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Policy Brief

Black Sea Synergy: Adopting a Holistic Approach to Maritime Security

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Abstract

The Black Sea Region’s position on the intersection between Asia, Russia, Europe, and Asia Minor has given the area international importance. To assist local stakeholders in securing a sustainable and prosperous future for the region, the European Union has invested significant resources towards improving maritime security in the Black Sea. Black Sea Synergy, the EU’s flagship initiative for the region, has enhanced maritime security by addressing underlying drivers of maritime insecurity and supporting existing maritime law enforcement operations. To further improve maritime security, Black Sea Synergy’s bottom-up approach should be used to complement the harder security driven initiatives implemented by organizations like NATO. Successfully integrating Black Sea Synergy into an overall European Union Maritime Security Strategy for the region can help generate sustainable and efficient solutions to regional maritime security issues.

1. Introduction

The 2018 revised European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) [Action Plan](#), which applies globally, has created a more focused maritime security agenda for the EU. The action plan specifically mentions the need to streamline “the priorities of the Black Sea Synergy in a result-oriented approach” when promoting regional maritime collaboration. Since its introduction in 2007, Black Sea Synergy has been the European Union’s (EU) flagship initiative in the Black Sea. Although focused primarily on socio-economic development, environmental conservation, and cultural and educational projects, the initiative also has considerable impact on maritime security. Black Sea Synergy complements the harder security measures implemented by local, regional, and multilateral initiatives by assisting local stakeholders in addressing underlying mechanisms that drive insecurity. By taking the initiative into consideration when designing regional security architectures in the Black Sea, policy makers can increase the chances of generating sustainable solutions to maritime security issues.

1.1 Maritime Security Threats

Both state and non-state actors create maritime security threats that undermine the stability of Black Sea littoral states and the European Union (EU) at large. The Black Sea’s location at the confluence of Russia, Europe, and Asia Minor, has given the area significant economic and geostrategic importance as a corridor for commerce and energy. The combined Black Sea coastal countries’ [merchant fleet](#) already

consisted of 51.4 million deadweight tonnage (dwt), or roughly 4.3% of the global total, by 2015. In the energy sector, [BlueStream](#) and the new [TurkStream](#) will transit a combined 30 billion cubic meters of gas across the Black Sea annually. Likewise, [Last year’s discovery](#) of 405 bcm of gas in the Black Sea’s Sakarya gas field, the largest offshore gas find of 2020, makes the region a contender for the [world’s largest](#) source of new natural oil and gas resources. The considerable amounts of traffic along these Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) have attracted the attention of both non-state and state actors.

Non-state actors exploit inadequate port security and maritime law enforcement to conceal illicit goods within cargo and circumvent inspections. Illicit maritime activities, including drug smuggling, arms trafficking, mixed maritime migration, nuclear proliferation, and illegal, unreported, and unregistered (IUU) fishing, detrimentally affect regional security and prosperity. For example, as the leading overdose drug in the EU according to the latest [European Drug Report Report](#), the presence of [heroin smuggling](#) networks across the Black Sea has ramifications throughout Europe. As both a catalyst and a byproduct of weak rule of law and poor coastal welfare, illicit maritime activities form a vicious self-reinforcing cycle with unstable governments. Since state-sponsored gray-zone tactics by regional actors like Russia exploit unstable governments, the subversive presence of these non-traditional security threats also impacts regional geopolitics.

The economic opportunities presented by the region has enhanced the Black Sea’s geostrategic significance for state-actors like Russia. The risk of

military escalation and Russia's proven willingness to achieve political objectives through military means threatens the economic and political security of littoral nations. Informal economic [blockades](#), [occupation](#) of off-shore oil rigs, and a reliance on [proxy forces](#) demonstrate Russian proclivity towards gray-zone tactics that can escalate into outright hybrid warfare. Understanding how EU initiatives like Black Sea Synergy can enhance maritime security in the face of malign activities by state and non-state actors can lead to more efficient resource allocation and effective project coordination.

2. How Does Black Sea Synergy Enhance Maritime Security?

The induction of Romania and Bulgaria into the EU gave the EU a littoral presence along the Black Sea. In coordination with the wider Eastern Partnership (EaP), Black Sea Synergy became the EU's primary mechanism for enhancing prosperity and connectivity along its new Eastern frontier in the Black Sea basin. The European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI), [which finances](#) Black Sea Synergy, provides grants for 92 percent of the costs associated with the projects, while national governments finance the remaining eight percent. For the period of [2014 to 2021](#), Black Sea Synergy was granted a budget of 49 million euro by the ENI. The funds are used to promote a regional, bottom-up approach that emphasizes the role of local stakeholders in implementing projects. Since its introduction into the region, the initiative has

indirectly and directly addressed threats to maritime security.

2.1 Addressing Underlying Drivers of Maritime Insecurity

By helping local stakeholders address weak rule of law and poor coastal welfare, Black Sea Synergy can contribute to preventing illicit maritime activities and unstable governments from perpetuating a vicious self-reinforcing cycle. As the coastal welfare increases, non-state actors become less incentivized to participate and facilitate illicit activity. Without access to recruits, supplies, and transit hubs, illicit maritime actors become increasingly vulnerable to law enforcement operations. Likewise, strong rule of law could deter [state actors](#) from attempting to increase their coastal influence and non-state actors from expanding their illicit maritime operations. Black Sea Synergy has helped regional governments develop stronger infrastructure and economies through projects ranging from local to regional levels.

Black Sea Synergy projects improve coastal welfare by contributing to the development of important maritime sectors like fisheries. Estimates on the value of annual Black Sea fish catches from 2006 to 2010 were placed at [\\$364 million](#). Although fisheries currently contribute only a small percentage to the Gross Domestic Product in coastal territories around the Black Sea, predictive modeling has projected an average increase in economic yields as high as [11 percent](#) if fish stocks recover. To help address IUU fishing and further develop the fishery sector, Black Sea Synergy organized the Black Sea fisheries and

aquaculture conference, which led to the signing of the [Sofia Ministerial Declaration](#). The declaration created renewed commitment and encouraged members to develop a framework to jointly address issues around sustainability in fisheries and aquaculture in the Black Sea.

To enhance natural resilience against maritime security threats, Black Sea Synergy also supports rule of law programs. Corruption has proven particularly problematic in the Black Sea Basin, with all countries scoring below the average for Western Europe and the European Union according to the 2020 [Corruptions Perceptions Index](#). Under the auspices of Black Sea Synergy, the Partnership for Good Governance received [36 million](#) from 2015 to 2018. As part of the partnership, programs promoting rule of law received funding to address corruption, money-laundering, and cybercrime. By strengthening economic and government resilience in coastal territories through local and regional programs, Black Sea Synergy addresses some of the underlying drivers of maritime insecurity.

2.2 Enhancing Maritime Law Enforcement Operations

Black Sea Synergy contributes more directly to maritime security by enhancing local maritime enforcement capacities and capabilities. The 2017 to 2021 [Black and Caspian Sea Project](#) (BCSEA) provides technical assistance for littoral countries in the maritime security sector, as well as maritime safety and protection of the marine environment. The project increases the capabilities of maritime law enforcement agencies in the Black Sea by providing

training to state inspectors and port officials, access to the CleanSeaNet satellite surveillance, and support in monitoring automatic ship identification systems datasets. Through specialized training and enhanced maritime domain awareness, the program assists Black Sea littoral states in identifying and proactively addressing maritime crimes.

Similarly, specialized EU agencies like the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA), also known as Frontex, work through Black Sea Synergy to improve maritime security in the basin. Frontex, with cooperation from Romanian and Bulgarian authorities, has been implementing a [Multipurpose Maritime Operation \(MMO\)](#) in the Black Sea. The MMO works to improve coast guard interoperability, equipment training, and domain awareness in order to react efficiently to maritime crimes like illegal migration and IUU fishing. The ability of Black Sea Synergy to coordinate stakeholders actions in the Black Sea enhances cooperation and stability in the maritime domain.

3. Policy Recommendations: A Holistic Approach to Maritime Security

Maritime security threats derive from a complex array of interconnected issue areas, including poor coastal welfare, weak rule of law, inadequate maritime law enforcement. Systematically addressing the underlying mechanisms that drive insecurity while simultaneously reinforcing law enforcement measures can contribute to creating

sustainable results. This requires a holistic approach that integrates Black Sea Synergy into a macro-level maritime security strategy for the basin, as well as the overall EU Maritime Security Strategy. The regional, bottom-up approach of Black Sea Synergy fulfills essential functions from a maritime security perspective that fall outside the purview of the security-oriented organizations like the North Atlantic Trade Organization (NATO). By designing future Black Sea Synergy projects in the context of wider EU-supported maritime security initiatives, the EU's impact on maritime security in the Black Sea can be magnified. Three priority areas that would benefit from an enhanced Black Sea Synergy's presence are outlined below.

Adopting a Whole-of-Government Approach

When implementing Black Sea Synergy projects, paying special attention to how they fit into a larger maritime security strategy can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of resource allocation. Black Sea Synergy could work to harmonize regulatory frameworks on maritime transport and safety in the Black Sea, for instance, potentially in coordination with the EU supported Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia ([TRACECA](#)) Programme. By creating unified agreements on safety protocols, it becomes harder for non-state actors to conceal illicit goods within large cargo shipments. These improvements to transportation would complement attempts by the EU member states and regional countries to enhance law enforcement capabilities [through initiatives](#) like the Black Sea Coast/Border Guard Cooperation Forum

and working groups like the 'Development of a common preventive system for early detection of illegal activities in the Black Sea'. The whole-of-government approach can generate long-term solutions for maritime security issues while making the most of limited capital and personnel.

Improving State of Affairs in Protracted Conflicts

Black Sea Synergy is uniquely positioned to enhance maritime security near protracted conflicts, where a more formal NATO or EU presence would be contentious. In protracted conflicts, poverty and inadequate governing systems make territories [vulnerable](#) to illicit operations conducted by criminal syndicates. Although resolving protracted conflicts would significantly help improve maritime security as well, the politically sensitive nature of breakaway territories makes reconciliation difficult. The bottom-up approach of Black Sea Synergy could prove instrumental in dealing with [security threats](#) emanating from these protracted conflicts, especially in the coastal breakaway territories like Abkhazia, by improving coastal welfare and rule of law. Likewise, engaging with local and regional levels of government can help build trust without overtly infringing on geopolitical spheres of influence.

Strengthening Energy Security

Black Sea Synergy can help address energy security issues, which in the Black Sea has contributed to increased tensions. The politicalization of transit routes, as underscored by the [decision](#) to turn off gas pipes through Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, stems in part from a strong reliance on hydrocarbons as an

energy source. A systematic approach to enhancing self-sufficiency in the energy sector through infrastructure development and decarbonization of sea transport can reduce dependency on hydrocarbons in the long-run. The [Black Sea Regional Transmission Network](#) project, with funding from the Neighborhood Investment Facility, set a successful precedent by taking steps to integrate wind power from the Black Sea Coast into the networks of littoral countries. By enhancing energy security and resilience in countries that are most vulnerable to foreign coercion, Black Sea Synergy can reduce political tensions and the accompanying risk of military escalation in the maritime domain.

While Black Sea Synergy has the ability to play an important role in enhancing maritime security, the initiative's inclusive approach also creates difficulties. In order to appease the significant number of stakeholders, for instance, Black Sea Synergy conferences can lead to vague agreements. Likewise, [limited access](#) to policy-making mechanisms by local communities can make implementation difficult. Although structural and administrative hurdles remain a source of friction, Black Sea Synergy can still leverage its unique approach and extensive regional support to improve security in the maritime domain.

4. Conclusion

Black Sea Synergy projects can contribute to improving maritime security both indirectly and directly. Addressing underlying drivers of non-traditional threats, like poor coastal welfare and weak rule of law, weakens support for illicit

operations. The cooperative, bottom-up approach favored by Black Sea Synergy complements other EU regional efforts, as well as the harder security driven initiatives implemented by NATO. By emphasizing this holistic approach to maritime security in the Black Sea, resilience to malign influence campaigns can be further enhanced in coastal territories. Adopting a macro-level maritime security strategy for the Black Sea and better integrating the Black Sea Synergy into the overall EU MSS could increase efficiency in resource allocation and could allow policy-makers to more readily develop sustainable solutions to both non-traditional and traditional maritime threats.



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