



Contribution ID: 238

Type: **Paper Abstract (Closed Panels)**

Trapped in the Strategic Trilemma: Ukraine's role in the Black Sea region (2014-2024)

The Black Sea stands out as a region of heightened complexity due to the divergent military, economic, and legal interests among its littoral states. Faced with the challenge of pursuing discordant objectives, its states' policies towards this arena oftentimes appear incoherent. In this volatile geopolitical landscape, characterized by risks and intense competition, a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play is imperative. We argue that the concept of the strategic "trilemma" best explains these dynamics. To demonstrate the heuristic utility of trilemmas for understanding Black Sea geopolitics, we examine in Ukraine's case in depth.

At its most basic, a strategic trilemma is a situation when a government pursues three distinct objectives, yet where only two can logically be achieved at the same time. For Ukraine, the three imperatives that Ukraine faces in the Black Sea include: 1) upholding/restoring national sovereignty over its 1991 borders; 2) deterring/defending against Russia, and 3) upholding a regional order favorable to Ukraine's economic development.

We demonstrate the utility of the strategic trilemma concept by examining how successive Ukrainian governments sought to reconcile these conflicting imperatives. We draw on various sources, to provide a detailed account of how Ukraine navigated sequential crises in the Black Sea, including Russia's seizure of Sevastopol and efforts through proxies to expand along the Sea of Azov, Russia's construction of the Azov Bridge and efforts to claim the Kerch Straits as "internal" wars.

Moreover, we suggest that the strategic trilemmas that littoral states face are a key factor complicating Ukrainian, Turkish, Romanian and Bulgarian efforts towards defence cooperation in the face of Russian revisionism. By understanding the trilemmas confronting Black Sea states, we can better conceptualize the forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation that could roll back and contain Russia's efforts to dominate the Black Sea.

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Session Classification: Defence Cooperation and Military Assistance

Track Classification: Closed Panels: Defence Cooperation and Military Assistance