquired Kastellorizo and other disputed islands in the Aegean Sea in 1947. Thus, the United States and Great Britain implemented a system of dual containment targeting both their Russian adversaries and their Turkish allies.

Currently, the leaders of Western civilization, Great Britain and the United States, are systematically signaling an intent to revise the 1936 Montreux Convention (Moskalenko et al., 2023), even though the latter is not a signatory to the document. Reflecting on why Great Britain and France were compelled in 1936 to abandon the open regime for the Black Sea Straits, established at the Lausanne Conference and highly advantageous to them, in favor of the current regime (which grants advantages to Black Sea powers over non-regional ones) brings to mind the foreign policy pursued by Italy in the first half of the 20th century, prior to its defeat in World War II.

In 1923, the Dodecanese Islands passed to Italy, with the largest among them—Kastellorizo—becoming an "outpost of Europe in the East." However, the islands, which Italy never fully developed, came under Greek sovereignty in 1947 (Nesterova, 2018, pp. 271–272). The very scenario Türkiye had managed to avoid following the Treaty of Lausanne ultimately came to pass—orchestrated by the United States and Great Britain, Türkiye's own allies. It was during the 1920s and 1940s that Italian geopolitics articulated the concept of "the Mediterranean for Mediterranean powers": the revival of a Greater Mediterranean space under Italian aegis was predicated on the idea of economic unity, encompassing states across Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East. As M.A. Shepelev notes, the slogan "The Mediterranean for Mediterranean peoples"—voiced during the struggle against the British—signaled geopolitical processes that ultimately served the interests of the Soviet Union. One

[3] Alekseev A. Stalin's African Game // Kommersant. October 3, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4518596 (accessed: 08.12.2024).

vulnerable regional position was the regime governing the Black Sea Straits, established at the 1923 Lausanne Peace Conference (Shepelev, 2017). Thus, the Montreux Convention of July 20, 1936, which codified a new regime for the Black Sea Straits,[4] served as an instrument of British geopolitical counter-strategy aimed at cutting Italy off from the Black Sea region. However, at the present stage, it is precisely the 1936 Montreux Convention that constrains Anglo-American expansion deep into the continent—via the Straits, Crimea, and Transcaucasia—toward Central Asia.

Conclusion

The geopolitical issues surrounding the development of the Black Sea—Eastern Mediterranean region are of paramount importance to the region's two major powers—Russia and Türkiye, and attract the keen interest from numerous other regional and non-regional actors. A landscape saturated with military-political tensions, compounded by the region's abundant resources and immense transit potential, creates a pivotal global arena prone to intense conflict. The 12-day Iran—Israel conflict of June 2025 and the Iran—US—Israel conflict of 2026 demonstrated the depth of these contradictions and the risk of a regional war escalating into a global one. This region serves as a crossroads for both established and emerging global trade routes. The competition over the planning and implementation of these routes, alongside deep-seated historical and geopolitical rifts, is driven by long-standing rivalries between Arabs and Jews, Turks and Arabs, Persians and Jews, Persians and Arabs, Russians and Turks, Azerbaijanis and Armenians, and others. For a long time, the region was shaped by British colonial policies that sought to balance and pit these rival groups against one another; however, the US intervention in Iraq in the early 21st century disrupted this logic of external control, exposing rifts within the alliance between Türkiye and the United States. A consequence of the US dismantling the British-established regional balance was the rise of Iran.

A dual-layered governance structure involving global and regional powers has emerged, shaped by Western "containment" strategies directed at Russia and "dual containment" strategies affecting the allies of the US and the UK. For the latter, this region represents a sphere of traditional geopolitical interest.

The internal governance of the region rests with regional powers. Through a mix of conflict and cooperation over several centuries, they have shaped a fluid and highly dynamic balance of power between Russia and Türkiye. For both Türkiye and Russia, the Black Sea and the Straits represent a source of threats, stemming from leading Western powers over the past few centuries, as well as opportunities for access to and influence over global maritime trade. For the modern Russian Federation, this region is also significant in the context of its foreign policy's "African vector," a sphere where Türkiye is likewise actively expanding. While Russian-Turkish relations are characterized by fierce competition in many areas, the desire of external actors to maintain an active presence in these same regions compels Moscow and Ankara to seek various forms of compromise and coexistence. Novorossiya, as a geoeconomic project, signifies Russia's return to the Mediterranean and, subsequently, to the World Ocean. For Türkiye, the concepts of the 'Turkic World' and the "Blue Homeland" represent an attempt to secure strategic Eurasian depth and resource access, thereby breaking free from the Western "containment" system imposed on its allies in the Black Sea and Straits region. Within this largely economic logic, Russia and Türkiye find themselves hemmed in by the geopolitical designs of major Western maritime powers—designs that exploit historical and geographical rifts between Russians and Turks (aiming to "hold the Russians by the throat in the Turkish Straits using Turkish hands") and between Greeks and Turks in the Dodecanese Islands, which block Türkiye's free access to the Mediterranean and the World Ocean. It is precisely this logic of the "dual containment" of Türkiye and Russia by the architects of Western geopolitics, combined with an understanding of these mechanisms in Ankara and Moscow and the

[4] For further details, see: (Moskalenko et al., 2023).

national orientation of their elites—that allows the two powers to merge these regions into a single geopolitical space, aiming for a breakthrough into the World Ocean and a fair share of global resources. The alternative scenario entails a clash between the two major regional powers, Russia and Türkiye, amidst escalating multilateral competition in the Black Sea and Straits region, an outcome that would primarily benefit Türkiye's Western allies. However, subsequently—depending on the outcome of this confrontation—the West will face the question of weakening the Turkish Republic itself, while Ankara will face the threat of a new Treaty of Sèvres.

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