

The Black Sea as a normative laboratory: the usefulness and limitations of thought experiments in maritime security analysis

A case study on Romania, 2022–2026

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Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point a set of speculative scenarios concerning maritime security and subjects them to a methodological test: under what conditions does a thought experiment (Gedankenexperiment) yield verifiable knowledge in security studies, and when does it remain a rhetorical device? We applied the rigorous counterfactual criteria formulated by Fearon and by Tetlock and Belkin to four scenarios relating to the Black Sea basin: the disappearance of the maritime legal order, the regime of the Montreux Convention, the security dilemma in a closed basin, and sabotage of undersea infrastructure by an unknown perpetrator. The results partially contradict initial intuitions. The abolition of naval policing does not halt global trade, but redistributes its costs through insurance premiums, rerouting and convoys, as demonstrated by the Gulf of Aden after 2008 and the Red Sea after 2023. In the Black Sea, security has historically been achieved through restricted access, not through freedom of navigation, which reverses the Grotiusian paradigm of the high seas. The incident at the Port of Constanța on 5 June 2026 shows that the ambiguity of attribution stems not only from the deliberate actions of the adversary, but also from the autonomous systems of partners. The extension of the mandate of the MCM Black Sea Task Force to the protection of critical subsea infrastructure, signed on 8 July 2026, provides an empirical argument — drawn from a unique case, yet one that is structurally difficult to explain through rival theories — against Hardin's model and in favour of the polycentric governance described by Ostrom. The article proposes an admissibility criterion for counterfactual scenarios used in defence planning, applied, in this version, both to the scenarios examined and to the author's own conclusions.

Keywords: maritime security; thought experiment; counterfactual analysis; the Black Sea; the Montreux Convention; critical subsea infrastructure; polycentric governance; Romania.

Abstract

This paper takes a set of speculative scenarios on maritime security and subjects them to a methodological test: under what conditions does a thought experiment yield verifiable knowledge in security studies, and when does it remain a rhetorical device. I apply the criteria for rigorous counterfactuals set out by Fearon and by Tetlock and Belkin to four Black Sea scenarios: the collapse of the maritime legal order, the Montreux Convention regime, the security dilemma in an enclosed basin, and unattributed sabotage of undersea infrastructure.

The findings partly contradict initial intuitions. Removing naval policing does not halt global trade; it redistributes its costs through insurance premiums, rerouting and convoying, as the Gulf of Aden after 2008 and the Red Sea after 2023 demonstrate. In the Black Sea, security has historically been achieved by restricting access rather than through freedom of navigation, thereby inverting the Grotian paradigm. The incident of 5 June 2026 in the Port of Constanța shows that attribution ambiguity arises not only from adversarial design but also from partners' autonomous systems. The extension on 8 July 2026 of the MCM Black Sea Task Group's mandate to include the protection of critical undersea infrastructure provides empirical support — drawn from a single case, albeit one structurally difficult to reconcile with rival explanations — against Hardin's model and in favour of Ostrom's polycentric governance. The paper proposes an admissibility test for counterfactual scenarios used in defence planning, and applies it, in this version, to its own conclusions as well as to the scenarios under review.

Keywords: maritime security; thought experiment; counterfactual analysis; Black Sea; Montreux Convention; critical undersea infrastructure; polycentric governance; Romania.

1. Introduction: from metaphor to research tool

Analysis of maritime security frequently draws on speculative scenarios. Authors imagine an ocean without rules, a strait suddenly closed off, a pipeline severed by an unknown actor, and then draw conclusions about defence policy from these fictions. This approach has a long-standing justification.

Weber¹ considered that causal judgement in the social sciences always involves a thought experiment in which the researcher removes an element of reality and assesses the probable course of events in its absence. The problem arises in the transition from heuristics to evidence. A scenario that is convincing through its narrative plausibility, rather than through its ability to distinguish between rival theories.

The article proposes four such scenarios: the abolition of the maritime legal order, the Montreux Convention paradox, the dilemma of absolute security in a narrow basin, and the vulnerability of submarine infrastructure. Each concludes with a firm conclusion. None specifies what observation might refute it. We set out to do two things: to reconstruct these scenarios as testable counterfactual hypotheses and to test them against the evidence accumulated in the Black Sea basin between February 2022 and July 2026.

We therefore put forward four theses.

First: the 'lawless ocean' scenario fails as an evidential tool, because its premise requires a radical rewriting of the world; when replaced by a limited counterfactual, it produces a prediction different from the intuitive one, namely the redistribution of trade costs, not the cessation of trade.

Second: in the Black Sea, the security order is based on restricting access, which overturns the liberal assumption that freedom of navigation is a source of stability.

Thirdly: the scarce resource in the grey-zone conflict is not force, but attribution, and the ambiguity of attribution also has unintended sources, as demonstrated by the explosion at the Port of Constanța on 5 June 2026.

¹Weber, M. (1906). Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik. Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, 22.

Fourth: the allied coastal states have resolved a problem of collective action without a hegemon and without a world government, which provides empirical support for Ostrom's model as opposed to Hardin's, with the limitations — and the rival hypotheses — which we discuss in section 7.

2. Method: what a thought experiment can and cannot do

Security studies use counterfactuals in two distinct modes. In heuristic mode, the scenario serves to generate hypotheses and break the analytical routine. In probative mode, it functions as a substitute for the controlled experiment, which is impossible in international relations.

Fearon² shows that counterfactual arguments are not a speculative luxury, but an implicit component of any causal claim based on a small number of cases. Tetlock and Belkin³ formulate the criteria for admissibility: clarity of the antecedent and consequent, minimal rewriting of history, the compatibility of the premises (their mutual compatibility, so that none contradicts the other), consistency with known statistical regularities, theoretical consistency, and the capacity or degree to which an idea, an object or a system can be transformed into a project—that is, the feasibility and clarity with which it can be planned.

A counterfactual⁴ that requires the simultaneous abolition of the law of the sea, naval forces, marine insurance and the jurisdiction of the flag state alters so many variables that the result can no longer be attributed to any one of them. The scenario becomes an allegory of order, useful pedagogically but analytically futile. A counterfactual that eliminates a single mechanism—for example, naval escort at a single chokepoint—remains assessable, as recent history provides comparable quasi-experiments.

We therefore adopt the following admissibility test, applied to each scenario in sections 3–6 and, by the same standard, to our own conclusions set out in sections 4 and 7. A thought experiment acquires evidential status if it fulfils three conditions: it specifies the antecedent as a change in a single variable; it indicates at least one observable that would falsify it; it identifies an analogous case that is similar in time and structure. We shall show that three of the four scenarios pass this test after reformulation, whilst one fails to do so in any formulation; we shall also show what, specifically, would refute our own conclusions regarding the Montreux regime and polycentric governance.

The empirical basis comprises the text of the Montreux Convention (1936) and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), official communiqués from the Ministry of National Defence and the Government of Romania from June and July 2026, NATO documents on the protection of critical underwater infrastructure, analytical reports published between 2024 and 2026, and a chronology of maritime incidents in the basin. The period covered ends on 1 August 2026.

2Fearon, J. D. (1991). Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science. *World Politics*, 43(2), pp. 169–195.

3Tetlock, P. E., Belkin, A. (eds.) (1996). *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

4The term refers to a hypothetical statement of the form 'if the antecedent X, contrary to the observed facts, had been true, then the consequent Y would have followed', used to isolate the causal effect of a variable by comparison with what actually happened (Fearon, 1991; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996).

3. The zero scenario revisited: ‘The Absent Leviathan’

The scenario posits the sudden abolition of treaties, naval policing and maritime law, concluding that global trade would cease within seventy-two hours. This figure does not stem from a model and cannot be verified. More seriously, the premise undermines stability: if treaties disappear, so too does the legal basis for ownership of cargo, charter parties and insurance – that is, all the mechanisms by which we might measure the ‘halt in trade’.

We can reformulate the scenario in a more limited form: what happens to trade flows when, at a specific chokepoint, naval protection becomes insufficient in relation to the threat, whilst the rest of the legal order remains unchanged? Formulated in this way, the question has two recent quasi-experiments. Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden between 2008 and 2012 led to war premiums, private on-board security teams, recommended transit corridors and multinational convoys. Traffic through the Suez Canal did not cease. The Houthi campaign in the Red Sea, which began in late 2023, diverted a substantial proportion of container traffic to the Cape of Good Hope route, adding ten to fourteen extra days to transit times and causing sharp rises in freight rates. Once again, global trade did not come to a halt.

The result contradicts the conclusion of the initial scenario and suggests a stronger proposition. The maritime order does not prevent disruption, but distributes its costs.⁵ When public protection weakens, part of its function shifts to the private order: Lloyd’s sets war risk premiums that make the route prohibitively expensive, shipowners reroute their vessels, and maritime security companies arm the ships. The difference between a governed sea and an ungoverned one is not measured by the volume of trade, but by who pays for the risk and how quickly the cost is passed on to the end consumer.

The Black Sea basin provided its own test in July 2023, when Russia withdrew from the grain initiative. The ‘shutdown’ scenario predicted a collapse in Ukrainian exports. In reality, Kyiv opened a unilateral corridor alongside the territorial waters of Romania and Bulgaria, accepted higher insurance premiums and restored export volumes within a year. The ‘zero’ scenario thus remains useful as an illustration of the land-based economy’s dependence on the sea, but it does not fulfil any of the three conditions of the admissibility test proposed in section 2.

4. The Montreux Paradox: security through restriction

The Montreux Convention⁶ marked its ninetieth anniversary on 20 July 2026. It confers upon Turkey the status of administrator of the Straits and imposes on non-littoral powers an aggregate tonnage limit, a maximum number of vessels present simultaneously, a twenty-one-day limit on the duration of stay, and a fifteen-day notice period. Submarines and aircraft carriers belonging to non-coastal states are not permitted to transit. Article 19 allows Ankara to close the Straits to warships of belligerent states, with the exception of those returning to their home base.⁷

⁵For the conceptual framework of the field, see Bueger, C., Edmunds, T. (2017). Beyond seablindness: a new agenda for maritime security studies. *International Affairs*, 93(6), pp. 1293–1311.

⁶The Montreux Convention concerning the Regime of the Straits, Montreux, 20 July 1936.

⁷The Montreux Convention (1936), Article 19, concerning the warships of belligerents; for the tonnage limit and duration of stay for non-riparian powers, see Article 18.

On 27 and 28 February 2022, the Turkish government characterised the Russian invasion as a war and invoked Article 19, whilst also discouraging the transit of warships belonging to non-belligerent states. The effect was twofold. On the one hand, Ankara capped the naval escalation at a time when the arrival of allied forces would have turned the basin into a direct point of contact between Russia and NATO. On the other hand, it outsourced the task of maritime security to allied littoral states, as even the mine-countermeasure assets of non-littoral partners were no longer able to enter. The minehunters donated to Ukraine by the United Kingdom remained stranded outside the basin.

We can describe this situation as an artificial distortion of the balance of power. We consider this wording to be inaccurate. Montreux does not distort a pre-existing balance, but rather constitutes it. The regime transforms a systemic problem of the balance of power into a problem of delegation: regional security depends on the preferences of a single administering state. The real risk is not the artificiality, but the concentration of decision-making in a single political centre. Analyses published in 2026 show that Ankara used the Convention simultaneously to support Ukraine's maritime survival and to maintain a managed cooperation with ^{Moscow}, which confirms that the regime functions as an instrument of Turkish foreign policy, not as a legal automatism.

Reformulated as a testable hypothesis, the Montreux paradox becomes: if the closure persists, allied riparian states will build their own mine-countermeasures and surveillance capabilities, rather than relying on permanent NATO task forces. The observable that would disprove the hypothesis: the absence of an autonomous regional initiative after two years of closure. The evidence points in the opposite direction. The trilateral Romania–Bulgaria–Turkey memorandum was signed on 11 January 2024; the group became operational on 1 July 2024 and had carried out eleven deployments by July 2026, with command rotating every six months. The hypothesis passes the test of plausibility.

The theoretical conclusion extends beyond the specific case. In ^{Grotius's doctrine}, security derives from freedom of the seas¹⁰; *mare liberum* guarantees access, and access guarantees prosperity. In the Black Sea, order has been maintained through the opposite of this principle, effectively reviving the terms of the debate between Grotius and his contemporary Selden: closed basins, with a single administrator of access, have historically followed Selden's logic (*mare clausum*) rather than that of Grotius (*mare liberum*). Closure brought stability; openness would have led to escalation. The basin thus functions as a regional counterexample to the liberal paradigm of maritime security. ^{Krasner's} theory of international regimes¹¹ explains the situation better than the theory of global public goods, because the regime explains the observed outcome through the distribution of decision-making power amongst specific actors — in this case, a single administering state —, rather than through the abstract properties of the good itself, which the theory of global public goods typically treats as constants regardless of the institutional architecture.

8Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2026). Managing Montreux: Turkey and the Russia-Ukraine War in the Black Sea. Washington, July 2026. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/07/managing-montreux-turkey-and-the-russia-ukraine-war-in-the-black-sea>

9The Grotius doctrine, pioneered by the Dutch humanist Hugo Grotius in the 17th century, forms the foundation of modern international law. It separated the legal norms governing relations between states from strict theology, basing them on human reason and the concept of natural law.

10Grotius, H. (1609). *Mare Liberum*. Leiden: Elzevir. For the opposing view, see Selden, J. (1635). *Mare Clausum*. London.

11Krasner, S. D. (ed.) (1983). *International Regimes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

5. The security dilemma in a closed basin: an empirical correction

Herz and Jervis¹² have shown that one state's defensive measures reduce the security of another when there is no distinction between offensive and defensive weapons and when the offensive side holds the advantage. The document under review applies the model to the Black Sea and concludes that the militarisation of Crimea automatically undermines the security of Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria, as the interdiction systems cover almost the entire area and there is no strategic depth for retreat.

The first part of the argument holds up. The range of coastal and air defence systems exceeds the effective width of the basin, which eliminates the distinction between a defensive posture and an offensive threat. Operational transparency, which Jervis regarded as a mitigating factor, has the opposite effect here: every movement becomes visible in real time, and the reaction time falls below the threshold for political deliberation. Mutual visibility does not calm the situation, but rather accelerates it.

The second part of the argument does not hold up. The implicit assumption that naval mass translates into maritime control was disproved between 2022 and 2025. Ukraine, lacking a surface fleet, forced the Russian Black Sea Fleet to relocate its main assets from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk, using coastal missiles and unmanned surface vehicles. The cost-effectiveness ratio heavily favours the side that denies access to the sea, not the side that seeks to control it.¹³ In a narrow and heavily monitored basin, the advantage lies with interdiction, not projection.

This realisation has an uncomfortable implication for Romania. Bucharest's strategic interest lies not in denying the use of the sea, but in ensuring its use: transit through Constanța, gas exports from the Neptun Deep field, and data cables. The cheap and effective means available in the basin serve the opposite objective to that which Romania is pursuing. This is the real dilemma facing the Romanian planner: the dominant instruments of the environment favour interdiction, whilst the national economy demands control. The solution does not lie in the acquisition of patrol vessels, but in combining persistent surveillance with the ability to challenge the adversary's interdiction within limited time windows, around specific targets.

6. Invisible infrastructure and the problem of allocation

The third scenario concerns pipelines, cables and platforms on the seabed. Here, the analysis identifies the problem: defending thousands of kilometres of linear infrastructure is impossible through physical presence, and attributing an act of sabotage remains difficult. We add two clarifications that alter the conclusion.

The first concerns the law. The grey area is not an accident of practice, but a consequence of the legal architecture. The 1982 Convention recognises the coastal state's sovereign rights over resources in the exclusive economic zone, but retains for other states the freedom to lay cables and pipelines and

¹²Herz, J. H. (1950). Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, 2(2), pp. 157–180; Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, 30(2), pp. 167–214.

¹³For estimates of the cost-effectiveness ratio: Euromaidan Press (2025). *Ukraine's \$50,000 naval drones are hunting Russia's Black Sea fleet — and winning*, 24 December 2025; Newsweek (2025). *Ukraine's Sea Drones Have Inflicted \$500M in Damage on Russian Fleet: Kyiv*. The exact figures vary between sources and should be cross-checked against the authors' own estimates, where available.

criminal jurisdiction is, in principle, reserved for the flag state.¹⁴ A coastal state that discovers a cable has been severed in its exclusive economic zone by a foreign vessel does not automatically have the legal basis for criminal prosecution. Underwater sabotage exploits a written loophole in the text of the law of the sea, not merely a lack of naval resources.¹⁵

The second concerns the source of the ambiguity. The standard model, developed following the explosion of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022 and the series of cable incidents in the Baltic Sea, assumes an adversary who deliberately conceals the perpetrator. NATO has responded institutionally through the coordination cell for critical subsea infrastructure, through the specialised maritime centre at the Allied Command in Northwood and, since January 2025, through the Baltic Sentry operation.¹⁶ All these mechanisms presuppose an adversary who can ultimately be identified.

The incident of 5 June 2026 in the Port of Constanța shows that this premise is incomplete. At 06:20, the Romanian Agency for the Safety of Human Life at Sea reported a floating object in Berth 78. At around 09:54, the Ukrainian Navy informed the Romanian side that, the previous day, they had lost contact with four unmanned Sargan-3000-type vessels, approximately 250 kilometres from the Romanian coast, near Sevastopol, and that they were no longer able to cancel the self-detonation sequence. At 10.27, the drone exploded, with no casualties. The other three self-detonated at sea. The authorities evacuated over a thousand people from the coastal beaches; according to subsequent clarifications from tourism associations, the evacuation did not extend to accommodation facilities in the resorts.¹⁷ Kyiv attributed the incident to a failure in Russian electronic jamming.¹⁸

The case has three analytical implications. Firstly, the ambiguity of attribution has structural, not merely adversarial, causes: an autonomous system belonging to a partner, disconnected from its operator and programmed to self-destruct, produces an event without an operational perpetrator, regardless of the original intention. Secondly, a response doctrine built on the sequence of consultation, technical attribution, declassification and sanction is rendered meaningless when the perpetrator declares itself and we attribute responsibility to it, as in the statement by the European official

14United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), Art. 56 (sovereign rights in the exclusive economic zone), Arts. 58 and 79 (freedom to lay submarine cables and pipelines) and Art. 113 (jurisdiction of the flag State in the event of the severance of submarine cables).

15Associate Professor Dr Cristina Elena POPA TACHE – The regulatory boundaries of the Black Sea through the lens of European Union law and international law. Case study: Romania's maritime security strategy. Universul Juridic - <https://www.universuljuridic.ro/frontierele-de-reglementare-ale-marii-negre-prin-cartografia-dreptului-uniunii-europene-si-a-dreptului-international-un-studiu-de-caz-strategia-de-securitate-maritima-a-romaniei-unde-cand-si-cum/>

16NATO Allied Maritime Command (2025). Baltic Sentry: safeguarding Critical Undersea Infrastructure. Northwood, January 2025. Available at: <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2025/nato-baltic-sentry-steps-up-patrols-in-the-baltic-sea-to-safeguard-critical-undersea-infrastructure>

17For the timeline and scale of the evacuation: Europa FM (2026). Over 1,000 people were evacuated from the coastal beaches following the explosion of a maritime drone in the Port of Constanța, 5 June 2026; AdevăruL (2026). Tourism industry bodies, following the incident involving the drone that exploded in the Port of Constanța: “There are no evacuations of tourists from hotels”, June 2026.

18Ministry of National Defence (2026). Statement on the Ukrainian side's response to the requests made in connection with the incident of 5 June 2026 in the Port of Constanța, July 2026. For a chronology of the incident, corroborated by contemporary press reports, see Maritime Executive (2026), RO Times (2026) and the Washington Post (5 June 2026); these sources indicate 10.27 am as the time of the explosion.

for ^{foreign} affairs¹⁹, to a third party via the causal chain of the jamming. Finally, the physical defence in place was derisory: the only obstacle that stopped the vehicle was an anti-pollution barrier, and the port radars had failed to detect a five-and-a-half-metre vessel with a low radar signature.

The conclusion we draw contradicts the emphasis of the document analysed. For a state in Romania's situation, the priority is not to refine attribution capabilities, but to build a response geared towards effectiveness: sensory coverage at port entrances, physical anti-vehicle barriers, permanent technical channels for notification with neighbouring navies, and procedures for designating self-destruction zones outside areas of national interest. The requests made publicly by the Ministry of National Defence following the incident correspond exactly to this logic, which suggests that practice preceded theory.

7. Romania between Constanța and Neptun Deep

7.1. The single-target paradox, re-evaluated

The document under analysis argues that the concentration of military, commercial and energy functions in the port of Constanța creates a major vulnerability, as a single hybrid or cyber attack would simultaneously paralyse Romania's economy and the supply routes of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. This argument contains a logical flaw. Concentration also generates defence savings: a single perimeter is cheaper to monitor, both sensor-wise and physically, than ten scattered perimeters. The vulnerability does not stem from geography, but from the level of investment in detection. The trade-off must, however, be acknowledged: concentration reduces the average cost of defence, but increases the tail risk — a successful breach of a single perimeter has a potentially greater impact than an equivalent breach in a dispersed system. The correct choice is not between concentration and dispersion, but concerns the level of investment required to keep the probability of a successful breach within the concentrated perimeter low.

The incident on 5 June 2026 confirms this reinterpretation. The port was not compromised by the concentration of functions, but by the absence of basic measures: anti-drone barriers at the harbour entrance, acoustic sensors, and optical detection of small vessels. Four hours elapsed between the object being detected and the explosion. The correct diagnosis does not concern the layout of the infrastructure, but rather the architecture of maritime situational awareness and the integration of the national surveillance system with allied mechanisms.

7.2. Neptun Deep and the shift in the security perimeter

The Neptun Deep block, developed as an equal partnership between OMV Petrom and Romgaz, with an investment of approximately four billion euros and estimated reserves of one hundred billion cubic metres, shifts Romania's security frontier to around one hundred and sixty kilometres offshore. The connection pipeline to the Tuzla station, the installation of the production platform and the subsea infrastructure were carried out during 2026, with the first deliveries announced for 2027 and a production plateau of approximately eight billion cubic metres per year.

The doctrinal implication is clear. The Romanian Navy was designed to defend the coastline. Protecting a fixed target deep within the exclusive economic zone requires something else: permanent underwater surveillance, sensors on the seabed, and autonomous inspection vehicles,

¹⁹Informat.ro (2026). 'The explosion of a drone in the port of Constanța highlights the expansion of the Russian war in the EU, says Kaja Kallas', 5 June 2026.

maritime patrol aircraft and a data fusion centre to integrate commercial traffic information with military intelligence. Deterrence, in this case, is not measured in tonnage, but in the probability that a hostile act will be detected before it occurs.²⁰

The main risk is not the bombing of platforms. It is the rise in insurance premiums to the point where operations become uneconomical. An adversary can achieve this effect without firing a shot, through repeated approaches by research vessels, the presence of unidentified maritime drones within the perimeter, or ambiguous incidents. Deterrence must therefore be calibrated to the insurance market, not merely to the balance of power, which implies that the Romanian state must be prepared to offer public guarantees against political risk for offshore operations.

7.3. Collective action without a hegemon: Hardin versus Ostrom

The document under analysis frames the central question in Hardin's terms²¹: if the sea belongs to everyone and no one, can states cooperate for the common good without being constrained by a world government? Formulated in this way, the question already contains the pessimistic answer, as Hardin's model assumes isolated actors, incapable of communicating or imposing sanctions. Ostrom²² has shown empirically that groups exploiting common-pool resources frequently establish their own governance institutions when the boundaries of the resource are clear, the rules are consistent with local conditions, participants decide on the rules together, monitoring is mutual, and sanctions are graduated.

The Black Sea Marine Mine Countermeasures Task Force meets these conditions. The boundaries are defined by the exclusive economic zones of the three states. The rules were negotiated directly through the memorandum of 11 January 2024. Collective decision-making is exercised through a six-month rotating command. Monitoring is carried out through successive deployments, totalling eleven by July 2026.²³ On 8 July 2026, on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Ankara, the defence ministers of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey signed the amendment extending the task force's mandate from the neutralisation of drifting mines to the protection of critical underwater infrastructure.

This amendment provides significant empirical support for the fourth thesis, albeit from a single observed case: three states with divergent strategic histories, one of which maintains substantial economic relations with the Russian Federation, have created and subsequently expanded a regional security institution without hegemonic constraints and without centralised decision-making by the Alliance. Hardin's model does not account for this outcome. Ostrom's model offers an explanation more consistent with the available evidence.

We apply here the same admissibility test required for the scenarios in sections 3–6. The premise is clear: the absence of a regional hegemon or a world government to enforce cooperation. The analogous case

²⁰For the distinction between force actually used and force reserved as a threat, see Schelling, T. C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²¹Hardin, G. (1968). *The Tragedy of the Commons*. *Science*, 162(3859), pp. 1243–1248.

²²Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²³Ministry of National Defence (2026). Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye expand the MCM Black Sea TG Missions, press release no. 138 of 8 July 2026. Available at: https://english.mapn.ro/cpresa/6813_Romania,-Bulgaria-and-T%C3%BCrkiye-expand-the-MCM-Black-Sea-TG-Missions — for confirmation of the eleventh deployment, carried out on 22–23 July 2026, see also the announcement by the Turkish Ministry of National Defence.

This is, in fact, the group's own precedent, dating from the initial mine-countermeasures phase (2024). The observable that would refute the Ostromian interpretation: if the extension of the mandate had occurred through the unilateral imposition by a single state, without direct negotiation and without mutual monitoring amongst the three partners, or if the cooperation had ceased as soon as external allied pressure had been withdrawn. We cannot completely rule out a rival explanation — cooperation motivated by alliance solidarity and the perception of a common threat, without requiring the institutional conditions described by Ostrom —, but the observed structure of the decision-making process (direct negotiation, rotating leadership, monitoring through successive activations) is more difficult to derive exclusively from alliance solidarity, which does not, in and of itself, impose such a format of joint governance. This remains an open question for further research, ideally testable through a second case study.

The limits of this assessment must be stated with the same clarity. The group excludes Ukraine and Georgia, and thus produces a 'club good', not a 'communal regime'. Its mandate remains contingent upon the application of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention and on Ankara's political calculations. Moreover, the protection of critical infrastructure requires resources on a scale far greater than those deployed in mine clearance, which leaves open the question of whether the institution will survive the very expansion of its mandate.

8. Discussion: the risk of confirming the narrative

The four scenarios examined share a common feature. Each is formulated in such a way that any subsequent course of events will confirm it. If states cooperate, the tragedy of the commons scenario has been averted through awareness of the risk. If they do not cooperate, the scenario has come to pass. If the adversary attacks the infrastructure, the vulnerability was real. If they do not attack, deterrence has worked. The structure is immune to falsification, and this immunity to falsification is precisely what distinguishes strategic rhetoric from research.

Applying the test proposed in Section 2 yields a differentiated result. The Montreux scenario passes, as it generates a verifiable prediction of the development of autonomous coastal capabilities. The security dilemma scenario passes in part, following the correction of the assumption regarding the conversion of naval mass into maritime control, and becomes testable through the cost-effectiveness ratio of interdiction systems. The 'submarine infrastructure' scenario passes, with observations regarding the incident rate and the proportion of successful attributions: as a minimum threshold for refutation, if, over the next two years, the majority of incidents recorded in the basin were to be attributed to a clearly identified operational actor — whether a state or a non-state group —, the thesis regarding the structural sources of ambiguity would have to be abandoned; maintaining a majority proportion of incidents without a clearly identified operational perpetrator supports the current thesis. The 'lawless ocean' scenario does not hold up in any formulation, as its premise requires the simultaneous rewriting of all relevant variables.

We therefore recommend that defence planning documents which use speculative scenarios explicitly state, for each scenario, the indicator whose development would refute it. The requirement may seem formal. It prevents a plausible intuition from being transformed into a budgetary premise.

9. Conclusions

A re-examination of four thought experiments concerning maritime security in the Black Sea yields five findings.

Firstly, the maritime order does not prevent disruption to trade, but distributes its costs. The correct measure of maritime security is not the volume of traffic, but the risk premium and the speed at which this is passed on to prices.

Secondly, in the Black Sea basin, security has been achieved through restricted access, not through freedom of navigation. The Montreux Convention does not distort the regional balance, but rather constitutes it, at the cost of concentrating decision-making in a single administering state.

Thirdly, the structural advantage in the basin lies in prohibition, not control, which creates a tension for Romania between the effective means at its disposal and the economic objective of ensuring the secure use of the sea.

Fourthly, the ambiguity of attribution has structural causes, as demonstrated by the incident in the Port of Constanța on 5 June 2026, and a response doctrine based on the perpetrator remains ineffective. Priority must be given to measures based on the effect.

Fifthly, the extension of the trilateral group's mandate to the protection of critical subsea infrastructure, signed on 8 July 2026, shows that allied coastal states can establish security institutions without a hegemon, providing empirical support — from a single case, but one that is structurally difficult to derive from rival explanations such as alliance solidarity — for the model of polycentric governance, within the limits of a club good.

A reasonable research agenda would comprise three strands: the quantitative measurement of risk transfer from the public defence budget to the marine insurance market; a comparative assessment of maritime situational awareness architectures in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea basins; and a legal analysis of the grounds on which a coastal state might exercise jurisdiction over hostile acts against infrastructure within its exclusive economic zone.

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