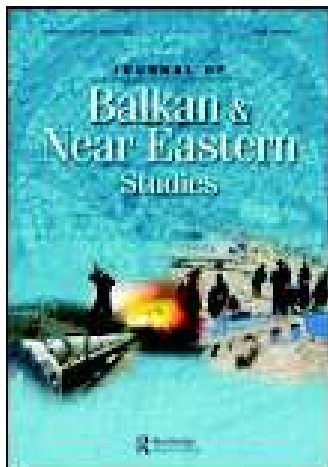


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Continuities and Ruptures: Tracking the US Interests in the Black Sea Area in the Context of the 'Pivot to Asia'

Sergei Konoplyov and Igor Delanoë

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the USA has become one of the main actors on the Black Sea stage. Whereas energy has been the key driver of Washington's involvement in the region since the end of the 1990s, the US agenda has broadened to include security issues and democratization after the 9/11 attacks. Today, in the context of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the 'pivot to Asia', the US influence in the Black Sea is retrenching. However, despite a seeming waning interest, Washington's involvement in the region is likely to remain driven by energy security considerations as well as by the deployment of NATO's Ballistic Missile Defense.

Introduction

The Black Sea lies at the crossroads of several geographical regions: Transcaucasia, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor. As a strategic intersection connecting the Middle East, Eurasia and Europe, the Black Sea appears to be one of the world's critical crossroads.¹ Defining the Black Sea region is not easy. Depending on what countries are taken into consideration, the Black Sea region could be considered as the territory corresponding to the six maritime countries around the *Pontus Euxinus*, or one could also consider the area delimited by the only regional organization which gathers all the neighbouring stakeholders, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).² However, according to the European Commission, the Black Sea region encompasses 10 countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.³ These definitions nonetheless do not provide an accurate sense of the Black Sea as a region, in the sense that the countries considered do not share 'self-conscious projects for crafting a sense of belonging to a broad community based on territorial proximity, common domestic policies, or cooperation in foreign policy'.⁴ In other words, the geographical proximity of the Black Sea states does not compensate for the weakness of their political and economic interdependence as well as their cultural heterogeneity.⁵ Moreover, other foreign or local actors, such as NATO, the European Union (EU) and the USA, should be taken into consideration since they exert influence on Black Sea

dynamics, thus shaping relations between local stakeholders. As for the USA, Washington's policy regarding the Black Sea area during the 2000s was centred on three pillars: energy, security and democracy. The aim was to turn the Black Sea into a reliable conduit of energy diversification, security and freedom between Europe and the Middle East and Central Asia.⁶ Since 2008 and the election of President Obama, the Black Sea seems to have been de-prioritized by the US administration which is focused on the withdrawal from Afghanistan and on the 'pivot to Asia'. However, despite a seeming waning interest, the Black Sea remains involved in the security agenda of the USA: the region continues to be the back door to the Caspian Sea and its hydrocarbon resources, it is a hub for the pull-out from Afghanistan and an outpost for the post-withdrawal period as well as a centrepiece of the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) architecture.

From the Clinton to the Bush Administration: Toward a Growing Interest in the Black Sea

If the access to natural resources seems to have first attracted the USA to the Black Sea area during the 1990s, one could also consider more widely the expansion of Washington's influence in the Black Sea in the late 1990s as the next step after Central Europe and the Balkans. The irruption and the extension of US influence to the Black Sea area in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s was sustained by two main dynamics: securing access to the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian basin and creating a secure corridor allowing the projection of influence and forces toward Central Asia and the Middle East through the Black Sea. Washington's growing influence was later sustained by the War on Terror triggered after 9/11, NATO expansion and the wave of democratization in the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, with the objective to anchor the Black Sea to the West by turning the Newly Independent States (NIS) into reliable partners.

New Sources of Energy

Energy remains one of the main drivers of Washington's foreign policy as it seeks to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of the energy resources for its own consumption, but furthermore, for its European partners. As a provider for economic stability, energy security became a high priority for the USA and the EU economies during the past decades.⁷ Whereas President Clinton's first term was mainly focused on ensuring stability in Russia; during his second term, the US administration developed an energy policy for the Caucasus and the eastern part of the Caspian basin. The concept of an 'East–West corridor' for oil and gas supplies emerged and the opening of this region corresponded in the early 1990s to rising US commercial interests. However, the focus on the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian and the objective to reshape the regional energy map by bypassing Russia precluded the creation of any comprehensive Black Sea policy.⁸ In 1999, the Silk Road Strategy Act was voted by Congress in order to support US involvement, enabling Washington to

enhance its foreign economic and military assistance to the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The first Bush administration started with similar priorities as its predecessor, and in May 2001, then Vice President Dick Cheney commissioned a policy review that was expected to produce recommendations to enhance the US role in the region. As the main corridor to access and secure the hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian basin, the Black Sea and the Caucasus with mainly Georgia and Azerbaijan, became a priority for the USA, which sought to diversify energy routes. Furthermore, Caspian resources appeared as strategic, in the context of growing energy competition; they would offer gas and oil supplies from non-OPEC, non-Persian Gulf and non-Russian reserves, thus increasing diversification and energy security for the European market.⁹ Turkey, as a NATO partner, was also seen as an energy hub and a key player for Washington's influence in the region. In that regard, the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, operational since 2005, may be considered as an achievement by the USA for diversification of the energy supply routes. Moreover, Washington focused its strategy on bypassing Russia to diminish its influence on former Caspian and Black Sea Soviet republics. However, the EU preferred interdependence with Russia, and this difference undermined to some extent Washington's projects in diversifying pipelines.

The War on Terror and the Expansion of the US Security Agenda to the Black Sea

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 affected Washington's priorities and interest for the Black Sea, and gave an impetus to the US involvement in the area, which was seen as a platform for influence and power projection for the War on Terror. The area began to be perceived not only as the back door to Central Asia, but also as the back door to the 'Wider Middle East' or to the 'Broader Middle East and North Africa' (BMENA).¹⁰ As a nexus to Central Asia and the Middle East, the strategic relevance of the Black Sea was enhanced whereas the Bush administration de-prioritized the Caspian basin. While under the Clinton administration, the US Special Advisor for Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy reported directly to the President; under the first Bush administration, he reported to the Secretary of State. Moreover, his office was merged with the office of the Special Envoy for Eurasian Security, which meant that there was no more specific focus on this area. In fact, the American security agenda in the Black Sea was not restricted to the War on Terror, but was soon widened to combating proliferation, organized crime and various illegal trafficking activities that aided and financed international terrorism.

NATO Extension to Black Sea States

The extension of the North Atlantic Alliance to Black Sea countries found its relevance in the context of the War on Terror. The integration of some of the Black Sea states to Euro-Atlantic security structures was supposed to provide stability while enhancing NATO's capacities of intervention. Bulgaria and Romania became credible candidates for joining NATO and allies for anti-terror operations while being part of

Donald Rumsfeld's concept of 'New Europe'. Whereas the process which led to Bulgarian and Romanian membership in 2004 was shortened, with regard to Ukraine, Washington lost at the same time a historical opportunity to offer NATO membership to Kiev. As for Georgia, possible NATO membership was raised in September 2006, when an intensified dialogue was launched on reforms required to join the Alliance.¹¹ The scope of cooperation covered by NATO–Georgia relations remains broad: security cooperation, defence and security sector reform, civil emergency planning, science and environment and public information. Tbilisi's involvement in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) allowed Georgian troops to operate in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo (1999–2008), as well as being deployed in Iraq and in Afghanistan (in Helmand Province). With 1500 military personnel operating in Afghanistan, Georgia is today one of the largest non-NATO contributors per capita to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).¹² However, during the NATO Bucharest Summit of April 2008, both Kiev and Tbilisi were not granted the Membership Action Plan (MAP—a tailor-made support programme for countries wishing to join the Alliance). While Tbilisi appeared deeply disappointed by the outcomes of this summit, Kiev was less concerned since there was no massive public support in Ukraine for joining NATO. The perspective of Georgian and Ukrainian membership raised a set of issues regarding the readiness of the Alliance to accept new members and to deal with frozen conflicts, potential conflicts (Crimea) or declared conflicts (South-Ossetia, Abkhazia), on the territory of new members, as well as challenging Russia in what Moscow considers as its 'sphere of influence'.

Democratization and the Colour Revolutions

Democratization as a driver of US involvement in the Black Sea appeared before 9/11. The promotion of initiatives related to the democratic development of the NIS was split between the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department.¹³ However, in 1996–97, then Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott delivered a series of speeches in which he outlined strengthening political and economic reforms as one of the US priorities in the NIS. This objective displayed Washington's strong belief that the USA will benefit from promoting peace and democracy in the NIS. Sustaining civil society institutions and promoting democracy through funding and technical assistance in Black Sea states was furthermore seen as a way to consolidate volatile and weak states and to prevent potential wars between them.¹⁴ The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the rise of international terrorism further enhanced the need to strengthen weak states and fortify central authority in Black Sea states to deter them from becoming safe havens for terrorist groups. Democratic transformation became the backbone of US foreign policy, and the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) as well as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) were seen as results of Washington's investment in democracy support. In the meantime, the aim was also to prevent the re-emergence of Moscow as the main regional hegemon that would be able to undermine US interests and influence, especially regarding energy security.¹⁵ Moreover, the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were seen as

iconic and as a strong path toward further integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

The First Obama Term: The Black Sea De-prioritized

The year 2008 represents a turning point at many levels in Washington's involvement in the Black Sea, and more widely, in the relations between the Euro-Atlantic community and the Black Sea stage. The replacement of Donald Rumsfeld by Robert Gates in 2006 as the Secretary of Defense had nevertheless initiated a shift in the US policy toward the Black Sea. However, President Obama's election confirmed the shift in US foreign policy since the newly elected president decided to put the relations with the Arabs at the top of his policy agenda. President Obama also began his tenure with a security agenda focused on the withdrawal from Iraq and from Afghanistan as well as rebuilding confidence with Moscow.

The Failure of the 'Colour Revolutions'

The eastern shore of the Black Sea has been experiencing a rise in authoritarian practices since the end of the 2000s.¹⁶ If Ukraine and Georgia were promising candidates to democratic breakthroughs, there has been a deep disillusion since the end of the past decade regarding domestic developments. Democratic transition in both countries could be considered as frozen if not regressing, although a distinction must be made between the Georgian context and the Ukrainian one.

Although he was elected president in 2005 as the leader of the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yushchenko was not able to sustainably implement democratic changes in Ukraine. After he lost the legislative elections of 2006, his main opponent and past challenger for the presidential election, Viktor Yanukovich, became Prime Minister. However, the turning point remains his election as President of Ukraine in 2010. As a first step, Viktor Yanukovich decided to improve relations with Moscow, which implied a deal on the issue of the Russian Black Sea fleet stationed in Ukraine. On 21 April 2010, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich signed the Kharkov Agreement. According to the text, the lease for the Russian Black Sea Fleet was extended from 2017 to 2042, with an option for another five years. In return, Ukraine was to benefit from discounts on gas imports worth up to \$40 billion under current contracts that expire in 2019.¹⁷ Kiev carried on its relations with NATO during the second half of the 2000s, especially in the naval realm. In 2007, the first Ukrainian ship, the corvette URS *Ternopil*, was deployed in support of Operation Active Endeavour, a deployment that has since been renewed annually. Kiev granted the Alliance a land transit right for the supply of ISAF in 2009; however, in February 2010, President Viktor Yanukovich clearly stated that he intended to continue cooperation with NATO, while taking the issue of NATO membership off the agenda.¹⁸ The same month, President Obama called President Yanukovich and outlined the main drivers of US policy toward Ukraine as 'expanding democracy and prosperity, protecting security and territorial integrity, strengthening the rule of law, promoting non-proliferation, and supporting reform

in Ukraine's economic and energy sectors.¹⁹ Kiev's intention to improve ties with Moscow received the support of Washington as stated by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she visited Kiev in July 2010.²⁰ Yet, Washington has also expressed concerns about political developments: in October 2011, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko 'was convicted of abuse of power arising out of her role in signing a natural gas supply agreement with Russia and sentenced to seven years in prison.'²¹ Tymoshenko's custody was interpreted as an attempt to eliminate a potential challenger a few months before the parliamentary elections of October 2012 that were considered by both Washington and Brussels as not meeting democratic standards. The State Department considered these elections as a 'step backward' and as a negative signal coming from the Ukrainian political stage. By the end of President Obama's first term, the 'passion', which existed during most of the 2000s in US–Ukrainian relations, was downgraded.²²

In Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili was re-elected President in January 2008 through elections which, while being considered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as meeting democratic standards, were nevertheless characterized by irregularities.²³ Yet, Georgia's step back from democratic progress recorded in the mid-2000s started in 2007. Opposition parties called for further systemic reforms, and growing tensions with the government led to demonstrations in Tbilisi in November 2007. Washington expressed deep concern in the Georgian government's use of excessive force to break up the protests.²⁴ In May 2010, a constitutional commission amended the constitution and as a result, the powers of the president were slightly reduced while those of the prime minister were augmented.²⁵ Although Tbilisi was not granted MAP during the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, Georgia and NATO increased their ties during President Obama's first term. In August 2010, bilateral relations were enhanced through the development of an effective military cooperation with the creation of a military committee, and in October, a NATO Liaison Office was inaugurated in Tbilisi. The NATO–Georgia Commission meeting held in Brussels in May 2012 underscored the Alliance's commitment to strengthen support for civil service reform and democratization efforts.²⁶ Washington and Tbilisi signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership in January 2009 which aims at strengthening US support for sovereignty and independence, and underscores perspectives for Georgia's NATO membership.²⁷ In October 2013, Giorgi Margvelashvili became the country's new President, and in late November, Irakli Garibashvili was appointed Prime Minister. Although NATO's Secretary-General stated in October 2013 that Georgia would not accede to the Alliance in 2014, both sides continued to pursue their bilateral cooperation after the elections.²⁸ In February 2014, NATO's Military Committee conducted its first ever visit to Georgia and acknowledged progress made by Tbilisi in defence reforms.²⁹ According to Garibashvili, Georgia hopes to be granted MAP during the next NATO summit in September 2014.³⁰ While this perspective remains very unlikely, Tbilisi is at least expected to contribute to the NATO Response Force in 2015.

Rebuilding Relations with Russia: From August 2008 to the Reset

Rebuilding confidence and constructive relations with Russia became one of the priorities of the Obama administration through the ‘Reset’ although it was not a top-level objective of US foreign policy. Meanwhile, the August 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict remains a milestone since it has recast the security paradigm in the area, and confirmed the inefficiency of regional structures to prevent, diffuse and settle the conflict. As Oksana Antonenko has written, ‘the war and its aftermath have clearly demonstrated that no regional security in the Black Sea is possible against Russia or even without Russia.’³¹ Moreover, it indicated that Moscow will not hesitate to use military force when it comes to its interests and that the conventional use of force remains a policy option in the area.³² Engaging Russia became a two-level objective for the new administration. First, at the regional level, Washington aimed at reducing tensions and instability. Improved ties with Russia in the Black Sea would improve, at the sub-regional level, the security of energy infrastructures in the Caucasus, especially those crossing Georgia.³³ At a global level, the USA needed better ties with Moscow to benefit from its support on key international issues such as Iran’s nuclear programme and arms control. Washington called for a ‘Reset’ in bilateral relations with Moscow, and prospects for improved USA–Russia relations came at a time when the perspective for further NATO enlargement was put on the back burner, at least for the foreseeable future.³⁴ During President Obama’s first term, the USA did not seek to challenge Moscow openly in what Russia considers as its ‘sphere of privileged interest’, namely, Ukraine and Georgia. Yet, Washington’s security agenda in the Black Sea area remained shaped by drivers which have conflicted with, even challenged, Moscow’s interests: the anti-ballistic missile shield and ongoing measures to diversify Europe’s energy supply routes.

Although USA–Russia relations have improved globally since 2008 in contrast to the years of the Bush administrations, the ‘Reset’ did not provide the expected results. Bilateral relations between the two sides remain tense despite progress on key global issues such as Afghanistan. Unlike the Bush administration, the Obama administration focused on a shift toward the Caspian basin energy issues while strengthening its position on the western shore of the Black Sea. One of the top priority issues of US foreign policy, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the commitment to protect European allies from a potential ballistic missile threat have shaped Washington’s stance on the Black Sea stage. On the eastern shore of the *Pontus Euxinus*, Washington’s pressure has paradoxically decreased since the USA tried not to challenge Moscow’s influence following the August 2008 conflict.

The Second Obama Term: America’s Retrenchment on the Black Sea Stage

Washington’s foreign policy appears today to be less driven by the promotion of democracy than it used to be during the past decade, a shift that has affected its involvement in the Black Sea. The ‘pivot to Asia’ illustrates the prioritization of the US interests eastward, toward hot topical issues such as Iran and East Asia. Furthermore, the ‘pivot to Asia’ takes place in a difficult economic context tied to the

global economic crisis: Washington had to make a choice and to prioritize its foreign policy issues. As a consequence, energy and security issues have arisen as the two main priorities of Washington's involvement on the Black Sea stage. While energy remains an area of direct investment, by 'leading from behind', the USA has used NATO and the EU as channels of influence with mitigated outcomes.

The Political Dimension of Energy Competition

Maintaining diverse and secure supplies to European allies remains an extremely important priority. Although the shale gas revolution has turned the USA into a gas exporter, it should not impact on Washington's involvement in the Black Sea and the Caspian where American interests are more geopolitical. The presence of NATO allies, the partnership with Turkey and the need to support energy security for the EU should keep the USA involved in the area.

The stability of the transit route through the Caucasus remains a concern for the USA, especially with regard to the protracted conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. Washington approaches its settlement through the Minsk Group and bilateral ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. This conflict is nevertheless not considered through a Black Sea prism since the BSEC, as the only broad regional organization, is not robust enough and not an appropriate forum to host peace talks. In June 2013, the Azeri Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov visited Washington and met with Secretary of State John Kerry. During their meeting, they raised a set of common issues such as the key role of Azerbaijan in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), the Southern Corridor, as well as the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh frozen conflict.³⁵ Indeed, pipelines connecting the Caspian Sea to Europe have to snake around Armenia because of this protracted conflict.

The USA has supported the development of domestic gas production, which would ease the Black Sea states' dependence on Russian supplies. In late 2013, Ukraine held talks on a production-sharing agreement (PSA) with an ExxonMobil-led consortium to exploit the Skifska gas field off the western coast of the Black Sea. However, in late January 2014, Kiev postponed the agreement for a later date.³⁶ In the meantime, Kiev and Baku were prospecting possibilities to create a liquefied natural gas (LNG) supply route via Georgia. This ambitious and costly project would require building an LNG plant in the Georgian port of Batumi in order to liquefy the gas, and another one in Ukraine's port of Yuzhny to gasify it.³⁷ The USA also backed the development of Ukrainian shale gas fields since the country is believed to have Europe's third-largest reserves with recoverable reserves assessed by the US Energy Information Administration at 1.18 trillion cubic meters. In January 2013, Kiev signed with Royal Dutch Shell a PSA on the Yuzivska field located in the east, while in November 2013 it signed a deal with Chevron on the Oleska field in western Ukraine.³⁸ However, these are long-term projects that could later open the path for further energy cooperation between the Black Sea area and the Baltics, through the old 'Varyags to the Greeks' trade route.³⁹

'Leading from Behind': NATO and the EU as US Channels of Influence

The USA has retrenched behind NATO in Romania, where the BMD is being built, and to a lesser extent in Georgia. In Ukraine, where US involvement relies mainly on geopolitical drivers, the EU appears to be the main channel of American involvement, resulting, however, in few constructive outcomes.

Washington has allowed the EU to take the lead in Ukraine, and decided to support whatever policy Brussels would undertake. Indeed, NATO enlargement to Ukraine seems frozen for the foreseeable future, since this perspective did not benefit from much support within the Alliance itself and in Ukraine proper. President Yanukovich rejected MAP in 2010, and has sought to improve ties with Russia since then. During the last years of the 2000s, Moscow had regularly stated that Ukraine's membership to NATO was seen as a direct threat and that it would be compelled to react;⁴⁰ a 'red line' which NATO member states were not ready to cross, and which prevented the Alliance from adopting a comprehensive and robust stance regarding Ukraine's membership. While cooperating with Kiev on nuclear non-proliferation and energy issues, the first Obama administration voiced serious concerns about democratic developments, especially regarding the October 2012 parliamentary elections.⁴¹ With the prospects for NATO integration fading, Kiev's best chance to get closer to the Euro-Atlantic community was some sort of enhanced integration with the EU. However, even this prospect has turned out to be compromised following Kiev's decision to suspend talks with Brussels on a Ukraine–EU agreement in November 2013 and the ensuing political crisis in the country. Beyond decisive economic and internal political factors, President Yanukovich's decision is also explained by the lack of support from the USA, which had previously fuelled the initial reluctance of some of the EU members to support a rapprochement with Kiev. Ukraine's decision highlights the lack of a strategic vision by the EU with regard to its neighbourhood, and the Union's attractiveness should not be taken for granted anymore. Kiev's decision follows Armenia's choice for the Russian-led Customs Union in September 2013, and further illustrates the failure, if not the collapse, of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the Black Sea area. Conflicting and overlapping EU policies (EaP, Black Sea Synergy) as well as a tendency to isolate Russia explain Brussels' inability to deal with the Black Sea region.

Both Georgia and Moldova initialled an Association Agreement with the EU during the November 2013 Vilnius Summit. In Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili's tenure (October 2012–November 2013) as Prime Minister raised concerns in the USA after his government began arresting officials who had served in the previous Saakashvili government.⁴² In November 2013, new elections brought to power Giorgi Margvelashvili as President and then Irakli Garibashvili as Prime Minister. Saakashvili's withdrawal from the Georgian political landscape could open the path to normalized relations with Moscow. The new Georgian government should also seek to establish relations with Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, an endeavour already backed by the USA as stated in December 2013 by Victoria Nuland, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.⁴³ Constrained by the 2014 pull-out from Afghanistan, the USA seems to have engaged Moscow in the

eastern shore's security system, thus not challenging Russia's interests in the Caucasus, in order to maintain stability in the Southern Gas Corridor.

On the other hand, the BMD appears to be the most difficult issue in USA–Russia relations. Romania plays a key role in the NATO missile defence architecture as it hosts elements of the second phase of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA). Interceptor missiles are scheduled to be deployed in the Deveselu airbase in southern Romania by 2015 while work to overhaul the base has been underway since October 2013.⁴⁴ However, following the November 2013 agreement on Iran's nuclear programme, relations between Washington and Teheran might improve in the midterm. This could potentially question the *raison d'être* of the BMD which is aimed at preventing any potential missile attacks, mainly from Iran, against Europe. In the context of the development of the BMD, Turkey also plays a key role: Ankara accepted in September 2011 to host on its soil an AN/TPY-2 radar, as a part of the European BMD.⁴⁵ Romania also contributes to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as a transit hub for American troops. In October 2013, Washington and Bucharest signed a bilateral agreement that would allow the USA to switch its flight operations from Kyrgyzstan's Manas airbase to Romania. Washington has been allowed to use the Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase as well as the nearby port of Constanta in order to withdraw its 52,000 troops from Afghanistan.⁴⁶ The subsequent increase in NATO naval activity around Constanta has made Ankara's involvement essential for the USA, since Turkey has shown in the past reluctance to any unilateral increase of US naval activity in the Black Sea. The revitalization of the US–Turkish partnership has been more broadly a part of the Obama administration's effort to build a new approach to relationships with countries in the Middle East.⁴⁷ Washington sees Ankara as a key partner to deal with Middle Eastern issues as well as with the EU, as a key economic actor and an energy hub, and as a NATO member state.⁴⁸ Moreover, there are ongoing outstanding tensions between Turkey and its neighbourhood, in particular with Greece, Cyprus and Armenia, while the country has borders with sensitive actors such as Syria, Iraq and Iran. NATO appears to be the key American driver on the western shore of the Black Sea. The Alliance has furthermore already planned to hold its next exercise, Trident Juncture, in Southern Europe in 2015. This exercise should be six to seven times bigger than Steadfast Jazz which was held in early November 2013 in Poland and in the Baltic states, with the involvement of 6000 NATO personnel as well as military from Ukraine, Sweden and Finland. Yet, the USA only sent 300 personnel. Trident Juncture's aim is to preserve Afghanistan-era cooperation between member states through the Connected Forces Initiative (CFI).⁴⁹

Conclusion

Following the US withdrawal from Iraq and the forthcoming pull-out from Afghanistan, the 'pivot to Asia' is likely to impact Washington's involvement in the Black Sea area. Washington needs to maintain constructive relations with Moscow to deal with major international security issues such as arms control, Afghanistan, Iran or stability in the Middle East. In that regard, the USA does not have any interest in challenging Russia in its so-called sphere of 'privileged interests'. Although

supporting democratization in the region is not the priority it used to be during most of the 2000s, Washington still maintains a presence through NATO and energy security remains a key driver of its involvement in the area despite the ongoing shale gas revolution. Nevertheless, regional hegemony, namely, Russia and Turkey, have gained more influence and leverage in the Black Sea stage. Russia has already seized this opportunity, as Armenia's choice for the Russian-led Customs Union and recent developments in Ukraine have demonstrated. Turkey has claimed its sovereignty over the Eastern Mediterranean offshore gas reserves, reviving tensions with Cyprus. On the other hand, the EU has not been able to fill the strategic vacuum left by the waning American influence in the region as shown again by its inability to deal with the Ukrainian crisis.

Yet, one of Washington's best assets in the area remains Turkey. Ankara continues to be a major energy hub for Europe's energy security, and as a NATO member state, it is furthermore involved in the BMD. In addition, Turkey remains a key stakeholder in the Cypriot and Nagorno-Karabakh protracted conflicts. Solving the Cypriot frozen conflict and reconciling Israel and Turkey would unlock energy issues in the Levant, and enhance Ankara's role as an East–West energy corridor. Moreover, it could give a new impetus to the negotiations over the resolution of other Black Sea protracted conflicts, like the one in Nagorno-Karabakh. As for energy security, the exploitation of Ukrainian and Romanian shale gas reserves with the assistance of major European and American energy companies is likely to enhance Europe's energy independence in the long term. In Ukraine, the USA will closely work with the EU and Russia to settle the crisis and maintain Ukraine's mainland territorial integrity.

Today, in the context of the 'pivot to Asia', Washington's diplomacy in the Black Sea is reactive rather than proactive. The US retrenchment from the Black Sea stage should be acknowledged by the EU as an opportunity to take the lead and engage other stakeholders like Russia and Turkey, to solve security issues and transcend the traditional competitive 'zero sum game' approach that still characterizes the region today. Brussels should overhaul its EaP which has failed to meet expectations as demonstrated by both the Armenian and Ukrainian episodes, while enhancing its strategic role in the Black Sea before its soft power and attractiveness fades. Nevertheless, none of this would be possible without a key role for the USA.

Notes

- [1] Bruce Lawlor, 'The Black Sea: center of the nuclear black market', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 67(6), 2011, p. 73.
- [2] Eleven countries established BSEC in Istanbul in June 1992. Today, it numbers 12 member states, including Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine.
- [3] Quoted by Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, 'The "security paradoxes" of the Black Sea region', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 9(3), 2009, p. 237.
- [4] Charles King, 'Is the Black Sea a region?', in Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna Klymush-Tsintsadze (eds), *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building*, East West Institute, Armonk, NY, 2004, p. 16.

- [5] Baptiste Chatré and Stéphane Delory, 'The Black Sea area within the international system: the struggle for influence between the United States and Russia', in Ivan Ruxandra (ed.), *New Regionalism or No Regionalism? Emerging Regionalism in the Black Sea Area*, Ashgate, Burlington, VT, 2012, p. 52.
- [6] Zeyno Baran and Robert A. Smith, 'The energy dimension in American policy towards the Black Sea region', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 7(2), 2007, p. 266.
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