

From Strategy to Action: Implementing the EU Black Sea Strategic Approach

Policy Paper – Black Sea Roundtable

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1. Introduction

The Black Sea Roundtable, convened by the **GlobalFocus Center** with the support of its partners*, gathered senior policymakers, defence and foreign affairs officials, EU and NATO representatives, academics, think-tankers and private-sector experts to discuss the transformation of the **EU Black Sea Strategic Approach** from a vision into a framework of action.

The guiding idea was that Europe can no longer afford to regard the Black Sea as a distant periphery. It has become both a frontline and a backbone of connectivity, where Europe's economic security, democratic resilience, and geopolitical credibility converge.

The tone of the meeting was encapsulated in the classical phrase *Navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse* – the obligation to act even in adverse conditions. The imperative facing Europe is to move from declarations of intent to **tangible delivery**, underpinned by political will, coordination and funding.

It has been acknowledged that there can be no Black Sea security without security for **Ukraine** and viceversa, and that actual strategies for the stabilisation of the region will depend greatly on the development and outcome of Russia's war on Ukraine and the status of the two countries relative to each other and their partners in its aftermath. Hence, the thinking around these two major themes should proceed in sync – but with urgency, which should not be limited by unknown variables. Rather, the EU needs to prepare for all scenarios, develop a theory of change for the region and align its resources and efforts behind a comprehensive, strategic endeavour to create that change.

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2. Strategic Context and Framing

2.1 The Black Sea as Europe's Frontline

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has re-defined the Black Sea as a **decisive arena of European and Euro-Atlantic security**. The region's complex geography – connecting Europe to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East – makes it the hinge between the continent's northern, eastern, and southern flanks. Instability here immediately reverberates through Europe's energy, food, and trade systems.

Historically treated as marginal, the region now represents the litmus test for Europe's capacity to act strategically. Unlike the Baltic Sea, enclosed within EU and NATO frameworks and surrounded by countries with convergent threat assessment and a history of constructive cooperation, the Black Sea remains fragmented: a patchwork of EU, NATO, and third-party jurisdictions with divergent threat perceptions, institutional attachments and political allegiances. This fragmentation has been reflected in its treatment at EU level (falling under DG ENEST, hence viewed as the European Union's periphery), but has also been systematically exploited by revisionist powers and external actors seeking to limit Western influence and the attractiveness of Euro-Atlantic integration.

2.2 From Risk Perimeter to Strategic Driver

The EU's *Strategic Approach to the Black Sea* marks a paradigmatic shift from managing risk, to building **resilience and economic growth**. It recognises that the Black Sea is not merely a theatre of confrontation but a **platform for transformation** – where cooperation, connectivity, **innovation**, and regional ownership, paired with EU and NATO support, can yield durable stability.

This strategic reframing entails:

- viewing **security, economy, and democracy** as interdependent elements of resilience;
- ensuring **regional ownership** by littoral states, supported – not substituted – by the EU and NATO;
- treating infrastructure and connectivity as **strategic enablers of deterrence**;
- anchoring the Black Sea within a **broader continuum** linking the Baltic, North Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkans, and Central Asia;
- recognising that freedom of navigation, energy corridors, and grain exports are now **strategic concerns for the entire EU**, not only coastal states and that European investment in the resilience of the Black Sea is an **investment in Europe's own stability**, not assistance to a troubled neighbourhood.

2.3 Structural Constraints, Strategic Competition and Hybrid Threats

The Black Sea's volatility arises from structural asymmetries and challenges:

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- the **Russo-Turkish condominium**, historically resistant to external influence, persists even amid shifting alignments; yet new players have an important role Ukraine, the EU, increasingly China and also the US's continued robust presence;
- **Ukraine's maritime security** is inseparable from Europe's, as well as the world's food and energy security;
- the Black Sea is a multimodal corridor, with multiple countries crossed by logistics and trade routes. The Caspian is a windy sea, whose water levels are dropping. Cargo transports need to stop, board and unboard trains, shift to ferries to cross land and sea, and navigate very different customs regimes as well as political regimes (with demand-side from local elites accounting for much of Russian/ Chinese involvement). All this makes it hardly an East-West corridor in real terms, and the **economic attractiveness** of this alternative transport route remains limited as compared to the maritime route or the northern and southern corridors;
- the region's hybrid environment, which will continue to define its threat profile in the foreseeable future – encompassing cyber, energy, information, and economic coercion – blurs the boundary between peace and conflict.

Russia's militarisation of Crimea, blockade tactics, and hybrid operations have turned the Black Sea into a testbed for coercive statecraft. Yet Türkiye's "active neutrality" (pro-Ukraine, but not anti-Russian, especially given Ankara's dependencies on Russia, from the S-400 to the Rosatom 'build-own' operate' Akkuyu nuclear powerplant, but all within a NATO framework), Ukraine's innovation-driven defence posture, and Romania's proactive diplomacy demonstrate that **agency remains distributed**. The challenge is not only to deter aggression but to construct a sustainable framework of cooperation that reduces vulnerability and rewards openness.

The Black Sea region will continue to be primarily targeted by **hybrid threats** as Russia has hit a deadlock in the Baltic and has the option of using other means short of war in the Black Sea, a "black hole" of military logistics, with very different defence requirements from the Baltic Sea. The response to hybrid threats must be political, legal and societal, not only military. One main challenge lies in this case in the need for preemptive, rather than reactive measures, which tend to be costly and require time. Preparedness for crisis management must also be multidomain and multinational, with non-littoral EU members likely to play important support roles.

3. The Black Sea in the Global and Regional Order

3.1 A Hub of Interdependence

The region sits at the crossroads of global trade and energy networks. Hence, **what happens in the Black Sea does not stay in the Black Sea**. The temporary blockade of Ukrainian grain exports in 2023–24 exposed how a local disruption can trigger worldwide consequences: food insecurity in Africa, inflationary pressures in Europe, and diplomatic realignments in the

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Middle East. The Black Sea is thus a **global public good** whose security underpins international stability.

Maritime routes through the Bosphorus link the Black Sea to the **Eastern Mediterranean** and onwards to the **Indian Ocean**. Russian force projection through this corridor remains one of the least predictable variables for NATO planners. Protection of the Mediterranean is vitally incomplete without protection of the Black Sea and constraints on Russian military build-up here – hence the heightened interest in the region of maritime nations such as the UK or France. Consequently, securing the Black Sea is not only about defending its western shores; it is about safeguarding the **entire European maritime continuum**.

At the same time, it must be retained that defence of European borders should be continuous north to south and east to west. It would be a mistake to perpetuate the current perception of **competition between the Baltic and the Black Sea** in vying for the attention and resources of the allies. While the Black Sea does not face the same immediacy of the threat that confronts the Baltic Sea, crossed by vital cables easier to disrupt by civilian ships such as those in Russia's Shadow Fleet than the few that lie on the deep seabed of the Black Sea, the south-eastern flank is a theatre of war already, and Russia remains interested in consolidating its malign presence further.

3.2 Regional Complexity

Unlike the Baltic, the Black Sea does not form a coherent security complex. Riparian states belong to different political and military frameworks, from EU and NATO members (Romania, Bulgaria) to partners (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova) and regional powers with distinct agendas (Türkiye, Russia). This diversity complicates collective threat assessment and hampers interoperability.

Nevertheless, the **heterogeneity can be turned into strength** if embedded in cooperative mechanisms that reconcile national interests with shared objectives. The proposed *EU Maritime Security Hub* and enhanced EU–NATO coordination embody this logic.

3.3 South Caucasus and Central Asia Dimensions

The war in Ukraine has reshaped alignments across the South Caucasus. Armenia seeks strategic emancipation from Russia; Azerbaijan asserts a more autonomous and transactional foreign policy; Georgia's internal political trajectory raises questions about democratic resilience. Meanwhile, Türkiye and China are expanding their roles as security and economic actors, while the EU risks marginalisation unless it re-engages with clarity and coherence and the ability to navigate complex conditions.

The *Middle Corridor* connecting Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian and the Caucasus remains central to this calculus. Despite logistical inefficiencies and divergent regimes, its geopolitical significance to the EU lies in maintaining Western presence in a region otherwise contested by Russia and China. For the EU, linking Black Sea strategy with **Central Asian connectivity** is both an economic and a strategic necessity.

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Russia itself is not interested in disrupting trade altogether in the Black Sea because it wants to protect its own civilian exports – its cooperation on the grain trade was an expression of its inability to dominate the Black Sea altogether. This should not be challenged by the EU and NATO as it risks opening the door for blockades by Russia in the Arctic and China in the South China Sea. Russia also has its own cables in the Black Sea and is not interested in sabotaging them (whereas the Baltic is crossed by European cables, and is thus more of a target).

3.4 Strategic Continuity Across Flanks

The defence of Europe's eastern and southern flanks cannot be compartmentalised. What happens in the Black Sea affects the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and even the Indo-Pacific through trade and energy linkages. The **north-south axis** from the North Sea to the Mediterranean and the **east-west axis** from the Baltic to Central Asia form a single strategic continuum.

Maintaining coherence across these theatres requires consistent policy (including at the level of political families in Europe!), inter-ministerial coordination, consistence across positions expressed within international organisations and in bilateral relations, and harmonisation between EU and NATO planning cycles.

4. Infrastructure, Connectivity, and Critical Resilience

4.1 Infrastructure as Deterrence

Infrastructure has become a determinant of security. Freedom of navigation, energy transit, digital connectivity, and grain exports are strategic assets that define the resilience of the European project. Ports, subsea cables, bridges, railways, and energy corridors are no longer purely economic facilities but components of **collective defence**.

The EU's **Global Gateway** and **Military Mobility** initiatives must therefore prioritise *dual-use infrastructure* – assets capable of serving civilian and military functions. Enhancing connectivity between the **Black Sea and the Danube** would shorten transport routes, diversify supply chains, and reinforce Ukraine's export capacity.

4.2 Critical Infrastructure Protection and Risk Management

According to NATO assessments, the EU has hundreds of potential bottlenecks where critical systems could fail or be targeted, most of them on the Eastern flank. The resilience of subsea cables, offshore installations, and logistics hubs is vital to sustaining deterrence and economic confidence. Because 87% of European critical infrastructure is dual-use, **civil-military cooperation** must become standard practice rather than exception.

Four lines of effort emerge:

1. **Integration** – Align EU, NATO, and national initiatives to avoid duplication and fragmentation.

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2. **Prevention** – Shift from reactive to pre-emptive protection through continuous monitoring, cyber resilience, and redundancy.
3. **Legal clarity** – Define red lines and attribution procedures for hybrid attacks below the threshold of armed conflict, as well as ensure that relevant responders have a strong mandate to authorise quick reaction within the limits of the law.
4. **Implementation capacity** – Improve absorption of EU funds and coordination among national authorities responsible for energy, transport, and defence.

4.3 Public–Private Synergies and Innovation

Security in the Black Sea cannot be achieved by governments alone. The private sector owns or operates most critical assets. Effective protection thus depends on **trusted public–private partnerships**.

Best practices exist and have already been tested by cooperative models such as the one around the North Sea or in particular in the Netherlands, where a case study presented during the conference showed how vetted infrastructure providers participate in advisory groups and security managers exchange operational information – illustrating how to build “communities of trust.”

Governments should create **incentive frameworks** through insurance schemes, risk-sharing contracts, and innovation funds. The **NATO DIANA initiative** provides an example of how public resources can stimulate experimental innovation while tolerating failure. Mobilising venture capital alongside public investment can close the persistent funding gap in the region.

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Part II: From Strategy to Implementation: Operationalising Resilience in the Black Sea Region

5. The EU Maritime Security Hub: A Cornerstone for Implementation

The proposed **EU Maritime Security Hub**, which Romania has offered to host in Constanța, stands as a core institutional mechanism for translating Europe's strategic vision into practice. Conceived not as a military command structure but as a **civil–military coordination and information platform**, the Hub's purpose is to enhance maritime domain awareness, integrate surveillance systems, and streamline crisis response. The hub emerges from the organic needs of Romania and Bulgaria as EU member states and the geography of its headquarters does not rule out using other locations as well, a multinational command structure and relying on existing national capabilities and assets. It is seen as an evolving structure, with several dimensions yet to be defined with precision, such as how to provide information to decision-makers, where to source it from exactly and how to process it (with own capabilities?), who are the beneficiaries, etc.

5.1 Purpose and Strategic Function

The Hub is designed to:

- provide **situational awareness** through the integration of civilian, military, and space-based systems, national and European (MARSUR, CISE, EMSA, SCOMAR);
- enable **rapid information-sharing** and **early-warning** capacities to pre-empt hybrid threats, as well as **crisis management** for quick reaction;
- develop **standard operating procedures** linking national agencies, in particular coastguards, naval forces, and EU agencies;
- strengthen **critical-infrastructure protection**, especially for subsea cables, offshore platforms, windfarms and maritime installations and dual-use ports;
- serve as a **knowledge and training centre**, promoting inter-agency learning and exchange with academia and piloting the approach to novel technologies, such as UAV, unmanned, uncrewed platforms;
- develop **joint mapping** of infrastructure, joint maritime awareness and threat assessment, in an area which has been historically hard to protect given the lack of coordination on responsibilities.

Its added value lies in connecting dispersed national capabilities into a **coherent European network**, ensuring that information collected by one actor benefits all. It will also anchor the EU's maritime strategy in the Black Sea to comparable structures in the North Sea and Baltic

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Sea, creating a pan-European architecture of security awareness. Cooperation should not be limited to riparian states and regional partners, but also other interested EU/NATO countries, such as the UK, Norway, Portugal, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, etc. Minilaterals and coalitions of the willing will probably have a growing role moving forward.

5.2 Public-Private Governance and Operational Model

Similar formats aiming to bring together private and public stakeholders, such as is the case of the Netherlands and its institutional efforts to streamline critical infrastructure protection, operate on layered governance tiers:

- a. **Working Groups** – technical experts from ministries and agencies;
- b. **Steering Committee** – Director-General level;
- c. **Secretariat Coordination Board** – ensuring cross-pillar coherence;
- d. **Ministerial Oversight Council** – providing political direction and visibility.

This layered structure ensures both vertical accountability and horizontal integration and could serve as a source of inspiration to PPP around the maritime security hub.

The hub will also complement NATO's maritime surveillance and MARCOM activities, avoiding duplication through formal liaison channels.

Funding will combine **EU budget instruments** (notably the Action Plan on Submarine Cable Resilience, the European Defence Fund, and the CEF-Military Mobility window) with **national contributions** and **industry partnerships**. Early deliverables before 2027 will demonstrate proof of concept.

5.3 Regional Participation

Effective resilience cannot be achieved without the full participation of **Türkiye, Ukraine, but also Moldova and Georgia**. Their inclusion is indispensable for comprehensive maritime awareness and for aligning EU initiatives with regional realities (i.e. denying Moscow the possibility to connect to Transnistria!).

Türkiye's cooperation is critical under the Montreux Convention, but also as a potential powerful mediator in the region. As Ankara sees its capacity for regional ownership and leadership diminished, it experiments with new modes of engagement as the fundamental 'swing voter' and insuperable facilitator or peace and stability initiatives. It should therefore be given access to EU projects commensurate with its potential and availability for constructive participation, not least to facilitate re-engagement with the Union.

Ukraine's integration connects the Hub directly with the defence of Europe's frontier and the future reconstruction of its economy. It also has a key role to play in the security of neighbours Moldova and Georgia and its interests align significantly with Türkiye's, so there is potential for cooperation in limiting Russia's actions.

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Engagement with Moldova and Georgia ensures that land-sea interdependencies are fully recognised. There can be no Black Sea security without securing the eastern shores as well as the western ones, for all the difficulties involved in implementation. Moreover, as EU enlargement is losing appeal among in the neighbourhood and within EU borders, **EU integration** and making the most of opportunities for **staged accession** could serve as more convincing and effective incentives for reform among the candidates, as well as proof of EU delivery.

5.4 Legal and Technical Challenges

Hybrid incidents in Exclusive Economic Zones and not only highlight gaps in jurisdiction and attribution. The Hub may therefore include a **legal advisory cell** linked to the EEAS legal service, supporting coastal states in interpreting EU and international maritime law, defining “intent” in ambiguous activities, and developing coordinated responses.

Equally vital are protocols for secure data handling, classification, and exchange with private operators. A **community of trust** among governments, infrastructure providers, and academia will underpin the Hub’s credibility.

6. Connectivity Equals Security: Linking Land and Sea

6.1 Infrastructure as Strategic Deterrence

Security in the twenty-first century is built as much on logistics and connectivity as on armaments. Ports, bridges, energy terminals, and data cables are not merely conduits of commerce; they are **strategic arteries of resilience**.

In the Black Sea, every bridge or port renovation contributes simultaneously to deterrence, integration, and recovery.

Europe must therefore view infrastructure as an **instrument of power projection and solidarity**. Investments through *Global Gateway* and *Military Mobility* should prioritise dual-use assets connecting the Black Sea to the **Danube corridor**, the **Western Balkans**, and **Central Asia**.

6.2 The Danube and the Wider Corridors

The Danube may represent both an economic lifeline and a potential rapid-deployment route in some circumstances, hence investment should continue in full navigability, modern bridges, and digitalised ports that could provide vital redundancy in crisis, even though structural factors may impede its development into a full-fledged alternative corridor for commercial transport or military mobility.

As a **route for military mobility**, it enhances NATO logistics and provides alternative export lines for Ukraine. Yet its infrastructure remains inconsistent: shallow waters, low bridges, and uneven port modernisation hamper efficiency. Modernising the Danube aligns with both **EU reconstruction efforts for Ukraine** and **energy-security objectives**. Removing bottlenecks
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also increases resilience against hybrid disruption, as seen in drone attacks near the river's mouths.

Beyond the Danube, the **Middle Corridor**—linking the Caspian, South Caucasus, and Black Sea—offers opportunities to link Central Asian economies with Europe. While current inefficiencies limit throughput, its geopolitical function is to maintain Western presence and counterbalance coercive dependencies on Russia or China (addressing the role of Central Asian countries in circumventing sanctions, in close cooperation with some EU governments and public or private operators is also highly relevant in context). Even if the corridor's economic potential remains modest, its political significance as a vector of engagement is undeniable.

6.3 Synchronisation with Global Gateway and Military Mobility

The Black Sea strategy should synchronise **Global Gateway connectivity investments** with **Military Mobility projects**, ensuring that civilian and defence infrastructures mutually reinforce each other. Military mobility can drive progress because governments see the value in fostering development to that end and it also benefits the economy.

Local authorities, regional agencies, and private investors should be systematically included to bridge the gap between Brussels-level decisions and on-the-ground execution. Currently, the critique is that the military mobility agenda in Brussels is not fully transferred in the capitals, political decisions are not well transferred to operational levels and that only 8-9% of projects for military mobility have a maritime dimension.

7. Economic, Societal, and Democratic Resilience

7.1 Economic Confidence and Innovation

Economic stability underpins political resilience. Investors require predictability, transparent governance, and mechanisms to mitigate risk. The Black Sea has long been trapped in a vicious circle of mutually reinforcing instability and underdevelopment due to limited interest from global companies, stemming from precisely its fragmentation and conflict profile.

To attract private capital, governments should establish **risk-sharing instruments**, specialised insurance schemes, and streamlined procedures for cross-border projects. Public funding must act as a catalyst: every euro of public investment can leverage multiple euros in private capital. This approach transforms economic recovery into a security multiplier.

Innovation and adaptability are central to deterrence. Capability and counter-capability evolve in real time and the time gap between the two has been shrinking rapidly. Ukraine's rapid innovation cycle in defence technologies serves as a powerful incentive for coopting Kyiv into the mobilisation of EU and NATO frameworks like **DIANA**, **Horizon Europe**, and the **Innovation Fund** to integrate Black Sea innovators into pan-European ecosystems.

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7.2 The Role of Civil Society and Academia

Civil society organisations and think-tanks sustain long-term resilience by linking institutions with citizens and by ensuring that the region remains on the European agenda even amid political fatigue.

To institutionalise expertise, a **Black Sea Knowledge Network** should be established, connecting universities, policy institutes, and naval academies. Through joint curricula, summer schools, and exchange programs, it would generate a shared epistemic community underpinning maritime security and regional cooperation.

7.3 Democratic and Information Resilience

Hybrid threats exploit divisions within societies. Disinformation, corruption, and governance weaknesses erode trust in democratic institutions. Countering these trends demands sustained support for **independent media**, **strategic communication**, and **civic education**. Information resilience also depends on creating credible channels for state-society dialogue and ensuring transparency in security-related policymaking. The credibility of Europe's engagement in the Black Sea will be measured not only in ships or budgets, but in **public confidence and societal cohesion**.

8. Regional Governance and Strategic Continuity

8.1 Multi-Level Governance

Resilience requires coherent governance across sectors and levels. Ministries of defence, transport, interior, and digital affairs must coordinate through permanent mechanisms linking national, EU, and regional initiatives.

Inter-ministerial taskforces should translate strategic objectives into operational milestones and ensure absorption of EU funds. Cooperation between national maritime-security centres and the future EU Hub will close existing gaps between operational and strategic levels.

8.2 Integration Across Theatres

Europe's flanks form an interconnected system: the **Baltic**, **Black Sea**, and **Mediterranean** must be treated as mutually reinforcing. NATO already aligns the Baltic with the High North and the Black Sea with the Western Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean; the EU should mirror this logic in its own planning. Strategic continuity also entails linking the Black Sea with **Central Asia** and the **South Caucasus**, recognising their shared vulnerability to coercion and their potential as partners in connectivity and energy diversification.

8.3 Managing Structural Competition

The Black Sea will remain contested. Russian and Turkish interests converge in preserving their privileged influence, yet diverge on long-term ambitions. The EU must manage—not

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eliminate—this structural competition by **shifting the regional incentive structure** toward transparency, economic interdependence, and the costliness of aggression. The Union’s value added is to act as the **third stabilising pole**, offering integration and investment rather than dominance.

9. Key Policy Directions

To translate strategic ambition into tangible outcomes, the following policy lines are essential:

- a. **Operationalise the EU Maritime Security Hub** by 2027 as a fully functional platform for information-sharing, training, and critical-infrastructure protection.
 - b. **Link the Hub to Odessa and other Ukrainian ports** to embed Ukraine’s maritime economy into EU frameworks.
 - c. **Invest in dual-use and digital infrastructure** under Global Gateway and Military Mobility, prioritising the Danube corridor, links to other strategic spaces and cross-border energy links.
 - d. **Institutionalise public–private cooperation** through advisory groups and standardised security-clearance systems for critical-infrastructure providers.
 - e. **Strengthen resilience legislation** to address hybrid threats below Article 5 thresholds and to clarify legal responsibilities within Exclusive Economic Zones.
 - f. **Promote regional ownership** by involving coastal states and immediate neighbours in EU-funded security initiatives wherever possible.
 - g. **Integrate economic and security policies**—recognising that deterrence rests on prosperity, innovation, and social trust.
 - h. **Ensure coherence across EU and NATO instruments**, avoiding duplication and establishing clear complementarity in planning, exercises, and capability development.
 - i. **Strategic urgency:** The war in Ukraine has made the Black Sea a testing ground for Europe’s capacity to act strategically and cohesively. Deliver visible progress soon, preferably before 2027, demonstrating that the EU can act strategically rather than rhetorically.
 - j. **Embed the Black Sea in Europe’s long-term enlargement and integration agenda**, shifting the paradigm from assistance to co-investment.
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10. Conclusions

The Black Sea has become Europe's strategic mirror: it reflects the continent's vulnerabilities and its capacity for renewal. It is not an outer border but the **centre of gravity** of a new European resilience architecture, as well as the testing ground for EU capacity to undertake a larger role as a global player.

Transforming the EU's Strategic Approach into action requires sustained leadership, regional ownership, cross-sectoral mobilisation and integration with the EU Maritime Security Strategy, EU Action Plan on Cable Security and other relevant EU initiatives aiming at 360 degrees defence of Europe's flanks.

Europe's credibility will be judged not by the eloquence of declarations but by the **infrastructure it builds, the partnerships it sustains, and the trust it inspires**.

The success of the Maritime Security Hub, the modernisation of the Danube, and the establishment of enduring public-private cooperation will determine whether the EU can protect its critical arteries and secure its neighbourhood.

The Black Sea is no longer a periphery of instability; it is a **laboratory of European strategic coherence**. The task ahead is to turn vulnerability into strength, connectivity into deterrence, and geography into strategy, **moving from admiring the strategic importance of the region to building its strategic infrastructure—together**.

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