

BALANCE OF POWER AND REGIONAL COMPLEXITIES: NAVIGATING THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Abstract

This article elaborates on the theoretical framework of the security dilemma concept through the lenses of regionalism by applying it to the geopolitical dynamics of the Black Sea region. The overall purpose of this study is to examine the strategic perceptions of the major regional actors and their impact on Eastern European security architecture. It explains how the parties' behavior, indirectly involved in strategic competition and seeking to maximize their own security, unintentionally exacerbates regional tensions. Through empirical evidence and theoretical analysis, the research provides a deep understanding of the balance of power and the security challenges in this strategically significant area.

***Keywords:** NATO, Russia, security dilemma, Black Sea, war*

Introduction

The Black Sea region stands for one of the most essential crosspoints in the post-Cold War security architecture, whereas it qualifies for the strategic equation of the security dilemma. Security dilemmas have profoundly shaped the strategic interactions between NATO and Russia after Moscow invaded Ukraine, thus challenging the Alliance's strategic influence on the Balkans. As geopolitical tensions rise, the Black Sea becomes a crucial strategic theatre, impacting broader security dynamics in Europe. The purpose of this paper is to provide a nuanced understanding of the security dilemma in the Black Sea region. In this article, I examine the balance of power between NATO and Russia and test the assumption that the parties' efforts to increase each other's security inadvertently jeopardize the security of others, leading to a cycle of tensions. Examining empirical evidence on security interactions and perceptions among key actors in the Black Sea region is the fundamental

research task of this study. For example, NATO's strengthened military posture is evident through its increased naval patrols, joint military exercises, and the deployment of advanced missile defense systems in Romania and Bulgaria, including the Sea Breeze 2024 exercises, which underscore NATO's commitment to collective defense. Conversely, Russia's military strategies, such as the deployment of hypersonic missile systems and the intensification of hybrid warfare tactics—cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure and disinformation campaigns—demonstrate its intent to maintain regional dominance.

These empirical developments are analyzed through the lens of NATO and Russia's defense strategies, which reveal how each side's actions, intended to enhance security, inadvertently deepen mistrust and exacerbate the regional security dilemma. This analysis also highlights how the militarization of Crimea and the broader Black Sea region represents a critical factor in understanding the balance of power and its implications for Eastern European allies.

The Black Sea region holds immense strategic importance in international relations, yet its precise definition varies across academic and policy circles. For the purposes of this study, the Black Sea region is defined as comprising the six littoral states: Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. This definition also accounts for the geopolitical influence of neighboring countries, such as Moldova, which play a role in shaping the region's security dynamics. This scope aligns with the strategic considerations central to the security dilemma explored in this article and allows for a focused analysis of the interactions between NATO, Russia, and regional actors.

Given the absence of a universally accepted definition, this study adopts a pragmatic approach, emphasizing the geopolitical realities that bind these actors within the shared framework of regional security. By clarifying this territorial scope, the article aims to avoid ambiguities and ensure a coherent foundation for further analysis.

In this article, the author argues that, given its geopolitical importance and strategic location, the Black Sea region represents a latent strategic manifestation of a security dilemma. The ongoing war in Ukraine stems from specific perceptions of the parties that predetermined the collapse of their cooperation. Ukraine's aspirations for closer ties with NATO and the EU were perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its sphere of influence, leading to a series of aggressive responses, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The latter illustrates how one country's actions to enhance its safety and security can provoke existential insurances in another, thereby exacerbating regional tensions and potentially leading to a cessation of conflict.

This article is structured as follows. The first section theorizes the security dilemma concept and its implications for the politics pursued by NATO and Russia in the Black Sea region. The works of Robert Jervis and Shipping Tang serve as the primary sources of knowledge for this article, representing Western and non-Western perspectives on security theories. While Jervis and Tang's models serve as the central reference point for the

methodological approach, later assumptions and concepts are also discussed in the relevant article to achieve a more precise and focused approach to the main research question. In the next section, I apply the theoretical findings to draw inferences about security measurements in the NATO–Russia relationship. The final section offers three possible scenarios for the balance of power in the Black Sea, establishing an extremely crucial factor for the region's future in the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

Defining the Security Dilemma: Navigating Complexity in International Relations

Classical theories, coined by major scholars in IR studies, envision the security dilemma as a major driver of conflict between state actors rising from uncertainty about the intentions of others and fears about potential responses, often leading to counterproductive outcomes (Butterfield, 1951; Herz, 1951; Snyder, 1984; Glaser, 1997). Robert Jervis's theory, aimed to harmonize game theories with strategic competition, offers a crucial insight, explaining how state actors with shared interests, a coherent foreign policy, and a common goal of achieving security can end up in competition. Jervis (1978) defines the security dilemma as a situation in which one country's efforts to improve its security inadvertently reduce the security of others. What distinguishes Jervis's definition, as mentioned, is his operationalization of game theory, which demonstrates how decision-makers might behave when faced with a situation similar to the prisoner's dilemma. By exploring the options of “cooperation” and “defection,” Jervis (1978, p. 171) highlights the importance of strategic preferences, ultimately illustrating how states can be trapped in a predicament not entirely of their own making. Several elements contribute to the rational outcomes of this game: the incentives to cooperate or defect, the costs associated with confrontation, the potential gains from exploiting the other side, and the mutual perception of the other's behavior.

Jervis's empirical study begins with the tangible impact of psychological perceptions, particularly states' fear of exploitation, which evokes subjective demands for security. Decision makers' actions are influenced by their perceived vulnerabilities, desired levels of security, and threat assessments (Wolfers, 1962, p. 10). Factors that exacerbate uncertainty include misperceptions of the other's hostility, the high cost of war, commitments to third parties, and even the satisfaction derived from observing the other party's reactions (Deutsch, 1973, p. 190). Summarizing his findings, Jervis (1978) operationalizes two variables to calculate the security dilemma: the differentiation between defensive and offensive postures and the offensive/defensive balance. He based his arguments on empirical observations regarding the availability of first-strike capabilities and the cost-effectiveness or speed of potential confrontations (Schelling, 1963, p. 135). Similarly, the distinction between offense and defense depends on whether the weapons and policies intended to defend possess offensive capabilities.

Applying Robert Jervis's concept of the security dilemma offers a plausible starting point to understand the interactions and perceptions of the key actors in the Black Sea region. For instance, Russia's militarization of Crimea, coupled with its deployment of advanced missile systems, highlights how actions intended to improve security are perceived by NATO as threatening. NATO's response, including enhanced military exercises such as *Sea Breeze 2024* and the deployment of missile defense systems in Romania, illustrates the practical activation of the security dilemma. Each side's actions reinforce a cycle of mutual mistrust, deepening insecurity in the region and transforming the Black Sea into a focal point for NATO-Russia strategic competition.

Jervis's framework illuminates how actions taken by one party to improve its security can inadvertently increase insecurity for others, thus leading to a spiral of competition and mistrust. Therefore, while traditional International Relations (IR) theories could provide contributions and serve as a basis for assessing the Black Sea security dilemma, a more precise interpretation is needed to analyze the implications of the war in Ukraine and the state of the dilemma in the context of the strategic rivalry between NATO and Russia. The most appropriate way to extend the theoretical framework of traditional IR theories would be by using a concept derived from Jervis's approach, but extending its scope beyond realist arguments about the conditions under which the security dilemma operates. In this article, the author uses the Shiping Tang concept of two variables to provide a better understanding of how the conflict of interests between Russia and NATO may affect the states in the Black Sea region and transform them into a strategic hub for Moscow's strategy in Eastern Europe.

Tang (2009) defines the conflict of interest as a divergence between two countries' national interests, emphasizing that conflict does not necessarily imply violence. Furthermore, Tang rejects Boulding's dichotomous approach to peace (Boulding, 1978), postulating that the conflict of interests has both subjective and objective sides and that interests can be compatible or irreconcilable (Tang, 2009, p. 599). The objective side refers to the absence of threats to the acquired values, while the subjective side is expressed in the absence of fear, which makes the parties less inclined to cooperate with the other states of the Black Sea region. They may become dissatisfied with the current balance of power because they may have to sacrifice their interests to Moscow or Washington, which may reinforce the dilemma through a feedback mechanism. In assessing a situation involving the security dilemma, it is crucial to consider its spiral pattern of psychological perceptions and misperceptions that typically lead state actors to confrontation. Tang (2009) clarifies that the security dilemma and the spiral model can be viewed separately, as a reversible and gradual continuum, in which the dilemma remains latent and benign until exacerbated by the parties' behavior.

Tang's criticism revises Jervis's causal relationship between the security environment and the inevitable outcome of war, arguing that "a distinction must be made between the contingent factors that give rise to the security dilemma and the potential threats to values" (Tang, 2009, p. 597). This

critique echoes earlier insights by Wolfers, who also emphasized the need to differentiate between factors that drive the security dilemma and the actual threats to national values (Wolfers, 1952, p. 485). Tang's concept derives six scenarios depending on whether the conflict of interest is subjectively or objectively reconcilable. In the first case, objective interests are illusory, the international system is peaceful and harmonious, and security dilemmas between states are unlikely. In the latter case, Tang envisions four scenarios based on the compatibility of interests between states and concludes that when conflicts are almost inevitable, the security dilemma is usually not applicable, while the spiral is (Tang, 2009, pp. 600-602).

To proceed further, it is essential to evaluate later works that use the Jervis and/or Tang approaches with a specific focus on the NATO-Russia security dilemma in the Black Sea to provide theoretical insights into the empirical part of this document. Vakhtang Maisaia's comprehensive analysis of the security dilemma in the Black Sea region provides several critical insights that extend the theoretical frameworks of Robert Jervis and Shiping Tang. By exploring the complex interplay of external forces, the critical role of energy security, the impact of regional conflicts, and the impact of NATO's presence, Maisaia offers a nuanced explanation of the multifaceted nature of security challenges in the Black Sea region. One of the main conclusions drawn from Maisaia's work is the significant impact of third parties such as Russia and the United States. The strategic interests of those parties and their military tensions exacerbate regional tensions, contributing to a security dilemma in which defensive measures by one actor are perceived as a threat by others. This perception leads to a cycle of escalation, emphasizing the importance of understanding the intentions and actions of external actors in the region (Maisaia, 2019; Jervis, 1978). In addition, Maisaia (2019) emphasized the critical role of energy security in the Black Sea region because its vast energy resources and critical infrastructure are central to its geopolitical struggles, with competition for these resources leading to regional instability and conflict. This perspective adds an economic dimension to the security dilemma, highlighting how control over energy resources affects regional actors and attracts significant external interest, further complicating the security landscape (Maisaia, 2024). NATO's strategic perceptions of the Black Sea region are another critical aspect of Maisaia's analysis. The author claims that "while NATO aims to enhance security, its actions are often perceived as a direct threat by other regional actors, exacerbating the security dilemma and provoking an arms race" (Maisaia, 2023, p. 148). In other words, while Jervis focuses on the general concept of the security dilemma (Jervis, 1978) and Tang elaborates on its variations and geographical implications (Tang, 2009), Maisaia provides a detailed case study that highlights the practical applications and challenges of these theories to the offense/defense balance in the Black Sea region.

Why do NATO-Russia relations qualify for a Security Dilemma?

The security environment in the Black Sea region underwent a profound transformation following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This watershed event intensified regional tensions, reshaped strategic priorities, and activated previously latent aspects of the security dilemma between NATO and Russia. Accordingly, this article distinguishes between the region's dynamics before and after this critical juncture.

Before 2022, the Black Sea region was defined by simmering tensions, with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 establishing the foundation for ongoing strategic competition. NATO's gradual expansion of its presence, alongside Russia's military buildup in Crimea and adjacent areas, highlighted the latent nature of the security dilemma in the region.

Post-2022, the invasion of Ukraine catalyzed a shift toward an active and heightened security dilemma. NATO's increased military deployments in Romania and Bulgaria, combined with Russia's intensified use of hybrid warfare and conventional military strategies, illustrate the region's transition into a more overtly confrontational security environment. This section examines these developments through the lens of the security dilemma, emphasizing the role of militarization in shifting the balance of power and exacerbating mistrust between NATO and Russia. Each side perceives the other's actions as a direct threat, reinforcing a cycle of reciprocal insecurity.

The distinction between pre- and post-2022 realities is critical to understanding how the war in Ukraine has transformed the Black Sea into both a focal point for NATO-Russia strategic rivalry and a testing ground for broader applications of the security dilemma concept. Before exploring potential scenarios for the evolution of this competition, it is essential to deductively derive the variables necessary for such an analysis. Drawing on the methodology outlined by Ivanov (2024, p. 340), this study categorizes the variables into three types—dependent, independent, and intervening. These variables are subsequently operationalized to establish causal relationships and to calculate the intensity of the security dilemma in the region.

	Variable/Causal Link	Jervis (1978)	Tang (2009)	Maisaia (2022)
Independent variables	Offense/Defense Balance between NATO and Russia	The defense has the advantage	The defense has the advantage	The offense has the advantage in strategic areas, but overall, the defense remains strong
	Offensive/Defensive Postures of NATO and Russia	Differentiation is present	Differentiation is present	Differentiation is present, with emphasis on hybrid warfare and defensive countermeasures

	Conflict of Interests between NATO and Russia	Present, but not clarified	Genuine, objectively reconcilable, but subjectively irreconcilable	Genuine, deeply rooted in geopolitical competition, resource control, and influence
Intervening Variables	Security Interaction (Cooperation or Confrontation)	Security cooperation is possible	Security cooperation is possible	Security cooperation is challenging but possible, with a high confrontation likelihood
Dependent Variables	Regional Stability (Policies of Black Sea Countries)	Under the security dilemma	Under the security dilemma	Under the security dilemma
	Impact on Regional Policies	Merely normative impact	Merely normative impact	Significant security impact influenced by NATO and Russia's actions
	Nuclear/Conventional Weapons Behavior	NATO and Russia favor deterrence	NATO and Russia favor deterrence	NATO and Russia favor deterrence but engage in hybrid warfare tactics

Table 1

Assessing the balance of power in the Black Sea region

To begin, it is essential to assess the offensive/defensive balance, which is a major factor determining the security dilemma between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea. Jervis (1978) argued that offense has the advantage when it is easier to destroy the other's army and capture its territory rather than defend one's own, while the defense has the advantage when it is easier to defend, and it is assumed that it is to destroy and capture. Tang extends this assumption and clarifies that the offense-defense balance is affected by geography, technology, and military doctrine and argues that a defensive advantage usually promotes stability, while an offensive advantage can escalate tensions (Tang, 2009). Vakhtang Maisaia argues that NATO's overall defense remains stable due to geographic and strategic positions, but Russia possesses specific offensive advantages, particularly with its advanced missile systems and naval forces. It highlights the importance of Russia's A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) capabilities, including deploying S-400 missile systems and advanced naval assets, strengthening its offensive posture (Maisaia, 2019). Barry Posen supports this view, arguing that technological advances such as precision-guided munitions can alter the offensive-defensive balance, making offensive

operations more feasible and increasing the risk of conflict (Posen, 2014).

Added to those theoretical assumptions is the realistic configuration of NATO – Russia offense/defense balance in the Black Sea region. NATO strengthened its defense posture through increased naval patrols, joint military exercises, and the deployment of advanced anti-missile systems. The presence of US destroyers equipped with Aegis ballistic missile defense systems in the Black Sea exemplifies NATO's commitment to defense (NATO, 2023). For example, the recent exercise Sea Breeze 2024 involved NATO and partner nations conducting complex maritime operations, demonstrating interoperability and defense readiness (NATO et al., 2024). Conversely, the ongoing modernization of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, including deploying Kalibr cruise missiles and improving coastal defense systems, emphasizes its offensive capabilities. The recent introduction of hypersonic missile systems, such as the Zircon, has further shifted the balance towards attack, as Michael Kofman has pointed out. These developments allow Russia to strike targets quickly and with high accuracy, posing a significant threat to NATO forces in the region (Kofman, 2024).

In addition, it is essential to highlight that the political confrontation between NATO and Russia carries the risk of nuclear escalation. Therefore, the safest approach for a nuclear-armed state is to carefully analyze its competitor's capabilities without engaging in direct conflict. In such cases, the security dilemma tilts in favor of offense when technology and commitments to third parties compel both countries to expand their interests. At the same time, defense prevails when arms races between equal competitors prevent expansion. Russia's policy in the Black Sea region currently includes military expansion and the strategic strengthening of its influence by strengthening its naval bases and conducting regular joint military exercises with friendly countries. Earlier studies in NATO – Russian relations properly observe that such actions aim to consolidate Russian dominance in the region and create an order supported by Moscow (Ivanov and Shalamanov, 2020, p. 65). On the other hand, NATO, through its members, especially Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, is increasing its presence in the Black Sea. For example, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Romania established itself as a highly reliable Euro-Atlantic member, becoming the main defender of the Eastern flank.

The alliance also conducts regular military exercises and strengthens its defense positions, but a formal collective defense pact involving all Black Sea littoral states has yet to be reached. Thus, the expansion of the military presence of both parties implies the need for preventive action. However, the logic of nuclear deterrence and Russia's limited military capabilities in the region determine the preference for defensive strategies, which are different from those in other regions, such as the Baltic Sea, where tensions tend to be more offensive action. Although NATO and Russia are equally prone to expand their influence, they are more inclined to keep the Black Sea security dilemma "cold," preferring to conform to established regional security structures rather than clash militarily. NATO's strategy focuses on creating more collective security agreements with countries in the region that resist Russian influence,

while Russia, for its part, continues to rely on a combination of hard power and diplomatic efforts to strengthen its impact. Unfortunately, the actions of both sides reinforce the effect of the spiraling pattern we discussed above. When calculating the offensive/defensive balance in the context of security in the Black Sea, it is essential to include another methodological variable – nuclear weapons in the sense of deterrence and coercion strategies. The presence of nuclear capabilities in the arsenals of NATO and Russia adds critical complexity to the security dynamic.

Another essential aspect of the regional balance of power is the deployment of nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil by Russia. Thomas Schelling's conflict strategy theory emphasized nuclear deterrence's role in preventing large-scale wars. The threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD) serves as a powerful deterrent against the use of nuclear weapons (Schelling, 1966). The modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal, including the deployment of hypersonic glide vehicles and advanced cruise missiles, improves its second-strike capabilities. These developments are perceived as a significant threat by NATO, prompting discussions to strengthen NATO's nuclear deterrence posture (Kofman, 2024). For its part, NATO reaffirmed its commitment to nuclear deterrence through joint exercises and strategic planning, and the deployment of dual-capable aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons during exercises such as Steadfast Noon underscores NATO's readiness to respond to any nuclear threat (NATO, 2023). However, the presence of nuclear weapons in Belarus raises the stakes of any military confrontation, or – as Stephen Cimbala argues – the risk of escalation to nuclear conflict, although still low, cannot be dismissed entirely, especially in a region with high tensions and frequent military interactions (Cimbala, 2023).

Calculating the postures

Distinguishing between offensive and defensive postures is critical to mitigating the security dilemma and reducing the likelihood of unintended escalation. Jervis and Tang emphasize the importance of clear differentiation to reduce misinterpretation and prevent unwanted escalation. Maisaia underlines that Russia is engaging in hybrid warfare strategies that blur the lines between offense and defense. Frank Hoffman adds the unconventional dimensions to security dilemmas, claiming that the adversary simultaneously and adaptively uses a combination of conventional weapons, inconsistent tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior on the battlefield to achieve its goals (Hoffman, 2008, p. 39). Another empirical statement postulates that this may only partially cover the actions of state actors (Ivanov, 2020, p. 62). Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics, such as cyber operations against critical infrastructure in Ukraine and disinformation campaigns targeting NATO member states, complicates the distinction between offensive and defensive actions. For example, the 2022 military exercises focused on countering hybrid warfare and improving intelligence-sharing mechanisms among member states. The establishment of the NATO Cyber Defense Center of Excellence in Tallinn is evidence of NATO's commitment to strengthening its defense posture against cyber threats

(NATO et al. Center, 2023). However, as Hoffman notes, hybrid warfare creates ambiguity in international relations, making it challenging for states to develop coherent strategies to deal with conventional and unconventional threats. Therefore, conflict of interest also represents an important variable in the security dilemma in the Black Sea region.

An actual conflict of interest?

Conflicts of interest between NATO and Russia are deeply rooted in their geopolitical and strategic goals, affecting their interactions and shaping regional stability. Jervis (1978) acknowledges the existence of conflicts of interest but does not delve into the specifics, focusing more on the structural aspects of the security dilemma. Due to differing perceptions and strategic calculations, Tang (2009) describes these conflicts as real and objectively reconcilable but subjectively irreconcilable. Maisaia (2024), for his part, defines the conflicts of interest between NATO and Russia as fundamental and deeply rooted in geopolitical competition. These conflicts are driven by strategic objectives such as control over energy resources, military dominance, and political influence in the Black Sea region. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 significantly changed the regional balance of power, giving Russia a strategic foothold and control over key sea lanes. This move – offensive by nature – was part of Russia's broader strategy to assert its influence over the Black Sea and prevent NATO expansion.

The ongoing war in Ukraine continues to exacerbate the NATO-Russia conflict of interest. Russia's efforts to maintain its sphere of influence and prevent NATO expansion run counter to NATO's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Michael Kofman (Kofman, 2024) argues that Russia's actions are driven by a desire to prevent NATO invasion and maintain its sphere of influence, emphasizing the strategic nature of these conflicts. For example, the supply of advanced weapons to Ukraine by NATO member states, such as Javelin anti-tank missiles and HIMARS missile systems, is a critical factor in the ongoing conflict. John Mearsheimer also offers another highly arguable perspective, highlighting the role of great power politics in the Ukraine crisis. Mearsheimer argues that the main reason for the conflict lies in the West's attempt to integrate Ukraine into NATO and the EU, which Russia perceives as a direct threat to its security and sphere of influence (Mearsheimer, 2014).

However, the most critical area of conflict remains the control of energy resources. The Black Sea is a strategic corridor for transporting energy, and Russia's actions in the region are partly driven by a desire to control these routes and influence European security. Alina Polyakova (2023) notes that these actions significantly affect regional stability and international energy markets. For example, the construction and operation of the TurkStream pipeline, which bypasses Ukraine, illustrates Russia's strategy to exert control over energy supplies to Europe while bypassing traditional transit routes (Polyakova, 2023). The move reduces Ukraine's influence on European energy supplies and increases Europe's dependence on Russian gas, thus strengthening

Russia's geopolitical influence. In addition, the discovery and development of significant offshore gas fields in the Black Sea, such as the Neptun Deep project in Romania, added another layer of complexity. Both NATO and Russia are aware of the strategic importance of these resources. Russia's Gazprom has sought to influence these resources' development and export routes, while NATO supports the diversification of energy sources to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas. This competition also extends to pipeline politics, where projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor, supported by NATO members, aim to provide alternative routes for gas supplies from the Caspian Sea and beyond.

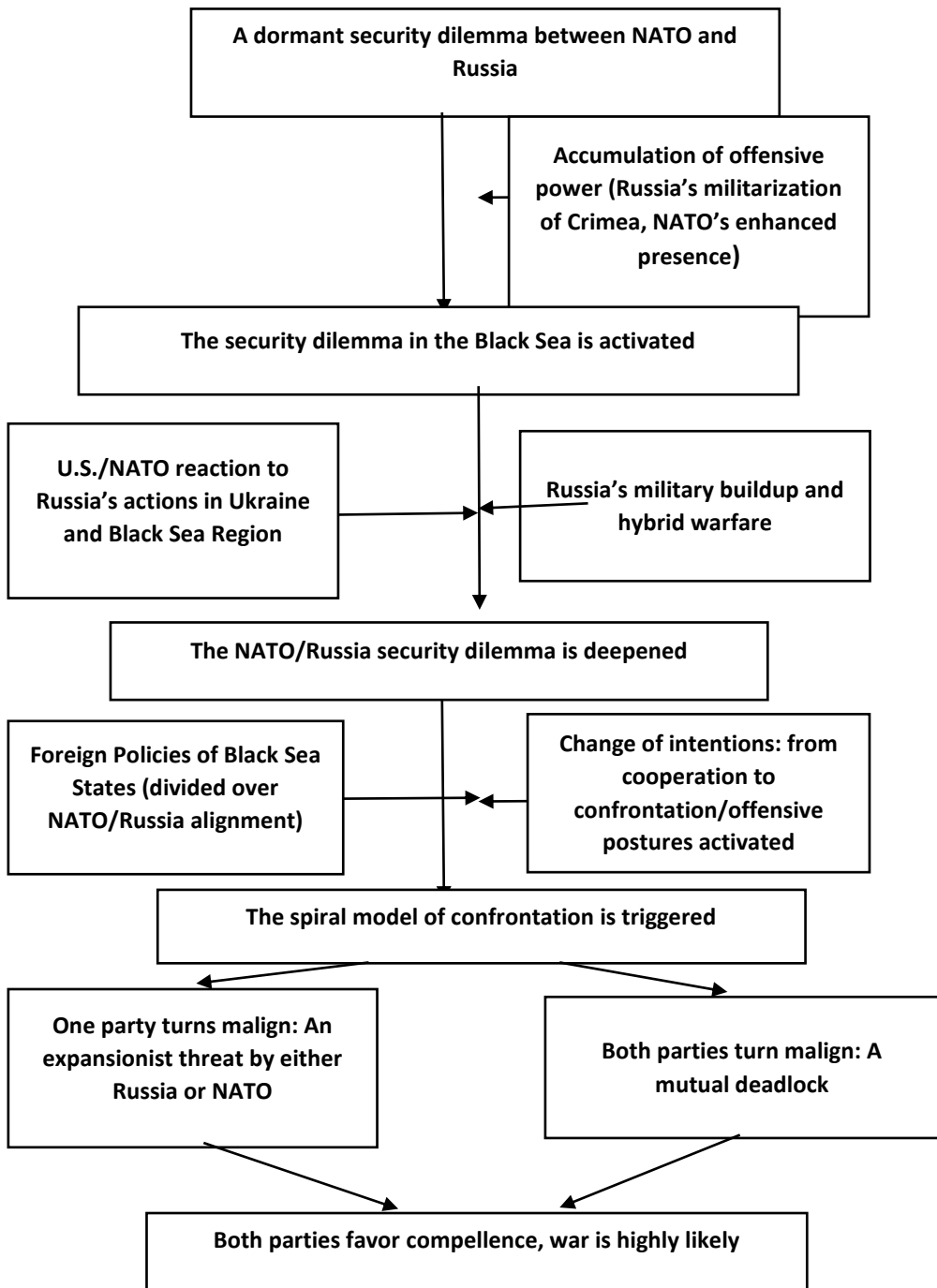
To sum up, Russia's actions in the region are part of a larger strategy to restore its influence in the near future and challenge the post-Cold War security order dominated by NATO. Dmitry Trenin argues that Russia views NATO's presence and activities in the Black Sea as a direct threat to its national security and regional hegemony, leading to a more confrontational stance (Trenin, 2021). From NATO's perspective, the Black Sea region is critical to the security of its Eastern European members and partners. The alliance's strategic imperative is to prevent Russian dominance in the region and ensure the security of its Member States. The establishment of NATO security initiatives in the Black Sea, including the deployment of maritime patrols and the improvement of military infrastructure in Romania and Bulgaria, reflects this strategic priority (NATO, 2023). These measures are designed to improve deterrence, reassure allies, and maintain freedom of navigation in the Black Sea.

The strategic importance of the Black Sea region reflects, on the one hand, the Russian perspective on the role it wants to play not only on the regional but also on the global stage, and on the other hand, it reflects the Western perspective, which aims to spread democracy, attract new allies and strengthen its position in the region. It is concluded that although NATO and Russia avoid confrontation, their security-seeking, based on uncertainty about the intentions of the other, suggests a security dilemma in the Black Sea (Figure 1). Even if the threat of going to direct war is still limited and the conflict is contained within the so-called buffer zone on the territory of Ukraine, the situation represents a real challenge not only for security in the Black Sea but also for the global security architecture in general.

Prospects for the future of security in the Black Sea

In this section, the author summarizes this article's arguments, introducing three scenarios for the future balance of the Black Sea security dilemma and its impact on regional stability. The article's perspectives are graded by the probability of the realization of each scenario. To draw these conclusions, the author operationalizes the model configurations mentioned earlier and applies them to calculate the security dilemma in the Black Sea region.

Figure 1
The Security Dilemma in Black Sea: A Structural Perspective



Unlikely Scenario: Strategic Russian victory

The first scenario envisions a strategic victory for Russia in the ongoing Ukrainian war. Before the conflict in Ukraine escalated, the Black Sea region was already experiencing a dormant security dilemma characterized by historical distrust and competition between NATO and Russia (Jervis, 1978). This underlying tension was poised to escalate due to both sides' buildup of offensive capabilities. As the Ukrainian war intensified, both NATO and Russia increased their military presence in the region, with Russia fortifying Crimea and increasing its naval capacity and NATO increasing its naval patrols and military installations in Romania and Bulgaria (Chivvis, 2024; Kofman & Lee, 2023). The mutual buildup of military power transforms the passive security dilemma into an active one, where each country's defensive measures are perceived as offensive threats by the other, resulting in a vicious cycle of escalation (Tang, 2009).

Reciprocal actions followed as the conflict progressed, with NATO's increased presence prompting Russia to deploy additional missile systems and modernize its Black Sea fleet. This deepening confrontation was further fueled by the Russian "smart" power such as propaganda and media portrayals that solidified public support for aggressive postures on both sides, complicating de-escalation efforts (Gerasimov, 2013; Lanoszka, 2016; Ivanov, 2021). Diplomatic initiatives to resolve the conflict proved ineffective, reminiscent of the failure of US-Soviet negotiations during the Cold War, which quickly collapsed in an atmosphere of rising tensions (Gaddis, 2005). As a result, the situation threatened to escalate into open conflict, with localized clashes risking escalating into a wider regional war involving NATO and Russian forces. The high readiness of military forces and the availability of advanced weapons only increased the risk of rapid escalation, making a total Russian victory a scenario with far-reaching and profound consequences (Kofman & Lee, 2023; Charap & Colton, 2016).

A strategic Russian victory would significantly alter the geopolitical landscape in Eastern Europe, likely encouraging the Kremlin to pursue further aggressive actions in the region and challenging NATO's presence and influence. This could lead to increased military deployments and fortifications by NATO in neighboring countries such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states (Lanoszka, 2016). The economic impact will be profound, with Ukraine's infrastructure and economy devastated, requiring extensive recovery efforts. Russia, already facing severe sanctions, is likely to face further economic isolation and long-term damage to its economy. Moreover, disruption of trade routes and energy supplies would have global consequences (Connolly, 2018)

In terms of the humanitarian crisis, the casualties will be enormous, millions of Ukrainians will be displaced, and there will likely be tens of thousands of civilian casualties and widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure such as homes, schools, and hospitals. Nevertheless, the losses will be largely irreversible. A full-scale Russian victory would likely lead to increased militarization of the Black Sea. Russia will improve its naval

capabilities and strengthen its position in Crimea, projecting regional power. This would prompt NATO to respond with increased naval patrols and deployments in Romania and Bulgaria, intensifying the security dilemma (Chivvis, 2024). Control of critical sea lanes and strategic air points in the Black Sea will become vital to the conflict. Russia's ability to cut off sea lanes and control access to Ukrainian ports would have significant economic and military consequences, affecting global trade and energy supplies (Polyakova, 2023).

Thus, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will face considerable pressure to demonstrate unity and resolve. Increased threats to member states bordering the Black Sea, such as Turkey and Romania, would necessitate robust defense measures and a reaffirmation of NATO's collective defense commitments under Article 5 (Pifer, 2024). The broader stability of Eastern Europe will be at risk. A complete Russian victory in Ukraine could encourage separatist movements and pro-Russian factions in other countries, leading to further destabilization in the region. Although a total Russian victory in the Ukrainian war remains unlikely due to the substantial military, economic, and political challenges, its consequences would be far-reaching and profound. The potential development of such a scenario would include a significant escalation of the conflict, widespread use of hybrid warfare, and prolonged occupation, all of which would exacerbate the security dilemma in the Black Sea region and beyond. This development of the situation foresees a post-conflict divided Europe. This would be seen as a triumph for the Russian Federation since the ultimate goal of this military conflict is to return NATO to its pre-1997 borders. Thus, Europe will be divided into three parts: Western Europe, with a traditional American sphere of influence; Central and Eastern Europe, acting as a buffer zone between Russian and American influence; and a Russian Ukraine, with Russian Belarus tacitly supported by a "neutral" Serbia, which would later split with China.

Possible Scenario: Frozen conflict with potential for a refugee crisis

A frozen Ukraine conflict characterized by intermittent fighting without a final resolution is a more likely scenario, fraught with significant complications. Neither side achieves a decisive victory in such a scenario, resulting in a prolonged stalemate. This will likely lead to sporadic outbreaks of violence, maintaining high tension and insecurity in the region. This situation is similar to other protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space, such as those in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, where unresolved territorial disputes have led to lasting instability and economic hardship (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2018; Caspersen, 2017).

Germany and the US have invested heavily in realizing a frozen conflict scenario, possibly involving some "feedback" to Moscow about red lines that should not be crossed (Hedlund, 2024). Since the Russian missiles raining down on Ukraine are being launched from Russian territory, the implication is that the attacks can continue with impunity. Although aimed at preventing a wider conflict, this decision by the leaders of the escalation has significant moral and humanitarian consequences, suggesting that the

associated loss of life and material destruction is acceptable (Charap & Colton, 2016).

The humanitarian situation would deteriorate significantly in a frozen conflict scenario. The war will continue to damage civilian infrastructure, resulting in dire living conditions and limited access to essential services such as health, clean water, and education. Continued battles would displace large numbers of people, both within Ukraine and across its borders, creating a refugee crisis. An influx of refugees into neighboring countries would strain their resources and potentially further destabilize the region.

Geopolitically, continued unresolved tensions will keep NATO and Russian forces on high alert, perpetuating the security dilemma. Both countries are likely to continue their military buildup in the region, with NATO increasing its presence in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea and Russia strengthening its position in Crimea and along the eastern Ukrainian border. The lack of trust and entrenched positions on both sides will complicate diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. The international community will be challenged to balance support for Ukraine with the need to avoid further escalation with Russia. The potential for a refugee crisis would have far-reaching consequences beyond the immediate region. European countries, already grappling with other migration challenges, will need to address the humanitarian needs of Ukrainian refugees while managing domestic political pressures. The EU is likely to face calls for increased financial and logistical support for the countries most affected by refugee flows and broader policy reforms to deal more effectively with such crises (Lavenex, 2018). However, it must be remembered that the frontline countries will bear the most significant burden. A wave of refugees in a country like Bulgaria, for example, will increase internal instability and allow the entry of an even more severe wave of hybrid attacks. In this way, the Eastern flank of NATO will be further weakened, and despite the initial calculations of the West, the gains for Russia seem more significant in this scenario.

Somewhat likely Scenario: Ukraine partitioned and pushed back

The scenario of Ukraine being partitioned with considerable Western support, especially under the leadership of France, represents a somewhat likely outcome that would change the dynamics of the conflict and the geopolitical landscape in the Black Sea region. If France leads a coalition of states committed to escalating the conflict, it will significantly change the strategic calculus. This coalition, if successful, could lead to the partition of a significant part of Ukraine under NATO's de facto protection. Although uncertain, the potential inclusion of Crimea in this buffer zone would represent a substantial obstacle for Russia, indicating a losing war (Charap & Colton, 2016). Such a scenario would introduce an element of strategic ambiguity, complicating the task for Russian military planners. France's strategy under President Macron emphasizes strategic ambiguity to prevent Russia from accurately gauging Western responses and capabilities. This approach aims to deter further Russian aggression by making its strategic calculations more complex and uncertain.

This situation underscores the ongoing competition between Western powers and Russia, with Ukraine in a larger struggle for influence in Eastern Europe.

In addition to these East-West tensions, China's role cannot be ignored. As a global power with strategic ties to Russia, China's stance on the conflict may have profound implications for the broader geopolitical dynamics. While Beijing has maintained a neutral stance, carefully balancing its relationship with Russia without directly antagonizing the West, establishing a Western-backed buffer zone in Ukraine could prompt China to reconsider its position. A further escalation in Ukraine might lead China to increase its support for Russia or use the situation to expand its influence globally, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, where it faces its own strategic challenges with the West. A divided Ukraine would have significant repercussions for the security dilemma in the Black Sea region. Even if Ukraine does not formally join NATO, creating a NATO-protected zone would drastically alter the balance of power, sending a strong signal to Russia that the West is willing to escalate its involvement. This would likely deter further Russian advances, but unresolved tensions in Donetsk and Luhansk would persist, leaving the door open to continued conflict and instability.

In the long term, the consequences of this scenario seem clear: eastern Ukraine, especially the contested areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, would remain hotspots of sporadic violence and instability. The humanitarian situation would likely worsen, with civilians caught in the crossfire and a rise in internally displaced persons and refugees (UNHCR, 2024). The geopolitical consequences of a divided Ukraine would be equally significant, marking a strategic setback for Russia. However, the West would still face the challenge of managing a delicate balance of power in Eastern Europe. The creation of a NATO-backed zone in Ukraine would lead to further militarization on both sides, exacerbating the security dilemma. Russia would undoubtedly perceive this as continuing Western encroachment on its sphere of influence, heightening tensions. Meanwhile, China's role as a global power could complicate this further. If the conflict deepens, China may exploit the situation to solidify its influence over Russia and its geopolitical contests with the West, particularly in areas like the South China Sea.

The third scenario represents an East-West divide and highlights the role of multipolarity, with China acting as a key player – or as some scholars put it – as a resource divider between pro-American European allies and states governed by pro-Russian decision-makers (Ivanov, 2022, p. 45). The interplay of these powers and how China maneuvers within this geopolitical competition could reshape the global order, with the Black Sea and Ukraine as pivotal in this broader struggle. As China continues to rise, its involvement in balancing Russia and the West will become more pronounced, deepening the complexity of power dynamics, both in Europe and globally.

Conclusion

The Black Sea region is a critical focal point for understanding the dynamics of the security dilemma, where the interplay of strategic actions and misperceptions has created an enduring cycle of mistrust and escalation. This

article has provided a comprehensive analysis by distinguishing between pre- and post-2022 dynamics, integrating case studies, and applying theoretical frameworks to the region's evolving balance of power.

The security environment in the Black Sea fundamentally changed following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The transformation from a latent to an active security dilemma is evident in NATO's expanded presence, such as its *Sea Breeze 2024* military exercises, and Russia's aggressive strategies, including its militarization of Crimea and deployment of hypersonic missile systems. These developments underscore how defensive measures on both sides are perceived as offensive threats, perpetuating a spiral of mistrust and escalation. The theoretical insights of Jervis and Tang have been instrumental in explaining these dynamics, particularly how strategic calculations and misperceptions exacerbate tensions.

By defining the territorial scope of the Black Sea region, including its littoral states and adjacent actors such as Moldova, this article has provided a clear framework for assessing its security challenges. This clarity has been essential in analyzing the region's role as a strategic crossroads where NATO and Russia compete for influence. The integration of case studies has demonstrated how specific actions—like NATO's missile defense deployments and Russia's hybrid warfare tactics—have activated and intensified the security dilemma.

Moving forward, breaking this cycle of escalation will require transparent communication, confidence-building measures, and the revitalization of regional cooperation platforms. International organizations, such as the OSCE, should take a leading role in fostering dialogue and preventing unintended escalations. Additionally, arms control agreements and joint economic projects could help reduce tensions and encourage collaboration among regional actors.

The Black Sea region serves as a microcosm of broader global challenges, reflecting the difficulties of managing rivalries and balancing power in an increasingly divided world. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts and commitments from all stakeholders, including diplomatic initiatives, confidence-building measures, economic cooperation, and international agreements. These approaches are pivotal for breaking the cycle of escalation and achieving long-term stability in the region. Additionally, the involvement of external powers, such as China, should be considered when assessing the broader implications of the Black Sea's security dynamics. Sustaining commitments to peace and cooperation can transform the region from a flashpoint of conflict into a model of stability and collaborative security.

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