

GUARDIANSHIP OR EQUILIBRIUM? POWER, AND THE LEGACY OF ORDER IN THE BLACK SEA

Teoman Ertuğrul TULUN

Analyst

Analysis No : 2025 / 20

02.09.2025

The confluence of history, law, and power in the Black Sea is now being tested as never before. As renewed rivalry, technological change, and expanding maritime interests redraw the regions strategic map, fundamental questions emerge: What sustains equilibrium in a basin historically marked by contestation? How should inherited legal frameworks and diplomatic conventions adapt to pressures from both old adversaries and new actors? This analysis □□□□□ in a series of three □□□□ whether the principle of guardianship or the logic of equilibrium best encapsulates the legacy of order in the Black Sea, focusing on the evolution, resilience, and limitations of the Montreux Convention.

The subsequent analyses build on this foundation. In this regard, the second one will probe the shifting operational challenges that confront Black Sea littorals today, examining how local actors are responding to hybrid threats, advancing multilateral security cooperation, and negotiating external ambitions, all while striving to uphold the inherited legal-strategic architecture. The final one will critically interrogate international discourses (Russian, Western, and Chinese) that now seek to redefine the regions norms and boundaries, assessing their implicit risks and potential for realignment.

Taken together, this trilogy aims to offer a holistic portrait of the Black Seas contemporary dilemma and strive to find answers to the following questions: can legal durability, adaptive diplomacy, and regional stewardship withstand mounting pressures for external intervention and strategic revision, or is a new epoch of instability and contestation looming on the horizon?

The Enduring Architecture of Security

The Black Seas geopolitical fragility, historically shaped by the ebb and flow of imperial ambitions, military rivalries, and significant power interventions, has consistently

demanded clear rules governing maritime use and sovereign rights[1]. Following centuries marked by contest and conflict □□□□□□□□□□□□□□ confrontations, shifting alliances, and the turbulence brought on by two world wars □□□□ need for a legal regime to mediate competing interests reached its zenith in the interwar years[2]. The result was not only the codification of principles, but the deliberate establishment of a maritime architecture whose endurance would be regularly tested but seldom matched in international law[3].

Central to this architecture is the Montreux Convention of 1936, a treaty that defined the rights of passage through the Turkish Straits and established strict regimes for military and commercial vessels. Rather than being merely reactive to the circumstances of 1930s Europe, the Montreux system was constructed to mediate between the security fears of littoral states and the ambitions of extra-regional powers, thereby embedding a delicate synthesis of sovereignty, access, and stability.

The Convention, signed at Montreux Palace and coming into force on November 9, 1936, carried both historical lessons and diplomatic innovation, with each key power aiming to balance its own interests while allowing for Turkish stewardship of this crossroads [4]. This document affirmed Türkiyes role as a steward □□□□□□□□ it the prerogative to regulate straits traffic in both times of war and peace, with powers calibrated to the evolving threat environment while preserving the Black Sea region's distinct character.

This regime, reinforced by Cold War realities, positioned the Turkish state as both a guardian and an arbiter of the region. Throughout the decades, Ankaras management of the Montreux regime has become a touchstone for Black Sea security, respected by allies and adversaries alike for its consistency and restraint[5]. The systems longevity is evident: even as crises have erupted □□□□ Cold War missile standoffs to todays hybrid conflicts, technological advances, and shifting alliance loyalties □□□ Conventions logic survives. Its calibrated differentiation between littoral and non-littoral navies, time and tonnage limits, and special wartime clauses have allowed adaptive resilience, preventing escalation while providing predictability[6].

Recent scholarship continues to highlight both the limitations and the ongoing necessity of the Montreux framework. While not eliminating security dilemmas, the Convention creates a unique regional balance and provides Türkiye with the legal mechanisms required to exercise diplomacy amidst intensified pressures from NATO, Russia, the EU, or emerging economic actors.

The contemporary security discourse, influenced by renewed Russian assertiveness, heightened Western interest, and technological transformation, continues to stress-test this legal framework. Yet the Montreux framework, and Türkiyes capable stewardship, remain the regions primary bulwark □□ testament both to the foresight of its interwar architects and to its adaptability in practice.

Contested Narratives and Historical Claims

The durability of the Black Seas legal order has long rested on both the codification of

principles and the prudent stewardship of regional powers. Yet beneath this apparent consensus, the regions history remains a dense web of political memory, revisionist claim-making, and strategic reinterpretation. As the Montreux Convention endures, so too do persistent challenges driven by the narratives of both maritime powers and aspiring extra-regional actors. Smoothly transitioning from the enduring architecture laid out previously, this context now sets the stage for the contest over history itself. [7].

In recent decades, Russian strategic doctrine has increasingly drawn on deep-seated imperial and Soviet-era memories to justify contemporary ambitions in the Black Sea □□ trend evident in official rhetoric and policy papers alike. These claims often cite a legacy of historic responsibility and invoke selective episodes, such as the naval campaigns of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as Soviet-era regional dominance. Western and NATO analyses, by contrast, tend to frame Black Sea access in terms of legal rights, liberal norms, and the imperatives of alliance security, sometimes allied with interpretations of the Montreux Convention that privilege open navigation over strict regional stewardship. Foreign commentaries frequently emphasize the Black Seas role as a potential flashpoint with Russia, underscored by recent military escalations and calls for multinational peace guarantees[8].

These competing perspectives risk conflating imperial memory and the language of precedent with actual legal standing; the Convention itself was not conceived as an extension of any single states historic prerogative, but as a corrective to centuries of instability and conflict. In this light, revisionist ambitions □□□□□□□ expressed through lobbying for expanded NATO access or regional condominium arrangements □□□□ a threat to the living balance that Montreux created. The push from some powers for a division of security responsibilities or a special role for non-littoral actors often sidesteps the foundational requirement for mutual restraint and the necessity of Turkish-led mediation.

Contemporary diplomatic disputes and security dilemmas must therefore be read through both legal and historical lenses. While historical claims shape perceptions and policy language, they cannot supplant codified international law or the enduring legitimacy of regional stewardship. Türkiyes diplomatic activism, rooted in this layered understanding, aims not only to defend its legacy but to prevent the weaponization of history against present-day stability. In the struggle against narrative-based revisionism, the region finds stability only in upholding the hard-won equilibrium that Montreux codifies. [9].

Legal Mechanisms and Strategic Prerogatives

The sequence from historical contestation to contemporary security dilemmas finds its crucial axis in the interpretation and defense of legal mechanisms, most notably the Montreux Convention and the evolving web of sovereignty principles that encircle it. Transitioning smoothly from the contest of narratives and claims, this subheading examines how shifting strategic imperatives have led to competing projects for the Black Seas future □□□□ seeking either to reaffirm or reinterpret the regions legal architecture. [10]

.

At the center stands the Montreux Convention, whose capacity for adaptation gives it more resilience than nearly any comparable maritime regime; its carefully constructed rules regarding naval passage, tonnage, and presence (especially in times of crisis) make it a living mechanism, not a static relic. The ability to regulate the entry of non-littoral naval powers has repeatedly insulated the Black Sea from spillover conflicts, reinforcing a regional ethos that prizes autonomy and predictability. Türkiyes stewardship has anchored this balance, but recent pressures have prompted renewed discussion of how far flexible interpretation should go.[11].

New scholarship and diplomatic discourse illuminate persistent tensions: some Western commentators draw Persian Gulf analogies, arguing for greater multinational security guarantees and regular patrols reminiscent of extraterritorial interventions in other strategic waterways. Such perspectives risk overlooking the specificity of regional interests and the legal logic of the Montreux Convention, which was explicitly designed to limit the military reach of foreign powers and protect the Black Seas unique strategic ecology. Recent events □□□□□ as proposals for NATO-led mission expansion or multinational security coalitions □□□□□□ concerns about precedent erosion and invite reactive counter-strategies from Russia and others.[12].

Simultaneously, Russia and certain regional actors cite sovereignty and historic entitlement, arguing for an exclusive or co-managed security system that sidesteps broader multilateralism and diminishes the diplomatic space for smaller littoral states. This transactional approach threatens not only to hollow out the legal regime but also to destabilize the fragile equilibrium among littoral actors, advancing unilateral security prerogatives at the expense of collective interests.[13].

In practice, the Montreux framework remains robust against most revisionist and extraterritorial pressures. Its clauses for extraordinary wartime administration, crisis-driven suspension, and temporary recalibration have allowed Türkiye □□□ guardian and arbitrator □□□ exercise restraint and adaptation without sacrificing foundational principles. Nevertheless, institutional resilience demands vigilant defense, cautious adjustment, and persistent urging for regional responsibility: only through legal continuity and strategic foresight will equilibrium prevail over a return to unchecked power politics.

Conclusion: The Balance of Independent Action and Constraint

The Black Seas enduring stability rests not on the pursuit of abstract security guarantees or the imposition of new great-power designs, but on the measured interplay of regional agency and legal constraint. This architecture □□□□□□□□ by the Montreux Convention □□□□□□□ a bulwark against escalating revisionism, even as relentless pressure for reinterpretation echoes across diplomatic and analytic circles. The Conventions pragmatic blend of sovereignty, flexibility, and mutual restraint, solidified by Türkiyes custodianship, exemplifies how agency is maximized not by unchecked autonomy, but by a strategic acceptance of constraint - channeling ambitions within

constructive norms, and insulating the littoral from destabilizing external precedents.[14].

Durable peace in the Black Sea thus requires a calibrated respect for the foundational frameworks painstakingly constructed across generations. Innovations that solve todays crises by recasting the legal order risk undermining the regions delicate equilibrium and increasing the likelihood of future instability. The temptation to compare the Black Sea to other strategic seas □□□□□□□ the Persian Gulf, the Baltic, or the South China Sea—obscures the unique history and logic of this maritime space[15].

The coming period, marked by technological transformation, shifting alliance patterns, and the growing importance of energy and trade corridors, will once again test this hard-won balance. The region's future will be determined precisely at the intersection of operational adaptation and respect for legal tradition. This issue will be explored in greater detail in the following analysis, focusing on the operational challenges, risks, and adaptations faced by coastal states under the pressure of hybrid warfare and shifting balances of power.

*Picture: *Johns Hopkins*

[1] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, THE FOUNDATIONAL PILLARS OF STABILITY IN THE BLACK SEA, AVİM, July 3, 2025, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-FOUNDATIONAL-PILLARS-OF-STABILITY-IN-THE-BLACK-SEA.

[2] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Careful Management Of The Implementation Of The 1936 Montreux Convention In A Difficult And Changing Geopolitical Environment Of The Black Sea, Center for Eurasian Studies, January 18, 2024, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/CAREFUL-MANAGEMENT-OF-THE-IMPLEMENTATION-OF-THE-1936-MONTREUX-CONVENTION-IN-A-DIFFICULT-AND-CHANGING-GEOPOLITICAL-ENVIRONMENT-OF-THE-BLACK-SEA.

[3] Turgut Kerem Tuncel, THE GRAIN INITIATIVE AND THE BLACK SEA SECURITY - II, AVİM, July 23, 2025, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-GRAIN-INITIATIVE-AND-THE-BLACK-SEA-SECURITY-II ; 4. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, BLACK SEA, A POTENTIAL FRICTION VENUE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST: TURKEY HOLDS THE KEY TO THE REGION, AVİM, March 13, 2017, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/BLACK-SEA-A-POTENTIAL-FRICTION-VENUE-BETWEEN-RUSSIA-AND-THE-WEST-TURKEY-HOLDS-THE-KEY-TO-THE-REGION.

[4] Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. 173, p. 213, 1936, https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf.

[5] Yücel Güçlü, Regulation of the Passage Through the Turkish Straits and the Montreux Convention, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2001): 105 □□□□□ https://www.sam.gov.tr/media/perceptions/archive/vol6/20010300/Perceptions%20March%20-%20May%202001/REGULATION%20OF%20THE%20PASSAGE%20THROUGH%20THE%20TURKISH%20S

[6] Beril Karadeniz, Security and Stability Architecture in the Black Sea, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 12, no. 4 (2007): 89-110, https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/816543 ;

[7] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, THE FOUNDATIONAL PILLARS OF STABILITY IN THE BLACK SEA,

[8] Chatham House, Understanding Russias Black Sea strategy, July 27, 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/understanding-russias-black-sea-strategy/summary ; Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Careful Management Of The Implementation Of The 1936 Montreux Convention In A Difficult And Changing Geopolitical Environment Of The Black Sea,

[9] Atlantic Council, A Security Strategy for the Black Sea, December 13, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/AC-Black-Sea-Strategy-ack-revised.pdf ; Kyivindependent, Rutte, Erdogan discuss Ukraine peace process, Black Sea security, August 19, 2025, https://kyivindependent.com/rutte-erdogan-discuss-ukraine-peace-process-black-sea-security/

[10] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Careful Management Of The Implementation Of The 1936 Montreux Convention In A Difficult And Changing Geopolitical Environment Of The Black Sea, ; Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Turkish Straits: The Montreux Convention and Contemporary Security,

[11] Beril Karadeniz, Security and Stability Architecture in the Black Sea, ; Yücel Güçlü, Regulation of the Passage Through the Turkish Straits and the Montreux Convention,

[12] Pınar Gözen Ercan, Turkeys Maritime Regime under the Montreux Convention: Security Challenges and Opportunities, Bilge Strateji 12, no. 22 (2020): 115 □□□□□ https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1561689.

[13] Emre Erşen, The Geopolitics of the Black Sea and the Future of the Montreux Convention, Turkish Policy Quarterly 18, no. 3 (2019): 41 □□□□ https://turkishpolicy.com/article/973/the-geopolitics-of-the-black-sea-and-the-future-of-the-montreux-convention.

[14] Serhat Güvenç and Nihan Er, The Montreux Convention: Key to Stability in the Black Sea, *German Marshall Fund of the United States* Policy Brief, July 2020, https://www.gmfus.org/news/montreux-convention-key-stability-black-sea

[15] Louis Fishman, The Turkish Straits: At the Intersection of Politics and Law, *Middle East Institute*, July 6, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkish-straits-intersection-politics-and-law

About the Author :

Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun is an analyst at Ankara-based think-tank Center for Eurasian Studies. Dr. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun received his Ph.D. in Political Science and Public Administration from İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University in Ankara. His area of research include European Union Studies, Globalization, Xenophobia, Hate Speech Studies and International Relations.

To cite this article: TULUN, Teoman Ertuğrul. 2026. "GUARDIANSHIP OR EQUILIBRIUM? POWER, AND THE LEGACY OF ORDER IN THE BLACK SEA." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Analysis No.2025 / 20. September 02. Accessed November 23, 2026. https://www.avim.org.tr/public/index.php/en/Analiz/GUARDIANSHIP-OR-EQUILIBRIUM-POWER-AND-THE-LEGACY-OF-ORDER-IN-THE-BLACK-SEA

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

© 2009-2025 Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) All Rights Reserved