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New security role emerges for Black Sea region

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Since 1991, the Black Sea has undergone a dramatic transformation. Once embedded within the communist world, it has now become a key point of intersection with considerable geopolitical significance.

Analysis by Paul Ciocoiu for Southeast European Times in Bucharest – 08/11/06

International Black Sea Action Day was marked on October 31st by Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. The annual event, launched ten years ago, seeks to promote co-operation among the six countries in addressing environmental issues in the area.

The occasion also provided an opportunity to reflect on the profound changes that have taken place in the region. Until 1991, all the Black Sea states except Turkey were in Moscow's sphere of influence. They were either members of the Soviet Union or belonged to the Warsaw Pact. Today, the Soviet Union no longer exists and the 44-year bipolar world order can be found only in the history books. Bulgaria and Romania have not only entered NATO, joining Turkey there, but are on the threshold of EU membership.

The Black Sea is located at the crossroads of three security spaces -- European, Euro-Asian and Islamic. Its new strategic configuration became evident as far back as the early 1990s, when the first pipeline projects for transporting energy from East to West were mapped out. Crisis intervened, however, in the form of conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and conflicts afflicting parts of the Caucasus -- Transdnestr, South Osethia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 spurred the West to rethink its perspective towards the Black Sea. NATO's long-term involvement in Afghanistan, the possibility of taking over some operations in Iraq, and the global war on terrorism in general shed a different light on the region.

Romania and Bulgaria's admission into NATO in 2004, along with Georgia and Ukraine's pro-Western course, took the area out of Europe's periphery. Leaders in Bucharest and Sofia opted both for the European integration and a pro-US and NATO-oriented strategic stance. Many analysts attribute this to a longstanding preoccupation in the two Balkan states with not falling prey to a continental hegemony, preferring a remoter great power.

According to Romanian President Traian Basescu, partnership with the United States is based on two elements: a US military presence in the form of bases, and the internationalisation of problems peculiar to this area. Romania supports the democratic process in the region and gives direct assistance to states in transition. It has a key role in ensuring regional security and stability, and Euro-Atlantic integration allows it to do so more fully.

On October 31st 1996, the six coastal states signed the Black Sea Strategic Action Plan for the Rehabilitation and Protection of the Black Sea, giving regional co-operation an environmental dimension. The Action Plan acknowledges that collective action is required from all Black Sea countries to reduce the impact of pollution on the Black Sea ecosystem, and to ensure a better life for the 16 million people living



The Black Sea region is a complicated intersection of societies, cultures and political systems. [Wikipedia]

in the area.

Influenced by political and military events, the Black Sea has become transformed into a complicated intersection of geopolitical and geo-economic boundaries, becoming also a framework within which the Euro-Atlantic community asserts itself. At no other frontier of NATO are the stakes as high when it comes to guaranteeing stability and peace. As before in history, the Black Sea is becoming once again a zone where opposites meet, overcome segregation and conflict, and work towards reconciliation.