

**ASSESSING THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE'S
STRATEGY FOR SECURITY IN THE
BLACK SEA REGION**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE AND
REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION**

OF THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
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ASSESSING THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE'S STRATEGY FOR SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2023

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE AND REGIONAL
SECURITY COOPERATION,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:32 p.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jeanne Shaheen presiding.

Present: Senators Shaheen [presiding], Van Hollen, Duckworth, Ricketts, and Barrasso.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JEANNE SHAHEEN, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

Senator SHAHEEN. This meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Europe Subcommittee will now come to order.

I want to thank Ranking Member Senator Ricketts for agreeing to hold the hearing on this very important topic and I also want to recognize the ambassador to Romania and the Romanian embassy officials who are here in the audience, and I understand that the DCM for Georgia is also planning to join so hopefully she will be able to make it soon, and recognize Senator Duckworth who was just in Romania, so thank you.

Almost 2 years ago to the day, I chaired a subcommittee hearing on the Black Sea region. This critical region has always been an area of interest and I first became familiar with it when I traveled to Georgia in 2012. Georgia, of course, was the first target of Putin's revanchist policies in the region, but sadly not his last.

The Black Sea region has been a critical area of focus for Vladimir Putin as he pursues his aggressive agenda and revisionist history. This map which, hopefully, you can see behind me shows precisely why this hearing and our efforts to focus on the Black Sea region are so important.

In 2008, Putin annexed South Ossetia and Abkhazia because Georgia was moving toward democracy. In 2014, he illegally annexed Crimea when Ukrainians made their voices clear in support of EU membership and in 2022, Putin further invaded Ukraine when he realized that his bullying tactics would not work.

The Black Sea is critical because Putin sees it in his orbit. Some refer to it as his lake. He sees it historically and strategically as

an important part of his empire, but the Black Sea is also home to three NATO nations and two aspirant countries. For them the Black Sea is a critical economic connector and when Russia's behavior goes unchecked, it has implications for their security and for their economies.

I saw this firsthand during a visit to Romania and Georgia earlier this year, and as the Ukrainian Ambassador Oksana Markarova shared with me, what happens in the Black Sea does not stay in the Black Sea.

By weaponizing the export of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea, Putin has already shown his willingness to bring the world to the brink of a global food security crisis.

Russia's actions affect not only the countries bordering the Black Sea, but also dozens of countries in Africa such as Somalia and Kenya, and Asia and other parts of the world, places whose food security depends on Russia's actions.

It has also caused extreme volatility in grain prices over the past year and a half, which creates increased costs and uncertainty for U.S. consumers and farmers.

He has upended the global energy market, contributing to rising costs in Europe and here at home, and most concerning, Russian attack drones have crash landed in Romania and Moldova, risking further escalation in Europe given that Romania is a NATO ally.

President Biden has sent Congress an assistance package that includes more than \$60 billion for Ukraine. I hope we can get this done and get Ukraine what it needs. Supporting Ukraine is crucial to America's security and prosperity by ensuring Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine remains a strategic failure.

This is critical not just for the sake of Ukraine or the sake of the Black Sea region, but for the sake of the United States and our allies.

I am pleased that Assistant Secretary O'Brien has agreed to testify on the State Department's Black Sea strategy, which the Department is required to produce pursuant to report language that was included in the fiscal year 2023 spending bill, and I would like to submit the State Department's Black Sea security strategy for the record at this time without objection.

Thank you. So entered.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the "Additional Material Submitted for the Record" section at the end of this hearing.]

Senator SHAHEEN. Assistant Secretary O'Brien, I look forward to hearing how this strategy will be implemented and part of support of an action plan. However, before I turn to Ranking Member Ricketts I would like to make one additional point.

I strongly believe that we need a comprehensive interagency strategy toward the region. That is why the Senate NDAA bill this year includes a provision requiring just that, a comprehensive interagency strategy for the Black Sea.

I do not believe the State Department can do this alone. The Departments of Defense and Commerce among others also have critical roles to play in supporting our allies and partners in the region.

With that, I will turn to Ranking Member Ricketts for his remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. PETE RICKETTS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEBRASKA**

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you Madam Chair, and thank you, Assistant Secretary and fellow Nebraskan Jim O'Brien, for being here with us today.

The Black Sea is becoming a gravitational center for Europe's future and is yet another important theater in the great power competition between Russia, us, and the People's Republic of China.

Putin's illegal war in Ukraine has put a spotlight on the region as part of the front lines in this battle against Russia's aggression. Putin would like nothing better than to turn the Black Sea into a Russian lake and its airspace into a no-fly zone.

Encouragingly, recent Ukrainian attacks in Crimea and on the port of Sevastopol have put Russia's vaunted Black Sea fleet into retreat and its maritime dominance into question, so much so that it is now looking to separatist friends in Abkhazia for a new naval base.

Georgia must be unequivocal in its rejection of this Russian power play into its sovereign territory. While Russia continues to weaponize the world's food supply after the withdrawal from the Black Sea grain initiative, Ukraine has once again proven to be resilient.

By turning the western Black Sea into a no-go area for Russian warships, Ukraine, with the help of the Black Sea NATO allies, has successfully established a humanitarian corridor to thwart Russia's de facto blockade.

Despite these recent successes we cannot allow ourselves to be lulled into complacency. While Russia has failed in its goals on the battlefield, it has also shown its ability to adapt.

As Russia looks to disrupt this corridor with mines, the U.S. must find ways to enhance the naval capabilities of our Romanian and Bulgarian friends to deter Russia's destructive tactics.

Turkey as a valued NATO ally and the gatekeeper of the Black Sea will also continue to play a pivotal role in constraining Russia, but Turkey, after playing both sides throughout this conflict, must make a choice if it truly wants to play a productive role in the region.

Ultimately, the Black Sea's future hinges on Russia's clear defeat in Ukraine and as Ukraine continues its long-term plan to push Russia out of Crimea, it should do so with unwavering American support.

The Biden administration's recent decision to send ATACMS was a welcome reversal after 18 months of pointlessly depriving Ukraine of weapons it needs to be successful.

However, by only sending the limited range variant I fear the Administration is only paying lip service to its critics and sending another message of weakness to Putin. While Russia represents the greatest threat to peace and stability in the Black Sea, we must also not lose focus on the PRC's desire to spread its tentacles into the region.

That means ensuring that the PRC plays no role in post-war reconstruction for Ukraine. The PRC would use its presence to collect intelligence on Ukrainian and foreign supplied military capabilities as well as steal the intellectual property of strategic Ukrainian companies, and its track record of spreading corruption and undermining the rule of law would serve only to hinder Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic trajectory.

This should be prevented at all costs. The PRC's no limit partnership with Russia is proof that its efforts will never be in the best interest of the region. Our Black Sea allies and partners should send a clear message to Beijing that its predatory lending practices and malign influence have no place in the Black Sea.

For too long the Black Sea region, even after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, has remained a low priority theater for the U.S. and NATO.

Recent events proved this must change. Neither direct NATO nor EU—neither NATO nor the EU has a specific strategy directed toward the Black Sea. American leadership is needed here to get the ball rolling.

Assistant Secretary O'Brien, I look forward to hearing from you on ways that we can better coordinate with our allies and partners in the region to deter Russian and PRC malign influence and aggression both in the short-term and the long-term.

Finally, I want to commend Senator Shaheen for her leadership on this issue and I am proud to support her *Black Sea Security Act*.

Madam Chair.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much, Senator Ricketts, and thank you to our witness for participating in-person in front of the committee today.

Jim O'Brien is the Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian affairs, a position he began after being confirmed earlier this month, so I do not think you have quite been on the job a month yet.

Mr. O'Brien formerly was a career State Department officer. He served two previous administrations as a special presidential envoy, and notably Mr. O'Brien was the first presidential envoy for hostage affairs from 2015 to 2017.

He helped establish the office and worked for the safe return of a hundred American citizens. Over the course of his career at the State Department he has led a large and successful sanctions program, advised on a range of issues including peace negotiations in Europe, scientific and environmental agreements and initiatives to investigate and prosecute persons responsible for war crimes.

With that, Mr. O'Brien, I will turn it over to you and, again, thank you for joining us today.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. JAMES O'BRIEN, ASSISTANT SECRETARY, EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS, UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. O'BRIEN. Thank you, Madam Chair, Ranking Member. It is a privilege to be here so I am very pleased you asked me. Thank you for legislating that we had to put this strategy together and for engaging with our partners and for being as involved in pushing us to develop a strategic approach to the region.

I have an excellent written statement that others wrote for me and so I will submit that for the record, and I want to try to talk through where we are at this moment because I think you and Senator Ricketts both captured where we are.

In the last few years I have been fortunate to both in government and out of, I visited Batumi, Poti, Chornomorsk, Yuzhne, Pivdenne, Galati in Romania and the Sulina Canal that connects the Danube to the Black Sea, the port of Costanta.

That is a lot of water for a guy from Nebraska, but it shows us how important the Black Sea is and that this strategy was developing momentum and moving to the center of our foreign policy. To our Bulgarian friends, I know I have to get to Varna and I have been to Istanbul as well.

Now I want to talk about what our strategy is and how we will implement it and how it relates to the current moment. What we are seeking is a Black Sea that is secure, prosperous, democratic, and globally connected to markets around the world.

All of that requires freedom of navigation. The threat to this, as Senator Ricketts said, is Russia. It is trying to cut off Ukrainian access to the Black Sea and that turns the Black Sea, it hopes, into a contest for domination against several NATO allies, trying to choke off critical trade routes for the South Caucasus, for Georgia, and for Central Asia.

That is what is at stake here. What is our strategy? We can all read about it, and I am glad you are putting the strategy in the record so that everyone can.

Five parts. We have strong diplomatic engagement. I have been in Romania, our great and good allies and partners, twice in the last several months to try to build up cooperation on the Black Sea.

We have engaged strongly in Georgia as well as with the other states around the Black Sea. We have security cooperation as the second element, put in almost \$370 million in FMF financing for security cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria.

We have a brigade combat team in Romania and we are working together against Russia's current threats by building up the surveillance capacities in Romania as Russia bombs on the border, but also supporting efforts by Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania to remove the scourge of mines that threaten the freedom of navigation. There are other elements in our strategy, but that is just an illustration.

The third element is resilience through regional cooperation and here the story is just remarkable. We just a month ago announced \$300 million in support through the Three Seas initiative and the heart of that is to build the cooperation along the shores of the Black Sea.

Fifty million dollars for a terminal in Poti, which brings grain and other commodities from Central Asia. We are working on energy security. We have started to create routes for non-Russian gas to Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova.

We are working on nuclear fuel as an option as well as renewable fuels such as offshore wind, and, Senator Duckworth, I know you just visited some of those elements. Finally, the strategy looks to democratic resilience as the foundation for what we are looking to do.

Now, I will talk about measures for success in a moment, but above all, right now how do we measure success? It is through success in Ukraine.

Ukraine is where Putin has decided to launch his war of global revision, and you just listen to him. He says what he wants is a return to the sphere of influence he had at the end of World War II. He starts by eliminating Ukraine and then by separating Ukraine's government from its global partners, its global markets, and from its own people.

The supplemental request the Administration has sent addresses all the dimensions of Putin's offensive and makes it clear that we will stand with the Ukrainian people as long as it takes until they beat back Putin.

For America you beat a bully before he gathers steam and that is what we are doing now, and it is a very good bargain because Ukrainians are paying the bulk of the cost, they are putting their lives on the line, and they have destroyed half of Putin's army. This is a good deal for America and it is important as we look to build for the future.

Now, I will touch on a few of the elements in which the Black Sea particularly is critical to getting Ukraine up and running so that its economy can pay its own way going forward, and its people can thrive as they look toward a future as part of Europe.

I will just close with a note. Thirty years ago as a young State Department lawyer, I spent a lot of time in both Russia and Ukraine. We were designing the assistance programs and we offered the countries a simple choice. Come be a normal country. Make some rules. Let your people be free and prosperous.

In the last 10 years, we have seen Ukraine has made the choice that Ronald Reagan wanted when he said tear down the wall. This is about their freedom.

Putin made the opposite choice and he says he wants to go back to a world where Moscow decides what people from Stefen to Trieste get to do with their futures. That is what is at stake here and the Black Sea is the forefront.

Senator Ricketts, you had it exactly right. Ukraine has won an amazing naval victory that has opened the possibility of its economy returning. Did that without a navy, which is pretty amazing. We have to follow through on that with a strong approach in the Black Sea.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. O'Brien follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. James O'Brien

Senator Shaheen, Ranking Member Ricketts, distinguished members of the Committee: Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today about the Administration's approach to the Black Sea region. I appreciate your leadership and engagement on this issue.

The United States has long recognized the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region. Not only does the Black Sea border three NATO Allies and several NATO partners, but it is also a vital corridor for the movement of goods—including Ukrainian grain and other products bound for world markets—and hosts significant untapped energy resources. The United States Government Black Sea Strategy, which the Department of State submitted to Congress in June, reflects our vision for the region and outlines our commitment to work with our allies and partners to increase cooperation. Our goal is a Black Sea region that is secure, prosperous,

interconnected, and free from threats to territorial integrity and from economic coercion.

Our strategy identifies five main areas where the United States can pursue that vision. First, we are committed to increasing our political and diplomatic engagement with the region—both bilaterally and in multilateral fora. To cite some recent examples, in September, I traveled to Romania to advance our efforts to ensure Ukrainian grain can continue to reach world markets. Secretary Blinken recently met in Washington with his Bulgarian counterpart to reaffirm our strong partnership. Special Presidential Envoy Kerry traveled to Bucharest in September for the Three Seas Initiative Ministerial meeting, where he met with PM Ciolacu of Romania. We will continue these engagements on a regular basis to demonstrate that the United States stands with our Black Sea partners.

Second, we are strengthening our regional security cooperation by supporting a strong NATO presence in the region, investing in joint training and exercises, and ensuring our security assistance supports the region's defense modernization needs. We are also committed to defending freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. NATO has already shown great commitment to defending the territorial integrity of its members in the region by establishing four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. The United States has provided FMF to Romania and Bulgaria in the last two fiscal years, established a new Brigade Combat Team in Romania, and more than tripled the number of U.S. troops there. We will continue to support a robust, visible NATO forward presence in the Black Sea region. All of this is in keeping with NATO's Strategic Concept updated at its Madrid Summit, in which it declared the Black Sea region's strategic importance for the Alliance.

Russia demonstrated with its brutal war against Ukraine that it is the single greatest threat to a peaceful and secure Black Sea region. Not satisfied with unilaterally abandoning the Black Sea Grain Initiative—an effort designed to bring grain to some of the world's most food insecure nations—Russia has subsequently launched drone and missile attacks on Ukraine's maritime infrastructure, ports, and grain storage facilities. Russia has also threatened to target commercial vessels in the Black Sea. Russia's actions in the Black Sea are central to its efforts to destroy Ukraine's economy, displace Ukrainian grain with Russian exports, and otherwise terrorize the Ukrainian people. Russia's actions not only threaten Ukraine but impinge on the security of all littoral states, and on freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. However, we see the strategic momentum in the Black Sea beginning to shift in Ukraine's favor. We are working with Kyiv, as well as allies and partners, to capitalize on this opportunity by opening vital trade and shipping routes to thwart Putin's efforts to destroy Ukraine's economy.

Third, we are supporting efforts to enhance regional economic cooperation to build resilience to Russian and PRC malign influence and promote a level playing field for business. This includes efforts to support strategic infrastructure investments, strengthen investment screening, and advocate for transparency in public procurement. We were proud to announce DFC's \$300 million investment in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund in September, which will help build strategic infrastructure, and we are committed to coordinating with the EU, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine to expand grain transit and ensure it reaches global markets. We will continue to rely on strong coordination with European partners, regional institutions like the Three Seas Initiative, and the private sector to achieve these goals.

Fourth, we are promoting energy security and clean energy in the Black Sea region. Russia's war has made plain to all the importance of energy security, which requires diversification of sources, routes, and types of energy. We will increase our efforts to help diversify the region's suppliers, increase regional interconnections, and expand clean energy solutions like solar, wind, and conventional and small modular nuclear reactors in partnership with international financial institutions and the private sector. Next month, we will announce (?) Project Phoenix to increase the region's energy security. EXIM has announced more than \$57 million to support feasibility studies for the expansion of Romania's existing nuclear power plant—a project that supports an estimated 200 new jobs in Texas and Illinois—and earlier this year, DFC and EXIM signed letters of interest totaling \$4 billion to deploy a small modular reactor project in Romania. The supplemental funds requested last week will enable us to further this goal by helping Ukraine modernize its energy infrastructure and connect to Europe as quickly as possible.

Fifth, we are working to foster democratic resilience, with a focus on combating corruption and countering disinformation. We are leveraging foreign assistance and raising the veil on the Kremlin's destabilizing efforts, including through the State Department's Global Engagement Center, to support freedom of the press, investiga-

tive journalism, and media literacy. We also use existing accountability tools to target corruption and its corrosive effects on democratic governments.

Just last month, I was in Constanta, Romania's largest port city on the Black Sea coast. I was there alongside Romanian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, and European Union officials for technical meetings to reaffirm our commitment to accelerating Ukrainian grain exports. This was my second visit to Romania this year to discuss Black Sea grain exports, and I have been continually impressed by our partners' commitment to working together to find practical solutions to support Ukraine. This collaboration with our European partners in Constanta illustrates the region's resilience as well as what we can achieve through collective action. Our Black Sea strategy seeks to expand and build upon these opportunities for deepened regional cooperation.

I'll close with a brief comment on the Black Sea and Ukraine's economy. President Zelensky has said the Ukrainian people will see a future if they see recovery. The Ukrainians are prioritizing efforts to expand revenue in the near-term, and opening the Black Sea ports is critical to this project. I was in Kyiv last week and can report that progress is underway. Ukraine recently established a humanitarian corridor that facilitates grain and steel shipments from its Black Sea ports. The route could be expanded with improved safety and insurance, and the supplemental funds requested by the Administration last week are essential to us helping Ukraine strengthen its Black Sea export infrastructure. Opening Ukraine's Black Sea routes can help unlock its broader economy and would advance our broader Black Sea Strategy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to your questions.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you very much and let me just say we will go into a round of questions. I am hopeful that we can have several rounds, depending on time, and I would ask that people try and stick to the 5 minutes for each question session.

Now, since you mentioned the navy and also Ukraine's work that has really had a significant impact in destroying some of Russia's navy, I want to start with that because in the strategy the State Department acknowledges that a visible U.S. and NATO naval presence in the Black Sea contributes to European and global security, and prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the United States and allied nations routinely conducted naval exercises and port calls in the Black Sea.

These helped to secure freedom of navigation in this waterway. They provided a measure of deterrence against Russia's navy.

The question is should we seek further U.S. or NATO military presence in the Black Sea and how do you envision that that might happen?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Thank you for that, Madam Chair. This is a constant topic of discussion with our Turkish allies.

Turkey controls access to the Black Sea for warships. It made the decision upon Russia's further invasion not to allow warships of Russia and other countries into the Black Sea as a way of reducing threats to shipping and that has been very important as a contribution to Ukraine's security.

We talk constantly about whether the balance is correct and whether we have the right set of forces and the Turks look at this constantly. We will keep working at it.

I will note two additional points. One is the importance of the local naval assets. Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania are working together, I mentioned, on a demining program. They are also working to secure the safety of shipping in the territorial waters of their countries. That is very welcome and we support this in a variety of ways.

The other thing is there are other assets that matter at sea. We have seen Ukraine drive off Russia's Black Sea fleet with use of drones and other new tactics. Much of what we are providing to Ukraine does go to providing real security in the Black Sea region, but we will keep looking at whether the mix we have is correct.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. I appreciate that. You cannot—sadly, the graphics are not big enough, I fear, but this map gives us some idea of the naval capacity that the countries bordering the Black Sea have, and as we can see Turkey and Russia are the only ones with submarines that are listed there and Ukraine, despite only having 13 ships, has been able to really undermine Russia's navy with five surface combatants, 32 principal ships, and six submarines there that were in the Black Sea at Sevastopol. Really an impressive effort.

You mentioned the anti-mining efforts and we heard that last week when Senator Ricketts and I met with the ambassadors from the Black Sea region, the importance of those anti-mining efforts, particularly given what the Russians have done in the Black Sea.

Can you tell us what additional congressional authorization might be needed for that to move forward and how soon that is going to begin?

Mr. O'BRIEN. I do not know what additional congressional authorization we need. I know we are providing support and then maybe through some of the FMF programs there will be some—I do not want to speculate. Let me get back to you in writing on this.

I think the strong support for the programs is incredibly helpful, but I am not sure we need a specific action at the moment.

Senator SHAHEEN. Okay, but funding—are we helping to provide some resources for the program?

Mr. O'BRIEN. We have made some resources available. Whether they are going to that specific initiative or to some of the support initiatives such as identifying where the activity should take place and that kind of work I think we can give you a briefing on.

Senator SHAHEEN. Great. Thank you.

Senator Ricketts.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

As we discussed, Russia was part of the Black Sea grain initiative up until July when they pulled out. Up until that point it delivered 33 million metric tons of grain and then since Russia has pulled out they attacked port facilities and ships, damaging civilian vessels.

Three hundred thousand metric tons of grain was destroyed and, as the chair said, really using food as a weapon and threatening not just Ukraine, but other countries who rely on that food supply.

However, as we also mentioned, Ukrainians have been very successful in driving off the Black Sea fleet out of Sevastopol and they have had to retreat to the eastern part of the Black Sea and that opened up that corridor, which now the Russians are trying to mine to be able to interfere with that.

This humanitarian corridor have been opened and at one point, Secretary O'Brien, you suggested that the success of the corridor along with insurers raising their rates and Moscow's costs going up might change Russia's calculation on that Black Sea grain initiative.

Do you believe that Russia is considering joining the Black—re-joining that and would it only be under lifting the sanctions that they have already demanded these—all these sanctions be lifted on? What is kind of your take on where Russia is standing right now?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes, it is a great question. I will try to answer in two senses.

First, I do not speculate on Russian intent. It is clear they will do what they can to demonstrate their dominance when they have it and I think what they have been surprised by since July, Ukraine has managed to continue its exports and has driven back Russian ability to restrict its exports.

At the same time, the threat to Russian ships affects Russian prices so everybody's insurance rates went up. Big ships were reluctant to go to the Russian ports, which meant Russia had to buy its own ships to manage its shipping. All the costs went up.

This has not been the great moment of victory that I think President Putin was briefed that it would be.

They are now in a world of considering a different approach. Whether that leads them back to the Black Sea initiative or it leads them to simply say let us have an arrangement where all shipments of grain or all commercial shipping are off limits that is something they will have to calculate.

There is a lot of diplomatic activity to try to get them to make such a commitment, but I think what they decide to say will be known only once they feel forced to take a position.

Senator RICKETTS. To that end then it is fair to say or would you agree that if we were able to keep that corridor open, for example, helping out with the demining efforts, that that would put more pressure on Russia to come to the table with regard to that Black Sea grain initiative?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes. Absolutely, and that is what we are working on. There are actually three things we are working on with Ukraine and its partners: one, our land routes, some of which go into Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary and on to Italy. Those handle about—let us do this.

Ukraine used to export about 6 million tons of grain a month and that was vitally important for world markets. They were 40, 50 percent of the World Food Programme grain every year. About one to one and a half million tons can go out through those normal routes. It is a bit expensive, but it is certainly possible and we will get that up and running again soon.

The other land routes go down through Romania ultimately and so the meetings I have been in with Romania and Moldova are about opening up to nine border crossing points and building the infrastructure that will let grain flow down through land and ultimately into the deep sea ports in Costanta.

The third route is along the coast and this is now showing real signs of success. It is allowing large ships to move and with that, Ukraine—we have made a commitment that by the end of this month we think Ukraine will be about 4 million tons of grain through those routes and I think it can go much higher soon. We will be almost back at pre-war levels. Then the challenge is getting the costs down and we are working on that as well.

Senator RICKETTS. Let me ask you another question along those lines as far as demining. If we were to loan or sell minesweepers, which are purely defensive, to Romania or Bulgaria, one of the vessels that was—hit a mine. One of the three cargo vessels was a Turkish flagged vessel off the coast of Romania. Perhaps Turkey would have an interest.

Do you think they would still—Turkey would still use its Montreux authority to stop a—if we loaned or sold a minesweeper to Bulgaria or Romania, would they stop that from coming through the strait?

Mr. O'BRIEN. I have raised that with Turkish officials. I think they would look at it very carefully. The restriction in Montreux I believe is only for combat vessels and, as you say, a minesweeper is arguably just a defensive item.

I would say two things. They are testing how effective the local assets are at managing this issue and I am not sure that one ship actually hit a mine. I thought there was some question it was an engine problem. These are older ships very often.

We would have a very strong discussion. Turkey has allowed NATO minesweepers into the Black Sea since the start of Russia's further invasion. There is some precedent that they would allow it if it—but I think they would decide based on the situation at the time. It is certainly a viable conversation to have.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you very much.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Senator Ricketts.

Senator Duckworth.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Secretary O'Brien, for being here today.

As noted previously, I did just return from an official visit to Romania where I had excellent conversations with our allies about our mutual support for Ukraine as well as our shared security priorities.

During my discussions with Romanian parliamentarians and cabinet ministers, I was struck by the central role that Romania has played in countering Putin's aggression. While Romania does not publicize many of these specific actions, they are in fact an excellent, even indispensable partner.

As one example, Romania is providing energy to its neighbors Ukraine and Moldova when necessary as well as buying power from Ukraine when available in order to bolster the Ukrainian economy.

When I thanked Romanian leaders during my trip, they expressed steadfast resolve to maintain this essential service for their neighbors.

Secretary O'Brien, can you elaborate on the portion of the Black Sea security strategy that covers promoting regional energy security and speak to additional opportunities to counter Putin's aggression in the energy sector?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes. Thank you for your visit and especially for highlighting the role that Romania is playing.

I have been there twice, as I said, and I think we could not ask for a better ally and partner. The willingness to stand up in support of Ukraine has been really a pillar of the global coalition fighting Russia. Romania has the deep sea port and the capacity to help

Ukraine get its economy running very quickly and I will get back to your specific question, but just to note, I was in Ukraine last week with Secretary Pritzker, who is the President's envoy for economic recovery of Ukraine, and President Zelensky talked about how important it is for his people to see some sign of economic life returning.

It is already happening. It is amazing, those of you who have visited Kyiv and some of the other major cities. If we are able to provide air defense, which we are asking for more help to do, and support for their electricity grid, their metals and grain industries will start to return to life very quickly and by one estimate, which we have to check, if they could double their exports through the Black Sea, it could provide an additional \$25 billion or more to their GDP and about \$5 billion to \$6 billion immediately in tax revenue for Ukraine.

If we want a path by which Ukraine begins to pay for more of its costs itself, the way forward is through the supplemental request, but also through the Black Sea because that is how Ukraine's economy moves forward and Romania is a critical partner in having that happen.

Now, to energy I would say there are a couple of parts to the strategy and we can do a deeper briefing at some point when you are back.

One part is to make sure that the states have access to electricity, but also to gas from non-Russian sources. Here, Greece has been a critical partner. Bulgaria now is arranging to import I think it is a third this year and more next year of its gas from—through Greece into Bulgaria and they are working interconnectors back up into Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine as well.

Romania has been providing equipment and support to Moldova as an energy provider. That kind of resilience is very important. The second pillar is to work and as—also gas from the South Caucasus and Caspian that will begin to flow.

The other piece is to build local supplies of energy generation. Very often those are renewable sources. You saw we have given money for offshore wind power in Romania. We are also working on nuclear power—a small modular reactor in Romania.

A British company is doing the same in Bulgaria. We are creating these alternatives and what is significant is that those replace generations-long entanglements with Rosatom, the Russian company that breeds corruption wherever it goes.

The strategy is to provide local generation where we can and connectivity to bridge the gap, and we are putting money into both of them and we are starting to see double digit changes lowering dependence on Russia. I think that is one of the measures of success for me.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. When I was there I met with SNN, Romania's state nuclear authority, and had excellent, excellent meetings with them. My own home state in Illinois is a national leader on nuclear technology. I am running out of time, but perhaps you can—

Mr. O'BRIEN. That is my fault. I apologize.

Senator DUCKWORTH. That is all right. Perhaps you can respond in a written format, if you could just discuss how the U.S. can build

on current efforts to promote the development of SMRs to speed broader use of this technology responsibly——

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes.

Senator DUCKWORTH. —and in a way that leverages the expertise we have in states like mine, Illinois, and elsewhere in the U.S. and how can Congress help with that in partnership with a country like Romania that is really pioneering this effort?

Mr. O'BRIEN. I know we have put, I think, \$57 million into some feasibility studies on the energy sector including a bit of the SMR work and I know that is 200 jobs in Illinois and Texas. It is—we are directly supporting jobs in the U.S. that go to supporting energy independence in the Black Sea.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Senator Duckworth.

Senator BARRASSO.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. Thanks for being here and joining us today. We appreciate it.

Just a couple of quick questions. In terms of the Black Sea maritime patrol, as you know, NATO created a very successful Baltic air policing mission to safeguard the integrity of the NATO alliance members' airspace. The mission could serve as a model, I think, for efforts to maintain a robust NATO presence in the Black Sea.

What are your views on NATO establishing a Black Sea maritime patrol mission?

Mr. O'BRIEN. We have a fairly robust presence that we are working in Romania particularly because Russia flies right along the border when it attacks the Ukrainian facilities, and I know we have beefed up that element.

Something dedicated and called the maritime mission, it is an interesting idea and I have not thought about it. I would have to talk with my Pentagon colleagues and come up with an answer, but certainly the capability is a really important one.

Senator BARRASSO. That was the capacity and the capability, and then the commitment to do it as well. Thank you.

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes.

Senator BARRASSO. In terms of the Russia-Turkey gas hub, there has been discussion about a gas hub. Russia has indicated its strong interest in creating this gas hub in Turkey.

There are reports that negotiations between Russia and Turkey are at a standstill due to disagreements regarding who should oversee it. Russia will use the hub as a workaround, I think, to sell to countries who are not willing to buy directly from them.

It is also possible for Russia to use the hub as a means to mask exports that are sanctioned. Russia continues to find any way it can. What do you think the implications would be if this deal went through between Russia and Turkey?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Well, I would say in both gas and nuclear power, we have been encouraging our Turkish partners to avoid long-term entanglements with Russia.

They have been doing this for hundreds of years with Russia in different sectors and they are aware of the need to keep them close, but more than arm's length away.

They think that they can negotiate an arrangement that will allow them control. I think we are skeptical of that and advising

them to look to other places for their gas and, frankly, the nuclear power as well and we are taking what measures we can to make that more likely.

Senator BARRASSO. I want to just get next to NATO strategy. The security and stability of the Black Sea is critically important to the security interests of the United States as well as the security interest, certainly, in NATO.

Earlier this month the NATO Parliamentary Assembly announced that they are set to adopt recommendations supporting strengthening defenses around the Black Sea.

What are the elements that are essential to any NATO strategy to address the security in the Black Sea and what strategy should NATO use, do you think, to build some resilience to the malign influence in the region?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Well, in our strategy we talk about—as the State Department we are talking about diplomatic strategy, building strong democracies, security cooperation to build up the local capabilities in this as well as resilience. Things like shared energy infrastructure that avoid the coercive power that Russia likes to use and then economic support so that they are more prosperous.

Those are the kind of core elements. In terms of a military capability, you touched on it. You need to be on sea, maybe undersea, able to control the air and control from the coastline the ability to threaten naval assets and the port facilities that are important to commerce.

Now, how we—what weapons array and who plays what role that will be something that NATO will dig in on.

Senator BARRASSO. Could you just talk a little bit about Russia's current military strengths and weaknesses in the Black Sea region and what the status is of their naval forces in the Black Sea?

Mr. O'BRIEN. They have redeployed away from Crimea over toward their major port—the military side of the port. This reduces their ability to restrict others' seafaring activities and has been a really important change.

There are indications that they are trying to mine or otherwise disrupt the shipping and that is something we are watching very carefully. It so far has been more by way of feint than reality, but we know they will try and they are using air assets to try to control or intimidate shippers, again, as a difficulty.

That is why, again, in the supplemental we are looking for the way to build up air defense because that is the answer to Russia using aircraft to lay mines in the Black Sea.

All of this works together as we try to build, going forward.

Senator BARRASSO. Senator Duckworth talked about her recent trip to Romania. I have been there in the military base a number of years ago. How can we continue to support modernization and interoperability of Romanians' armed forces?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes. Well, as I mentioned, we have provided a substantial grant of foreign military financing so that the—building more, as you say, interoperability. We have a combat brigade.

I think we have—I will have to check the numbers—trebled the number of U.S. forces in Romania and they are a fantastic partner on the Black Sea region and, frankly, elsewhere as well. We will keep integrating as close as we can.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Senator Barrasso.

Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair and welcome, Mr. Assistant Secretary.

I know we have covered a lot of areas that I plan to focus on—the demining of the Black Sea, I think looking for alternative routes for Ukrainian wheat through Romania. I would like to turn to the issue of cybersecurity because I know that part of the Black Sea’s security strategy involves addressing the malign cyber activities in the region.

My state of Maryland is home to Cyber Command, DISA, and other agencies that are very focused on these challenges and so I just wanted to ask you what we are doing to try to help our friends in the area address cyber attacks from Russia.

Mr. O’BRIEN. Yes. Senator, I will get you a written briefing in full about specifically the cyber activities.

Certainly, Russia’s attempt to control the information space are very damaging politically. As part of our program to support the democratic resilience of the seven states we are discussing today, we put a great deal of emphasis on countering the kind of, say, artificial efforts to influence the public sphere.

On cybersecurity itself we work with each of our partners on hardening their systems. The critical infrastructure and the key government functions are protected from Russian attack. I think the specifics, frankly, I would rather give you in another forum.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that, but you can assure us that we are very engaged on that front?

Mr. O’BRIEN. Yes. Yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I would like to pick up on a question I think Senator Duckworth raised regarding diversifying energy supplies—gas supplies away from Russia. I think she mentioned Romania. President Sandu of Moldova just recently said that that was a priority of theirs.

Could you address what we can do to help Moldova, but more broadly what we are doing in the aftermath of much of Europe waking up at the time of the Russian invasion to say, oh, my God, we just became over-dependent on Russian energy.

Mr. O’BRIEN. This has been a remarkable defeat for Putin. He thought that the gas would give him the ability to control Europe’s response to his further invasion of Ukraine, that either the prospect of cheap gas would induce people to allow him or the fear of losing all gas would cause them to cave and that has not happened.

The result is he has lost his own most lucrative markets and it has turned a great deal of their long built-up gas infrastructure into a white elephant, some of it lying under the sea, but even above ground.

The Ukrainians report that the last gas pipeline that is carrying some gas to Europe is carrying much less than half the contracted amounts and they think that number will go down.

We are looking at a country that has sacrificed one of its main sources of income and a long-held dearly prized asset. How is that happening? We have seen all the states of Europe both take some serious economic pain to make the change. Germany says that its

GDP suffered a fair bit from making the change, but they are buying a considerable amount of U.S. LNG and they are looking to other sources for gas and then to new sources of energy as well.

That is also true of the states on the Black Sea. I mentioned earlier the Greek port of Alexandroupolis is a very important source of LNG. I think it is almost oversubscribed.

Several Turkish ports have LNG terminals that are making capacity available so that gas can be provided to the States. I was with President Radev in Bulgaria last—states of the region. I was with President Radev when he was completing the deal that would allow Bulgaria to begin—I think by next year it will be two-thirds of their gas will be purchased from non-Russian sources.

That is quite a remarkable transition just for that one state, but especially when you are looking at an entire continent looking a different way for its gas supplies. This is moving very quickly and it will be very hard to turn it back the other way.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that and we have been following closely the impact of the oil price cap as well that was placed on Russia, which seems to have had some—a pretty significant bite, although, obviously, sale of energy and gas is still their primary source of revenue.

That is a good news story you are painting and I agree the rate at which—the pace at which people have been trying to wean themselves off of Russian gas has been impressive. More work to do, but as you say it has happened relatively quickly. Thank you.

Mr. O'BRIEN. Thank you, sir.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Senator Van Hollen.

I think we have time for another round. Assuming that Senator Ricketts and I are both on board, let us do that.

Most of our conversation has been around NATO and what NATO might do in the region, but a number of the Black Sea countries are also EU aspirants in different stages of that, of course, but how important is it, do you think, for the EU to think about how to include some of these states as they are looking at EU enlargement and why is that important for not just countries in the Black Sea region, but for other countries that are looking towards the West and the transatlantic alliance?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Sometimes we do talk about this with a alphabet stew of organizations and I think this is pretty simple. The European Union is based on four freedoms: the right of people to move, move their goods, send capital, sell their services, and to do it not just in their neighborhood, but across the entire union.

When a state says we want to join that, they are saying we want to be open just in the way that a U.S. state says, we are open for interstate commerce. That allows an incredible growth of prosperity and we see it in places like Romania, which I think the average income has close to doubled over recent years or up 70 percent. Do I have that right? Sorry. I am phoning a friend.

[Laughter.]

Mr. O'BRIEN. We see that as an incredible allure, plus it brings with it guarantees that relate to the rule of law and freedom from autocratic government. That is what is at stake.

Now, the other piece, what I care about as an American policy-maker, is that I want our friends to keep getting stronger because we are facing a sort of global challenge here.

China wants to set the rules of the global economy in the next century. Russia kind of wants to help out a bit, but China is 1.4 billion people. Having some economic difficulties, but it is very active in trying to shape the rules. If we are working with our friends, we are—depending how you count it, Europe is about 600 million people.

We are almost 350 million people. Japan, Korea—all of a sudden, we are getting close to the same size and we are very wealthy societies. We are used to writing rules.

That becomes a place where we are in very good position to control what happens as the rules get made for artificial intelligence, biomedical engineering, all the things that will drive productivity over the next couple generations.

That is what is at stake. Ukraine is 35 million people, we will say, highly educated, very developed IT sectors. I am kind of jealous that they are going to join the European Union because that is a really strong addition to the team that wants to write the rules and live in an open society based on the rule of law. That is what we are fighting for now.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. I agree and I hope that the EU is going to look at the opportunities and provide a real expedited path for some of the countries, recognizing that there are reforms that still have to be done.

One of those countries that we have not talked much about yet is Georgia, and Georgia is really under a significant amount of pressure from Russia. They share a very long border with Russia.

How are we working to secure—help secure Georgia's democracy? They have elections next year. What are we thinking about in terms of those elections?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Thank you for your attention to Georgia. I think it is very important in part—Senator Ricketts, as you noted 20 percent of its territory is occupied by Russia and Russia now is making noises about trying to use that territory as a base for military projection. That is something we watch very closely.

On Georgia, as you know well, 85, 90 percent of the Georgian people want to be a part of this rule-abiding community. They want to join the EU. They want to be very close to the U.S.

The question is whether a small group of businesses and others who do have some political influence prefer being in a gray area sort of between Russia and the West.

Our challenge is to point out to the people each time there is an inflection point when a decision must be made. We have put forward some sanctions and some requirements for reform. We are working completely in-line with our EU friends.

The EU will make a decision about whether to grant Georgia the status of a candidate, which opens up access to funding and technical assistance. We have said that there are a set of measures Georgia must take in order to qualify for the candidacy and we are using—we do not make that decision, but we are using our tools to try to back that.

We have a great new ambassador in Georgia and she is evaluating kind of what the best course is on elections because you have been a really stalwart activist, and as you know I spent years working with an organization that helps to organize democratic elections. Thank you for that.

We are waiting for the initial report of the U.N. election preparation office that will tell us what the design of a long-term observation mission has to be and then we will work with the Georgian authorities to be sure that that election is as free and fair as we can make it using our very excellent partners, both international organizations, but more importantly the Georgian people because I think we talk to some of the same activists and their point to us is, this is our country, we are not leaving, and it is going to be a democracy until we are done. I think our job is to help them have a good election.

Senator SHAHEEN. I certainly agree. I have some other questions on Georgia, but let me turn it over to Senator Ricketts because my time is up.

Senator RICKETTS. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Turkey certainly has no interest in the Black Sea becoming a Russian lake and we have been getting mixed messages out of Turkey with regard to this Ukrainian war. On the one hand they provide critical weaponry to Ukraine, but then Turkish companies help avoid the sanctions by doing business with Russia.

They support Ukraine entering NATO, yet they hold up Sweden's ascension into NATO until just very recently when it was put to their legislative branch. They, on the one hand, have helped keep Russian warships out of the Black Sea, but also are preventing our ships from going into—our warships from going into the Black Sea.

Of course, they have got the opportunity here, depending on how this war works out, when the war ends to be maybe the pre-eminent naval force in the Black Sea. The Black Sea grain initiative was also one of the things that President Erdogan championed. That obviously came to an end when Russia pulled out.

Where do you see the relationship between Russia and Turkey right now? How do you assess that relationship? What is President Erdogan thinking of how the Russians are behaving?

Mr. O'BRIEN. This is a chapter in centuries of competition, cooperation, between Turkey and Russia for control of Crimea, control of the Black Sea, control of Istanbul itself and President Erdogan is very aware that what he does not want to do is be alone with Russia.

His presence in the alliance and the close cooperation with us on any number of issues around Turkey's borders, but also through, say, the Western Balkans is vitally important to Turkey.

That allows us to get a lot of work done with Turkey, but it is also clear that they do listen to us when we are concerned that they are tilting too far in a way that will make them vulnerable to Russian pressure.

We talked about energy earlier and what we would like to see is them working with us to bring Sweden into NATO very quickly. We are working and hoping this vote will happen in the next week or two. That will leave only Hungary that has not ratified and we believe that will happen quickly as well.

The alliance will be strengthened and Turkey will have restated its commitment to working with us on the problems around its neighborhood and we do have a very good working relationship. Does this answer—

Senator RICKETTS. Did Russia pull out of the—pulling out of the grain deal harm that relationship or did President Erdogan not really care that much?

Mr. O'BRIEN. I think—no, I believe—again, I will not characterize President Erdogan's emotions. He made a very strong effort to encourage Russia to stay in and to return. He traveled to Sochi to see President Putin and I think met a really blunt "no, that could not have been welcome." I will not state what he felt about it.

I think for Turkey having—I never got back to my answer on what is success about our strategy. Well, one measure is increased freedom of navigation around the Black Sea—more trade, more ships, lower costs.

That is the core of Turkey's commercial interest and, in fact, it is almost existential for that whole long Turkish coastline along the Black Sea.

I suspect what he would want is an arrangement that ensures all of the commercial shipping in the Black Sea, that it can move at as low cost as possible and that is only possible if Russia backs off the threats that it has made to shipping around—in that north-western quadrant.

Senator RICKETTS. That is a great segue to one of the other questions I was going to ask is there is reports that Russia has created this ghost fleet of cargo ships that are—

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes.

Senator RICKETTS. —moving between the Black Sea and its bases in Syria to transport military items.

Have there been discussions with Turkey about trying to intervene in some way because these are carrying weapons that—if it is true carrying weapons that potentially create more of a danger in the Black Sea? Any discussions on that with Turkey?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes, and I am going to make this a wider discussion maybe for a second.

We spoke earlier—Senator Van Hollen asked about the oil price cap. The normal way that we use sanctions to enforce things like a price cap or limitations on who is allowed to buy and sell a commodity like oil is through service providers, insurance companies, crew facilities, maritime registers, on down the list.

What Russia has tried to do with—and Iran has tried to do the same is create what they call a ghost fleet. They bought up old ships and they try to run them without ever touching the places where we enforce sanctions.

Now, what that means is you have this unregulated maritime presence. It is 500-odd ships that we are aware of and that is dangerous for shipping, it is dangerous for all counterparties, and it is dangerous for the ports where these ships go.

We published—as a first step we thought it was important to begin establishing what the parameters for regulating these ships would be, so we published a maritime advisory just a couple of

weeks ago and already that is affecting, we will say, due diligence and the commercial practices. We will see how far that goes.

We need to follow that up with some teeth so that the people who are engaging in business with these ships realize that they are jeopardizing their access to the dollar, the euro, and to the commercial operations of the West.

We have already designated some of the port facilities or operators who have provided services to some ships, whether it was exactly munitions or other things, and that message we believe is starting to change practices including at some ports along the—on the Black Sea, and will continue work in this vein, so you will see more done.

It is not simply a small number of ships carrying a specific kind of cargo. It is a Russian effort to build a system that is outside any of the post World War II regulatory mechanisms and that is dangerous.

It is also very costly for Russia, so it is eating into the money that Putin has to run his war, but we cannot allow that kind of system to go unchecked.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Senator Ricketts.

I have just a couple more questions, but while we are on Turkey, let me just point out that the Turkish ambassador came to the meeting we had last week and his comments were very helpful.

I especially appreciate that they are now taking up the ratification of Sweden's accession to NATO, but I have to say and I was very disappointed to see President Erdogan's comments in support of Hamas after the violence in the Middle East.

You do not need to comment on that. I just think it is important to point out that as we are looking at the civilized world versus terrorist groups and those who would base their operations on destruction as we are seeing with Putin in Ukraine, it is disappointing to see those kinds of comments.

Mr. O'BRIEN. Thank you for both those comments, Senator.

Senator SHAHEEN. To go back to Georgia, one of the issues that we heard the last time we were in Georgia was the Chinese effort to develop the port in Anaklia and that was concerning.

Can you talk about how we plan to support Georgia as they are looking to remain resilient to Chinese efforts to develop that port and invest in other ways in the country?

Mr. O'BRIEN. We have made clear that critical infrastructure should not belong to states that will steal or suborn the countries in which they operate and that includes port facilities like the one at Anaklia.

There are two finalists, I believe, for this tender. The project is many years from completion. There is a joint Singaporean-Chinese consortium as well as a Western consortium.

We have backed—and some of this was in my prior life so I hope I am allowed to speak to it—but the U.S. DFC has provided a very large loan to a facility in the Poti port that handles bulk cargo—I mentioned that earlier—and we are working to develop these other facilities in Georgia so that they are able to manage a great deal more traffic.

Part of it is making sure that there is competition, but also that Anaklia is controlled by a firm that is open to working in accordance with the rule of law and will continue to insist on that.

Senator SHAHEEN. One of the other things we heard that I thought was very positive is the effort for this new East-West energy corridor that would go under the Black Sea and provide an alternative for energy coming out of Central Asia into Europe.

Can you talk about why this would be helpful? Also, one of the things we heard was the real interest on the part of the Georgian officials we met with and having a development finance office in Georgia.

I know it is a new agency and they are still trying to decide where they are going to go, but the Black Sea region seems to me to be ripe for having that kind of DFC office. That would be really helpful in the long term.

Mr. O'BRIEN. I will confine myself here to say that I think the DFC is incredibly valuable and I think its ability to be onsite helps identify and even create investment opportunities often rather than just sifting through the opportunities that make it to it, and where it chooses to locate permanently or not, it is not my decision, but I agree the Black Sea is incredibly exciting.

Senator, you took down your map, but the states of Central Asia largely have been—no, that is okay—they have largely been dependent on routes that run through Russia or now through China. They want another way.

That is for oil and gas. Oil currently runs through a Russian-based pipeline, but it is also for grain, fertilizers, and other items. Those have to come down to ports on the Caspian.

One point where it will be helpful to have legislative support is these ports—it is the Caspian where a couple of the littoral states are Iran and Russia. We have to be very careful that we are not benefiting those states, but that we are creating opportunities for the other states and understanding the choices we are making will be very helpful.

Once it crosses the Caspian it ends up in Azerbaijan, whatever the good is, and then the choice is either it goes to Georgia and across the Black Sea or it has to go through Armenia, so we need an agreement with those two states, and then to Turkey, so Turkey has to open its border with Armenia, and then out again to the Black Sea.

Whatever path we take leads us to the Black Sea and that is why there is so much momentum behind the strategy that you have legislated to have us put in place.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you. I agree. I think it makes a lot of sense to have—to recognize how important that is as we are doing the strategy.

Just because I am out of time, but my final comment is to go back to Ukraine because in your opening remarks you talked about measuring success in the Black Sea by what happens in Ukraine.

Can you talk about why funding for Ukraine in the supplemental is going to be so important?

Mr. O'BRIEN. I would just say the measure of success we have touched on. I think there are certain stable measurements.

I mentioned more freedom of navigation. I would say more states, part of the Black Sea trading region so bringing Central Asia along is a real marker, and then I think it is the democratic stability of the states around the Black Sea because that is the foundation for security, NATO membership, et cetera.

Those things are there, but then the success of Ukraine. Why Ukraine? This is the freedom that at least my whole lifetime we wanted to see extend across Europe. Putin wants to eliminate Ukraine and move from there.

His officials talk about the Baltics as a historical Russian place. They remind Poland that its territory used to at one point be part of Russia. They—and then they look at Bulgaria, parts of Turkey and other places as points that Russia has been striving to control for hundreds of years. He wants that influence. That is what he is fighting for.

I look at Ukrainians, and when I was with President Zelensky last week—and he talks about his people. They are fighting and dying for this freedom. It is right for us to stand with them.

We talk sometimes carelessly about burden sharing, but we are here with the greatest coalition the world has seen, at least since World War II, but I think maybe ever. It is more than 50 countries have supported Ukraine.

In terms of pure money, about 45–50 percent more has gone to Ukraine from other countries than from the United States. We are there with a coalition. I think we are indispensable to shaping what it does and how it does it.

We are building as part of that then a rule-abiding community that will stand for the next several generations. That is something I want to leave to my kids rather than just holding on to the remnants of a 1940s settlement. We have the chance to do that now and that is the moment—this is the moment to do it.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Senator Ricketts.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

I want to return to Ukraine, as well. As China is part of the no-limits partnership with Russia, but they have also tried to position themselves to be a part of a peace settlement and then therefore be a part of the reconstruction of Ukraine.

As I mentioned in my opening comments, having the People's Republic of China have influence on post-war Ukraine really goes against all of our interests. PRC companies own and operate terminals in nearly a hundred commercial ports around the world and then that creates a platform for the People's Liberation Army. It creates a platform for them to collect intelligence.

This critical infrastructure they are involved in really puts us at a disadvantage in many areas. They already have a history with Ukraine before the war when in 2017 they upgraded Ukraine's port of Odessa and, of course, through this war countless Ukrainian port infrastructure facilities have been damaged by Russia and especially since we have seen this since the—they have pulled out from the grain initiative, and it is going to obviously be very costly to repair and rebuild Ukraine.

What threats does PRC involvement in Ukrainian construction do you see and what does it pose to Black Sea security and our

U.S. interests and what are we doing to really try to check that before it becomes an issue for us?

Mr. O'BRIEN. I think it is a great question. Russia has not shown any favoritism to assets that were owned by the Chinese. The major facilities have been closed since the further invasion and damaged.

The important point here is what is the future of Ukraine. It is for the people of Ukraine to decide and they have decided they want to be part of a Western community, and as a piece of that, our work with our European partners to discuss a way forward with regard to China has been incredibly important and we see, I would say, a convergence of views about the risks that are posed by China.

As Ukraine decides, it is not about who it wants investing and holding what assets. It is not 2017 anymore. Ukraine will be emerging from this war with the opportunity to set in place ownership that will be compatible with the rules of a new European Union, one that is cognizant of the risks that China poses, one where we are in active conversation about the threat that is posed by having what often are usurious debt arrangements and kind of opaque and onerous ownership arrangements, control of data, et cetera.

All these things will be a part of the decision-making and I feel pretty confident that we will be in place to have Ukraine firmly in a camp where we will be comfortable.

Now, it will be their choice, but a major way that we shape that discussion with them is to, frankly, stay in the game from a financial standpoint. That is why we have asked for more than \$60 billion to provide support so that Ukraine can get itself back on its feet, but back on its feet headed the direction we want and that is the way we address the threat from China.

Senator RICKETTS. Would you agree that if China were to get involved in the reconstruction that would be a problem for our anti-corruption efforts and bringing about Western institutions to develop fully in Ukraine?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes.

Senator RICKETTS. What more can we as the United States do to really prevent that from happening? Then if we agree this is a really bad thing, is there more—you mentioned it is the Ukrainians' choice, which obviously that is true.

What can we do? Obviously, continued investment. Is there anything else we can be doing to be able to prevent the PRC from taking a bigger role in post construction?

Mr. O'BRIEN. You sound like you are hoping I will say something in particular, but I think the main thing is it is difficult to be—

Senator RICKETTS. No, I am looking for ideas actually.

[Laughter.]

Mr. O'BRIEN. Oh, okay. No, I think it is hard to beat something with nothing and we are being—we are very clear with Ukraine, the primary message of last week's visit was it is time to complete the reform agenda so that Ukraine builds in the transparency that we want and avoids the kind of opaque arrangements that allow autocratic regimes to flourish.

The commitments are very good. Ukraine has taken some remarkable steps. It has two active independent anti-corruption bodies that are investigating powerful political figures.

It has one of the most robust civil societies focused on anti-corruption that I have ever seen and within the Administration there are many people deeply committed to seeing Ukraine build a modern, decentralized, open economic architecture.

Working with them and then being able to provide the resources that let them succeed now so that they do not have to go grasping at straws.

Senator RICKETTS. Would you say then that just even the anti-corruption efforts we are doing right now that help create that open transparent society is actually a barrier to China coming in and doing these deals?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes.

Senator RICKETTS. Because it is the opposite of what the People's Republic China want to see?

Mr. O'BRIEN. Yes.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Senator Ricketts. We are being summoned to go vote.

I want to thank Assistant Secretary O'Brien again for your testimony today. Thank you for your partnership on this issue, Senator Ricketts, and for the information of everyone, the record will stay open for questions until close of business on Thursday.

Mr. O'BRIEN. Thank you both very much.

Senator SHAHEEN. At this time I close the hearing.

[Whereupon, at 3:44 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF MR. JAMES O'BRIEN TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

Question. It is positive that Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria plan to work together on anti-mining efforts in the Black Sea. How does the Administration plan to support this effort, and what additional Congressional authorization or appropriations does State need to move forward?

Answer. The United States strongly supports regional efforts to address the threat to commercial and naval traffic posed by mines in the Black Sea. We understand the trilateral anti-mine initiative is in the planning stage and that governments will share more information as those plans develop. While they have not requested international support, the United States has provided FMF to both Romania and Bulgaria to help backfill for donations they provided to Ukraine. Additional FMF for countries affected by the war in Ukraine, including Bulgaria and Romania, would advance our Allies' modernization efforts, increase their capacity to ensure security in the Black Sea region, and allow them to provide additional capabilities to help Ukraine win. NATO has also increased surveillance over the Black Sea, including with patrol aircraft and reconnaissance drones. These measures strengthen our Allies' response to threats, including maritime threats, in the Black Sea.

RESPONSES OF MR. JAMES O'BRIEN TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH

Question. Assistant Secretary O'Brien, can you discuss how the U.S. can build on current efforts to promote the development of SMRs to speed broader use of this technology responsibly and in a way that leverages the expertise we have in Illinois and elsewhere in the U.S.? How can Congress help?

Answer. From his first day in office, President Biden made clear that addressing the climate crisis is at the center of U.S. foreign policy and that nuclear energy is a critical climate solution. Advancing civil nuclear cooperation is a national security priority and we have taken significant steps to help countries build their capacity and access financing through public-private partnerships, foreign assistance, and U.S. Government financing tools. The SMR project in Romania is a great example of public-private partnership, with contributions from private industry spurring letters of interest from the United States (EXIM and DFC) and other countries. The State Department was a major financial contributor to the Front-End Engineering and Design (FEED) study grants for U.S. reactor projects both in Poland and Romania. At the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Bucharest, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry announced a new program to provide SMR advisory services to countries in Europe and Eurasia. We have also launched Project Phoenix, which supports coal-to-SMR conversions to accelerate the rapid and responsible clean energy transition in Europe. We are committed to working with our Allies and partners to leverage U.S. nuclear expertise to support energy security and the global clean energy transition.

Question. In addition to strongly supporting NATO, I also believe that smart investments in time, troop presence, multi-lateral exercises and more in the European theater can yield results in allied capability and capacity that can ultimately free the U.S. to focus more in the Indo-Pacific.

Secretary O'Brien, strengthening regional security cooperation is a core part of the Black Sea Strategy. This includes bolstering NATO's presence in the region, such as the increased force posture at MK Airbase in Romania. Can you discuss where you think the U.S. should focus its security cooperation efforts in the Black Sea region? What opportunities do you see with key allies and partners, and how are you working with DoD to pursue these opportunities?

Answer. We seek a Black Sea open to commercial navigation and secure for the countries that depend on it. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO and the United States have deployed more forces to the Black Sea region. The United States established a new Brigade Combat Team in Romania, nearly tripling the number of U.S. troops in country, and NATO established new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria and Romania. We have provided additional FMF financing to help backfill and enable future donations to Ukraine and advance military modernization of likeminded Black Sea littoral states—including over \$430 million for Romania and Bulgaria. Three NATO Allies—Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye—have naval bases on the Black Sea and the United States continues to partner with these NATO countries on land and maritime exercises in the Black Sea region. In coordination with our DoD colleagues, we are enhancing our Allies' capacity to work together to improve maritime domain awareness and strengthen regional security.

As I said in my testimony, the focus of our immediate efforts is ensuring Ukraine wins this war and emerges whole, free, and at peace. We will continue to focus our security cooperation efforts on strengthening the capabilities of our Allies and partners and encouraging all possible support for Ukraine.

**State Department's Black Sea Security
Strategy Report to Congress***Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen*UNCLASSIFIED**Report to Congress on
A Strategy for Working with NATO Allies to
Deepen Ties with Black Sea Countries
Section 7019(e) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and
Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023 (Div. K, P.L.117-328) and the
Joint Explanatory Statement**

The United States has an enduring interest in a Black Sea region that is secure, prosperous, interconnected, and free from threats to the territorial integrity of states, economic coercion, and malign influence posed by Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The President's National Security Strategy underscores our interest in working with Allies and partners to strengthen our defense and deterrence against Russia's aggression and respond to the PRC's attempts to reshape the international order and erode U.S. alliances. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine highlights growing challenges in the Black Sea region and has deepened our resolve to ensure Putin's war is a strategic failure. The United States, our NATO Allies, and likeminded partners have responded with greater focus, more security and economic assistance, and additional forces for the Black Sea region. The NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022 explicitly recognizes the Black Sea's strategic importance to the Alliance.

The Black Sea region encompasses a diverse set of countries with disparate interests. Our strategy considers the Black Sea littoral states of Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Türkiye, and Ukraine, as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece, and Moldova. Russia's war against Ukraine seriously constrains the environment, and supporting Ukraine as it defends its sovereignty and territorial integrity remains our immediate priority. Yet even in this wartime context, we see opportunities to strengthen regional

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cooperation and advance U.S. priorities. This strategy will rely on interagency coordination, robust cooperation with likeminded partners, NATO, and the European Union (EU), and the expertise of private industry – as well as the availability of adequate personnel and resources.

The United States will coordinate our efforts in the Black Sea region along the following lines of effort:

1. Promote Political Engagement

Consistent, visible U.S. engagement in the Black Sea region counters malign narratives and emphasizes to Allies and partners that there is a credible alternative to those who seek to undermine Europe's stability. The United States will strengthen our ties with likeminded countries in the Black Sea region through deliberate and focused political and diplomatic engagement. We will meet with Black Sea partners more frequently at senior levels and foster greater regional political cooperation through formats such as the Bucharest Nine. We will coordinate with European partners and the EU to encourage frequent multilateral engagements with and among Black Sea states and leverage opportunities through the EU, NATO, the Three Seas Initiative, and other fora.

We will increase the visibility of U.S. commitment to the Black Sea region through messaging that conveys the importance of the region to U.S. and European security. We will emphasize the tangible benefits of Transatlantic integration, interconnectivity, energy security and democratic resilience through diplomatic channels, media engagements, and public outreach. Our support for political and economic Euro-Atlantic integration will include robust support for aspirants to join NATO and the EU and continued security, economic, and humanitarian support for Ukraine.

U.S. efforts to promote peace in the South Caucasus will secure and reinforce this Black Sea strategy. Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan will fundamentally change the U.S. relationship with both countries, unlocking new security cooperation and economic opportunities.

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2. Strengthen Regional Security Cooperation

The United States has done much to strengthen the U.S. and NATO presence in the Black Sea region since Russia's unprovoked and brutal invasion of Ukraine, and unwavering support for Ukraine's self-defense and sovereignty remains the bedrock of our efforts. The strategic importance of the Black Sea region is shared by our Allies as reflected in NATO's Strategic Concept. The region continues to face long-term threats to its security, including Russia's aggression and occupation in Ukraine and Georgia, mines in the Black Sea that threaten commerce and freedom of navigation, and hybrid threats such as malign cyber activities. The United States will support likeminded regional states' efforts to promote regional cooperation, build joint all-domain awareness, advance freedom of navigation, strengthen coastal defenses, and protect critical infrastructure. In consultation with Allies and partners, we will identify opportunities to conduct port visits, further joint training and exercises, and support non-NATO joint exercises, building on the United States' reputation as a trusted security partner. Our priorities are:

- a) Increase Information Exchange and Strengthen Domain Awareness:** We will support increased information-sharing and strengthened maritime domain awareness among likeminded littoral states and with the United States and NATO. Improve capabilities to monitor the maritime domain will also ensure the security of the region's economy. We will build on initial progress in Georgia and Romania to further integrate other likeminded Black Sea region states, including via NATO's Regional Airspace Security Program.
- b) Prioritize Defense Modernization and Interoperability:** We will continue to ensure our security assistance meets the region's defense needs. Ensuring all NATO Allies and partners acquire interoperable military equipment bolsters Black Sea security and reduces vulnerabilities posed by Russian or PRC defense exports. Modernization of defensive capabilities will be among our top priorities, including improved intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, coastal defense, and hardened communications.

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- c) **Bolster NATO Presence:** Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO has significantly stepped up its deterrence and defense posture along its Eastern Flank, establishing four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. The United States deployed more forces in Romania and Bulgaria and will continue to support a robust, visible NATO forward presence in the Black Sea region, including through support for enhancing indigenous maritime, land, and air capabilities of likeminded Black Sea littoral states.
- d) **Defend Freedom of Navigation and Use of International Air Space:** A visible U.S. and NATO naval presence in the Black Sea contributes to regional security. We will seek to preserve U.S. and NATO access to the Black Sea, consistent with international law, including the Montreux Convention, and in a manner that does not escalate tensions. Engagement with Allies and partners, combined with targeted capability development, will build towards exercising freedom of navigation and use of international airspace. We will work with NATO Allies and partners to deter and defend against maritime threats and ensure the freedom and security of commercial shipping lanes in the Black Sea. The United States should resume periodic ship visits to the Black Sea as in the pre-2022 period after deliberate consultation with our Allies and partners and informed by conditions.

3. Enhance Regional Economic Cooperation

The Black Sea region has great economic potential as a connector between Europe and Central Asia and plays a vital role in global food security. The United States will continue to promote free commerce, advance U.S. competitiveness, and promote economic resilience, including from Russian and PRC influence, through our economic assistance, support for policies that promote a level playing field, and the prioritization of commercial projects with a strategic focus on the Black Sea. We will cooperate with the EU to promote Black Sea development and advance regional initiatives that can contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction. We will:

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- a) Invest Strategically and Boost Interconnectivity:** We will continue to promote economic development and interconnectivity in the Black Sea region through international financial institutions. We will support platforms such as the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and encourage them to invest in strategic infrastructure that enhances the resilience of the region's transit corridors for people, goods, and services. We will promote integration of 3SI funding with existing EU and G7 resources. We will also further focus our economic assistance to Black Sea countries on promoting integration with Europe and Western markets, promoting transparent, predictable, and stable investment climates, and building capacity to counter foreign malign influence. We must secure these economic and infrastructure linkages now for the United States and our partners to effectively support Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction.
- b) Promote a Level Playing Field:** We will work with Black Sea countries and partners such as the EU to support policies that ensure fair and open trade and investment and combat malign economic influence. We will help countries develop robust investment screening mechanisms and advocate for transparency in public procurement and diverse supply chains in strategic sectors such as critical minerals and energy supplies. These measures will strengthen economic resilience and help EU aspirants on their path to European integration.
- c) Support the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI):** We will continue to work with partners to ensure the BSGI operates effectively. We will encourage participants in the BSGI to uphold their commitments. We will work to extend and expand the BSGI and work towards restoring pre-war levels of agricultural output from the Black Sea.

4. Promote Regional Energy Security and Clean Energy

Russia's aggression underscored the urgent need to help countries transition away from dependence on Russian energy sources. The United States will strengthen the Black Sea region's energy security and resilience through

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support for energy diversification and clean energy alternatives. These efforts also advance our shared climate goals.

- a) Support Energy Interconnectivity and Western Integration:** We will support the integration of the energy markets of aspiring EU member states with internal EU markets as well as the expansion of regional electricity and natural gas infrastructure to produce, distribute, and store transitional and next-generation energy sources across state boundaries. This will increase the resilience of our Allies and partners to supply shocks, spur economic growth and workforce training, and advance our objective of a clean energy future. Integrating energy supplies from the South Caucasus will promote the western orientation of these countries, while also expanding Europe's resource base and energy resilience.
- b) Support Energy Sector Decarbonization:** Solar, wind, geothermal, hydrogen, and conventional and small modular nuclear reactors are but a few examples of the low-carbon sources that we will increasingly rely upon to facilitate a global clean energy transition. We will work with international financial institutions, the U.S. Export-Import Bank, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, and private sector partners to couple innovative and sustainable financing with new and scalable technologies as well as more immediately implementable solutions.

5. Foster Democratic Resilience and Counter Malign Influence

The United States will support our Black Sea Allies and partners to strengthen rule of law, promote respect for human rights, combat corruption, and counter disinformation that threatens regional security, increases vulnerability to malign influence, and hinders greater investment and economic growth. We will support the European aspirations of partners and help consolidate the region's ties to Euro-Atlantic institutions and values. We will encourage greater cooperation and engagement among civil society in the region. We will strengthen regional people-to-people ties by promoting exchanges between and among local government and civil

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society leaders in likeminded littoral states and through increased engagement on issues of common interest such as health and climate. We will:

- a) **Combat Corruption:** Corruption corrodes public trust, undermines security and government stability, hinders economic growth, and serves as a vector for foreign malign influence. The United States will promote transparency and rule of law and elevate our anticorruption work in the Black Sea region through our assistance, capacity building, and by using existing accountability tools to target corrupt actors. We will leverage multilateral engagement through the Group of States against Corruption and the Conference of the States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption. We will promote information sharing, work with partners to boost anticorruption enforcement, and ensure capacity building efforts incorporate anticorruption considerations, in line with the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption.
- b) **Counter Disinformation:** Our adversaries use disinformation to undermine international norms. The United States will support policies and programs that strengthen media freedom and media literacy and publicly counter malign narratives. We will also support investigative journalism to expose corruption and linkages between civil society elements and malign actors. We will pursue partnerships with the public and private sectors and civil society to counter disinformation and share U.S. experience and expertise with Black Sea nations. We will leverage resources like the Global Engagement Center, the interagency Russia Influence Group, and multilateral platforms like NATO and the EU to strengthen our efforts to counter propaganda.
- c) **Strengthen People-to-People Ties:** We will continue to support regional states, including EU aspirants, to strengthen their democracies, promote respect for human rights, and use public diplomacy and programming to build support for further Euro-Atlantic integration. We will foster strong people-to-people ties with our assistance, through exchanges between government and civil society groups, and via bilateral engagement. We

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will support regional exchange among Black Sea states on issues like health, climate, and science to advance our shared goals.

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