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GUARDIANSHIP UNDER PRESSURE: DRONE ESCALATION, RUSSIAN MILITARIZATION, AND TÜRKIYE'S LEGAL ORDER IN THE BLACK SEA

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1. Introduction

The recent incident in which a surveillance drone, widely reported as Russian, was brought down by Turkish air assets near the Black Sea theatre once again illustrates how the Russia □□□□□□□ war continues to export escalation risks toward Türkiyes immediate maritime environment. It is observed that such episodes are not isolated tactical events but manifestations of a broader pattern in which the basin is drawn into an increasingly dense web of military activities and signalling. In parallel, Ukraines own use of long □□□□□ drones and maritime unmanned systems against targets in Crimea, Sevastopol, and along Russias Black Sea logistics routes has further contributed to a security environment in which offensive actions at sea are no longer the prerogative of a single party.

At the same time, the relative stability of the Black Sea since the Second World War has not been secured by episodes of confrontation between NATO and Russia, but by the disciplined application of international law □□□□□ all the Montreux Convention □□□ by Türkiyes cautious exercise of its responsibilities over the Straits. This commentary, therefore, argues that, under conditions of mounting militarization, it is Türkiyes law-based guardianship, rather than warfighting postures, that continues to constitute the primary anchor of order in the Black Sea and that frames the subsequent discussion of the evolving security environment, the Montreux regime, and emerging hybrid pressures.[1]

2. The evolving militarized environment

Russias annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked the beginning of a sustained militarization process in the Black Sea, in which Moscow has constructed an A2/AD architecture that increasingly turns the basin into a semi-closed and contested zone. In response to this environment, Ukraine has conducted a growing number of drone and maritime strike operations against Russian naval units, bases, and energy infrastructure in and around the Black Sea, reinforcing a pattern of reciprocal escalation at sea even as the underlying structural advantage remains with Moscows A2/AD posture.[2]

Successive deployments of coastal defense missile systems, reinforcement of the Black Sea Fleet, and the integration of drones and other unmanned systems into maritime operations have further consolidated this posture. In response, various NATO members and partners have periodically advocated for an expanded naval presence and more visible exercises, arguing that deterrence requires a larger regional footprint. However, such parallel buildups risk redefining the Black Sea as a permanent forward defense theater, thereby heightening the risk of escalation and placing additional pressure on the legal □□□□ political framework that has underpinned relative stability to date. The key question, therefore, is not which side prevails militarily but how stability can be maintained amid continuous confrontation.[3]

3. The Montreux anchor and Türkiyes guardianship role

Against this background of mounting military capabilities, the enduring significance of the Montreux Convention of 1936 becomes even more evident as the principal legal instrument that structures naval access to the Black Sea. By imposing apparent limitations on the tonnage, composition, and duration of stay of non-littoral warships, and by regulating passage through the Straits, Montreux creates structural constraints that prevent the basin from becoming an unrestricted arena of great □□□□□ naval rivalry. Türkiyes consistent and cautious implementation of these provisions over decades has enabled it to act as guardian of the Straits system, a role that AVİM commentaries have characterized as guardianship rather than domination, aimed at preserving equilibrium among competing interests rather than favoring any single bloc. In this perspective, neither episodic NATO deployments nor large-scale wars have been the authentic guarantors of stability; rather, it is international law, backed by Ankaras restraint, that has kept escalation in check. NATOs rotational naval presence may provide reassurance to allies, but under the strictures of the Montreux Convention, Türkiyes primary duty and added value are to keep the Black Sea non-militarized and stable to the greatest extent possible.[4]

4. Hybrid pressure and adaptation needs

Yet the very success of this law-based guardianship also exposes its vulnerability to forms of pressure that Montreux could not explicitly anticipate, particularly hybrid tactics that blur the boundary between peace and armed conflict. The increased use of armed and unarmed drones, electronic warfare assets, and other gray □□□□□ instruments in and around the Black Sea allows state actors to test thresholds, probe defences, and intimidate shipping without formally violating the Conventions provisions on warship tonnage and presence. In this environment, Türkiye faces the dual task of interpreting Montreux in light of new technologies while simultaneously defending the Conventions integrity against calls □□□□□□□ for more permissive or more restrictive readings □□□□□ would erode its stabilizing function. Whether through carefully calibrated preemptive restrictions, enhanced maritime and airspace surveillance, or discreet diplomatic

coordination with both littoral and non-littoral states, the core objective must remain de-escalation through law: preserving stability by measured, predictable enforcement rather than by aligning with maximalist alliance rhetoric or by accepting a drift toward permanent confrontation.[5]

5. Türkiye as arbiter, not frontline

Taken together, these dynamics underscore that Black Sea security is shaped by two competing logics: a confrontation logic driven by NATO □□□□□□ military posturing and an order logic grounded in Türkiyes implementation of international law, above all the Montreux Convention. The fact that the Black Sea has remained relatively insulated from the worst forms of open great □□□□□ war since 1945, despite recurrent crises and the current high-intensity conflict in Ukraine, attests to the weight of Türkiyes legal stewardship and its preference for equilibrium over bloc confrontation. In this sense, the continuation of this guardianship function □□□□□□□□□ balanced, and sensitive to regional ownership □□□□□□□ the sole credible guarantee that the Black Sea will not become another theatre of uncontrolled confrontation, and it points toward a policy course that privileges multilateral dialogue and faithful application of Montreux procedures over further expansion of military presence as the primary instrument of security.[6]

*Picture: Daily Sabah

[1] Euro Maiden, Frontline Report: Russian Drone Incurssionspush Turkey tothe Brinkof closing Black Sea shippingroutes Euromaidan Press, December 26, 2025, https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/12/26/frontline-report-2025-12-25/, accessed January 5, 2026

[2] Natalie Sabanadze, Gali Dalay, Understanding Russias Black Sea Strategy: Summary, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, July 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/understanding-russias-black-sea-strategy/summary , accessed January 5, 2026.

[3] Ben Hodges, Steven Horrell, and Ivanna Kuz, Russias Militarization of the Black Sea: Implications for the United States and NATO (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, December 6, 2022), https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/russias-militarization-of-the-black-sea-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/, accessed January 5, 2026.

[4] Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Black Sea, AVİM, 2025, https://avim.org.tr/Tags/Black-Sea

, accessed January 5, 2026.

[5] Ben Hodges, Joseph L. Votel, and William Courtney; Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Black Sea Attacks on Merchant Vessels: Türkiyes EEZ, the Montreux Regime, and the Risk of War Spillover, AVİM Commentary no. 2025/53, December 2, 2025, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), https://www.avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/BLACK-SEA-ATTACKS-ON-MERCHANT-VESSELS-TURKIYE-S-EEZ-THE-MONTREUX-REGIME-AND-THE-RISK-OF-WAR-SPILLOVER, accessed January 5, 2026.

[6] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Black Sea Attacks on Merchant Vessels: Türkiyes EEZ, the Montreux Regime, and the Risk of War Spillover, AVİM Commentary no. 2025/53, December 2, 2025, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), https://www.avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/BLACK-SEA-ATTACKS-ON-MERCHANT-VESSELS-TURKIYE-S-EEZ-THE-MONTREUX-REGIME-AND-THE-RISK-OF-WAR-SPILLOVER, accessed January 5, 2026.

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