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# Strategic Lessons from the Black Sea for the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean

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## Abstract

The war in Ukraine has accelerated a transformation in maritime warfare, demonstrating that unmanned systems, precision strike capabilities and attacks against critical infrastructure can challenge conventional naval superiority. The Black Sea has emerged as an operational environment in which technological innovation, geographic constraints and geopolitical competition interact to reshape established assumptions about sea control and deterrence. For Greece, these developments carry direct implications for national defence, the security of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, NATO's southern flank and the protection of European maritime infrastructure.

This analysis argues that Greece should adopt a comprehensive maritime-security approach that integrates conventional naval capabilities with autonomous systems, maritime-domain awareness, counter-drone defence, infrastructure resilience and regional cooperation. The objective should not be to replace traditional sea power, but to adapt it to an environment in which the ability to detect, interpret and respond to emerging threats is as important as the platforms available to engage them.

**Keywords:** Greece, sea power, Hellenic Navy, Black Sea, Aegean Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, NATO, maritime security, autonomous systems, deterrence, critical infrastructure.

## The Changing Strategic Character of Sea Power

The Black Sea has become one of the most important operational laboratories of contemporary maritime warfare. The conflict following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has challenged assumptions about the relationship between fleet size, technological superiority and control of maritime space. The use of relatively inexpensive unmanned surface vessels, the vulnerability of naval bases and commercial shipping, and the increasing strategic

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significance of energy infrastructure have demonstrated that maritime power is undergoing a substantial transformation.

For Greece, these developments should not be treated as lessons relevant exclusively to the Black Sea. The country's maritime geography, its extensive island environment, its position along major commercial routes and its responsibilities within NATO and the European Union make the evolution of naval warfare a direct national-security concern.

The central issue is not whether conventional naval forces will retain their importance. They will. Rather, it is whether established naval structures, operational doctrines and defence-investment priorities can adapt sufficiently quickly to emerging technologies and changing patterns of strategic competition.

From a Greek strategic perspective, sea power must be understood as the combined capacity to maintain a credible maritime presence, protect national interests, preserve freedom of action and deter coercion across a geographically complex operational environment.

The experience of the Black Sea provides a useful starting point for examining how Greece can strengthen that capacity.

## The Black Sea as a Strategic Case Study

Three interconnected developments make the Black Sea particularly relevant to Greek defence planning.

First, the conflict has demonstrated that an adversary does not necessarily require a conventional fleet comparable to that of its opponent to impose substantial operational costs. Ukraine's maritime-drone campaign has constrained Russian naval operations and demonstrated the disruptive potential of relatively inexpensive systems when employed alongside intelligence, targeting and persistent operational pressure.

Second, the war has reinforced the vulnerability of maritime infrastructure. Ports, merchant shipping, offshore facilities and energy-related assets can become targets in conflicts whose consequences extend beyond the immediate theatre. Disruptions to grain exports and commercial navigation have also demonstrated the relationship between regional maritime insecurity and global economic stability.

Third, the conflict has highlighted the importance of geography and legal frameworks. The Montreux Convention has shaped naval movements through the Turkish Straits, illustrating how maritime access, international law and regional political decisions can influence the operational balance.

These developments suggest that maritime superiority should not be measured exclusively by fleet tonnage, the number of major surface combatants or the sophistication of individual weapons systems.

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A more comprehensive assessment must consider surveillance, resilience, the ability to distribute forces, the protection of bases and infrastructure, the integration of autonomous platforms and the sustainability of operations under prolonged pressure.

For Greece, the strategic significance of these lessons lies in their implications for the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, where geography, military deterrence, commercial navigation and critical infrastructure intersect.

## Greece's Maritime Geography and the Requirements of Deterrence

Greece occupies a strategically important position at the intersection of the Aegean, the Ionian Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Its island geography, extensive coastline and proximity to major maritime corridors create both strategic advantages and substantial defence requirements.

The Aegean presents particular operational challenges because of its numerous islands, confined waters and complex maritime environment. The Eastern Mediterranean introduces a different but interconnected set of considerations, including energy security, access to international shipping routes, regional military competition and the protection of maritime infrastructure.

These environments require a naval force capable of operating across different geographical and operational conditions while maintaining readiness and credible deterrence.

For the Hellenic Navy, conventional capabilities remain indispensable. Frigates, submarines, fast attack craft, maritime surveillance assets and supporting logistical infrastructure provide essential elements of national defence. Their effectiveness, however, increasingly depends on the quality of the information available to commanders and the integration of complementary capabilities.

The strategic requirement is therefore a balanced force rather than a choice between traditional platforms and emerging technologies.

Unmanned systems can expand surveillance coverage, reduce the exposure of personnel to certain risks and provide additional options for monitoring maritime activity. Integrated sensors and secure communications can improve the speed and quality of operational decision-making. Electronic warfare and counter-drone capabilities can strengthen force protection.

These investments should be assessed according to their contribution to deterrence, operational resilience and the protection of Greek national interests.

Deterrence depends not only on the capacity to impose costs on an adversary, but also on the ability to deny an adversary the expectation of achieving its objectives at an acceptable cost.

## Autonomous Systems and the Future of Naval Operations

The rapid development of unmanned maritime systems represents one of the most consequential changes in contemporary naval warfare.

Unmanned surface vessels, autonomous underwater vehicles and aerial drones can contribute to surveillance, reconnaissance, mine countermeasures and the protection of maritime

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infrastructure. When integrated effectively with crewed platforms, they can extend operational awareness and allow navies to distribute selected functions across a wider network of systems.

For Greece, these capabilities offer particular potential because of the geographical demands associated with monitoring island approaches, remote maritime areas and critical infrastructure.

Autonomous systems could supplement existing surveillance arrangements, support hydrographic and seabed monitoring, and improve the safety and efficiency of mine countermeasure operations. Their employment may also allow expensive conventional platforms to concentrate on missions that require their distinctive capabilities.

Nevertheless, technological enthusiasm must be accompanied by operational realism.

Autonomous systems remain dependent on communications, navigation, data processing, maintenance and reliable command arrangements. Their effectiveness may be reduced by electronic warfare, environmental conditions, cyber interference and the difficulty of interpreting complex operational situations.

They also introduce legal and ethical questions concerning accountability, the use of force and human control over consequential decisions.

Greece should therefore pursue a phased approach to autonomy, beginning with clearly defined operational requirements and progressively incorporating systems that demonstrate measurable value in exercises and operational evaluation.

The objective should be interoperability and mission effectiveness, not the acquisition of autonomous technology simply because it is becoming more prominent in contemporary warfare.

### Counter-Drone Defence and the Economics of Naval Warfare

The Black Sea conflict has exposed a fundamental problem for modern naval forces: the imbalance between the cost of an attacking system and the resources required to intercept it.

A relatively inexpensive unmanned platform may force a defender to use a substantially more expensive interceptor. Repeated attacks can place pressure on ammunition stocks, operational readiness and defence budgets, particularly when an adversary can deploy large numbers of expendable systems.

This cost asymmetry challenges conventional approaches to force protection.

For Greece, counter-drone defence should become an integral component of maritime planning rather than an auxiliary function within existing air-defence arrangements.

An effective approach requires layered detection and response capabilities, combining appropriate radar and electro-optical sensors, electronic warfare where suitable, short-range weapons and other proportionate means of defence. The specific combination must reflect the characteristics of the threat, the protected asset and the operational environment.

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The same principle applies to naval bases, commercial ports, island infrastructure and offshore installations.

Protection cannot rely exclusively on high-end naval weapons or assume that every threat will be detected by a single surveillance system. It requires coordinated procedures, reliable information exchange and a clear understanding of the responsibilities of military and civilian authorities.

For Greek defence planners, the policy priority is to improve the sustainability of defensive operations while ensuring that the response remains proportionate to the threat.

This involves not only procurement but also doctrine, training, ammunition planning, maintenance and the integration of national capabilities with NATO procedures.

## Critical Maritime Infrastructure and National Resilience

Maritime security increasingly extends beneath the surface and beyond the immediate operating area of naval forces.

Submarine telecommunications cables, pipelines, port facilities, energy installations and shipping-related infrastructure support essential economic and governmental functions. Their disruption may generate consequences that extend across national borders and affect the wider European economy.

Greece's geographical position and maritime economy make infrastructure protection an important component of national resilience.

Ports support commercial activity and tourism while also contributing to the movement of essential supplies and, under appropriate arrangements, allied military logistics. Telecommunications infrastructure supports economic activity and governmental functions. Maritime energy projects and associated transport networks can affect national and regional energy security.

The protection of these assets requires an integrated approach involving the Hellenic Navy, the Hellenic Coast Guard, relevant ministries, port authorities, energy operators, telecommunications providers and other infrastructure stakeholders.

Three policy priorities follow.

First, Greece should strengthen maritime-domain awareness by improving the integration of information from relevant military, civilian and commercial sources.

Second, it should develop clearer arrangements for assessing and responding to suspicious activity around critical infrastructure, including procedures for cooperation among agencies and operators.

Third, it should strengthen resilience through risk assessments, incident-response planning, redundancy where feasible and regular exercises involving the organisations responsible for infrastructure protection.

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The aim should be to reduce the likelihood that a localised incident can produce disproportionate strategic or economic consequences.

### NATO, the European Union and Regional Maritime Cooperation

Greece's maritime-security policy operates within a broader institutional environment shaped by NATO, the European Union and regional partnerships.

NATO provides a framework for collective defence, maritime cooperation, intelligence exchange and interoperability. The European Union contributes through maritime-security initiatives, infrastructure resilience, industrial policy and the development of relevant technological capabilities.

These frameworks are complementary but not interchangeable. NATO's principal contribution concerns collective defence and military coordination, while the EU has important roles in economic resilience, regulation, infrastructure protection and industrial development.

For Greece, the challenge is to connect these instruments without creating unnecessary duplication or fragmented national responsibilities.

Regional cooperation also remains important. Coordination with Cyprus is particularly relevant to the security of the Eastern Mediterranean. Cooperation with other regional partners can support maritime awareness, search and rescue, mine countermeasures, infrastructure protection and the security of commercial navigation.

The Black Sea experience further demonstrates the importance of regional legal arrangements. The Montreux Convention, which regulates passage through the Turkish Straits, remains a significant factor in the strategic environment linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean.

Its implications should be understood within the framework of international law and the distinct responsibilities of the states concerned.

For Greece, regional cooperation should focus on practical outcomes: common operating procedures, information exchange, regular exercises and the capacity to coordinate responses to incidents that cross national or institutional boundaries.

Partnerships become strategically meaningful when political commitments translate into usable operational capabilities.

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## Policy Recommendations for Greece

The strategic lessons of the Black Sea suggest that Greece should prioritise a set of mutually reinforcing measures.

**First, establish a more integrated maritime-security framework.** Improve coordination among the Hellenic Navy, Coast Guard, civilian authorities and infrastructure operators, with clear responsibilities for surveillance, incident response and crisis management.

**Second, accelerate the operational integration of unmanned systems.** Prioritise missions in which autonomous surface, underwater and aerial platforms can demonstrably improve surveillance, mine countermeasures, infrastructure monitoring and force protection.

**Third, develop sustainable counter-drone capabilities.** Assess defensive systems according to detection performance, effectiveness against relevant threats, lifecycle costs and the ability to sustain operations during repeated attacks.

**Fourth, strengthen critical-infrastructure resilience.** Improve risk assessments, information sharing, incident-response arrangements and coordination with the operators of ports, energy facilities and undersea infrastructure.

**Fifth, align technological modernisation with doctrine and personnel development.** Investment in new platforms should be accompanied by training, operational experimentation, maintenance capacity and the development of appropriate command procedures.

**Sixth, deepen NATO and European cooperation.** Use existing frameworks to improve interoperability, share relevant lessons and strengthen industrial and technological cooperation without sacrificing national operational requirements.

**Seventh, strengthen the national maritime-industrial and knowledge base.** Encourage appropriate cooperation among defence industries, shipbuilders, universities, research institutions and maritime operators to support innovation, testing and sustainment.

These measures should be implemented through a prioritised programme informed by threat assessments, operational requirements and budgetary sustainability. The objective is not to acquire every emerging technology, but to ensure that Greece can identify, deter and respond to the threats most relevant to its strategic environment.

## Conclusion

The Black Sea has demonstrated that the future of maritime warfare will be shaped by the interaction of conventional naval forces, autonomous technologies, critical infrastructure and geopolitical competition.

The lessons for Greece are clear. Traditional naval capabilities remain essential, but they must be supported by better surveillance, integrated command arrangements, sustainable counter-drone defence and stronger protection of maritime infrastructure.

The Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean possess distinct strategic characteristics, and the Black Sea experience should not be transferred mechanically to Greek defence planning.

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Nevertheless, the operational principles emerging from the conflict are relevant: technological adaptation matters, the protection of infrastructure is inseparable from maritime security, and effective deterrence depends on the integration of capabilities rather than the accumulation of platforms alone.

Greece's maritime position remains a source of national strength. Realising that potential requires a comprehensive strategy that connects naval power with technological innovation, economic resilience, professional expertise and international cooperation.

Ultimately, sea power is not defined solely by the number of warships in service. It is defined by the capacity to understand the maritime environment, protect vital interests, maintain a credible presence and preserve freedom of action under conditions of uncertainty.

For Greece, adapting sea power to the realities of autonomous warfare is therefore not simply a military modernisation challenge. It is a strategic requirement for national security, European maritime resilience and the credibility of deterrence on NATO's southern flank.

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