

MULTIDIMENSIONAL COMPETITION IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

On geo-economic and security grounds, the Black Sea region qualifies to play a much more essential role for Europe, the Middle East, and Asia than it is currently accorded. However, the recent instability in southeastern Ukraine is a trigger for further significant transformations of the region. This article examines the key political tendencies in the Black Sea region in view of the current situation revolving around Ukraine. The author outlines the basic contours of the competition among major powerbrokers in the Black Sea region, which are willing to make concessions and create new alliances in order to rebalance the distribution of power.

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The contemporary situation around Ukraine and Russia drew international attention to the Crimean peninsula and southeastern Ukrainian border. While Russia acts as the aggressor on the political stage in terms of public opinion, the Black Sea region is undergoing significant alterations. In particular, competing narratives associated with Russian aggression have put significant pressure on regional leaders, exhibited through the political endeavors they have undertaken. As a result, a rivalry of interstate security initiatives and functional alliances has emerged.

With tensions between the European Union (EU) and Russia escalating over the Ukrainian challenge, Turkey acquires significant regional weight; accordingly, its role in the Black Sea region should be greatly enhanced. A similar reappraisal came into play long before the annexation of Crimea.¹ Against this background, the activity of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in deepening relations with Azerbaijan is noteworthy. This Caucasian state is exceedingly loyal to Turkey and is one of the most authoritative units in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) implemented by the EU.

All the abovementioned shifts are based on geopolitical competition in the region. This paper examines the key political tendencies in the Black Sea region in view of the current situation revolving around Ukraine. It also aims to outline the basic contours of the competition among major powerbrokers in the Black Sea region, which are willing to make concessions and create new alliances in order to rebalance the distribution of power.

The Turkish Factor

Turkey is a strong player that, at least in the short term, may be involved in various regional and even supra-regional initiatives. Turkey's role in the region is shaped by its ambiguous position on the Crimean issue and its long-stalled European Union accession.

In many respects, the excessively reserved attitude of Ankara towards the Russian-Ukrainian crisis is largely motivated by its loss of confidence in the Middle East. The case of Egypt demonstrates this particularly well, in light of the 2013 overthrow of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, who had the strong support of Turkey. This loss of political capital has subverted the political image of Ankara, and has forced the government to implement a more cogent policy in the Black Sea region

¹ "Enhancing security in the Black Sea Region and prospects for the Turkish-Ukrainian cooperation," *Razumkov Centre and the Centre for International and European Studies* (2011), p. 179, http://www.uceps.org/upload/UA-TR_2011_eng.pdf

– the buffer zone between Europe and the Middle East. Nonetheless, the situation is aggravated by the significant influence of the West over Turkey, as the eyes of many Turkish elites were already turned to the West. Certain Russian actions in Crimea grabbed the attention of Turkey – a country with an Eastern set of mind and in many ways overbearing political behavior. In spite of this, Ankara seeks to replace Russia as the distributor of energy resources in the Black Sea basin and seemingly will continue any dialogue with the EU regardless of potential fluctuations in the region.

Turkey’s increasingly dwindling prospects of EU membership call into question the European enlargement approach in general. The low efficiency of the ENP and the integration processes of the EU towards Eastern countries are also favorable to Russia’s position in the region, a country that finds common ground with Turkey rather than with Brussels. Indeed, Russia is capable of offering an alternative platform of cooperation with Turkey – the Eurasian Union, that should be fully launched in the beginning of 2015. The main benefit of this association is the energy resources of members, as it considerably reduces competition within the Black Sea region, and at the same time makes it impossible for Turkey to seize the palm tree of superiority from Russia and become the only transit country.² On the other hand, Turkey’s participation would enable the Union to become increasingly diversified and lower the domination of Russia, thereby creating a balanced confederation of states needed for a multipolar collectivity instead of the traditional bipolar configuration.

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The Crimean Tatars Issue

Turkey has vested interests in the fate of the Crimean Tatars, who have applied for Ankara’s support.³ The case of Russia’s prohibiting Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Cemilev from entering Crimea until 2019 demonstrates the complexity of Turkey’s situation; the Turkish authorities have formally promised to discuss the issue with Russia, while recommending that Cemilev comply with Russian demands.

This situation demonstrates that any threats in the Black Sea region (including those the Crimean Tatars are facing) automatically leave Turkey with a dilemma in terms

2 Mikhail Pak, “A solid four,” *Lenta.ru*, 10 October 2014, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2014/10/09/armenia/>

3 “Mustafa Cemilev appealed for help to Erdogan,” *Anspress*, 5 April 2014, <http://www.anspress.com/index.php?a=2&cid=48&lng=ru&nid=269054>

of favoring Western or Eurasian (Russian) vector development.⁴ The existing predicament of choice was also indicated by Ankara's neutral position at the beginning of the Crimean crisis, which was not fully positively received by the West and rather more suited Russian interests. Cooperation between Russia and Turkey is crucial for both countries, being fundamental for trade and economic relations as well as in negotiating implicit geopolitical confrontation.

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Despite the steadily growing rate of bilateral trade between Russia and Turkey, Moscow encourages tourism in Crimea as a priority destination, as an alternative to the already popular Turkish resorts. Russia has to evolve its own policy over Crimea. Effectively, the issue of human rights protection of the Crimean Tatars is a purely political point in Turkish-Russian relations despite Turkey's formal willingness to negotiate with Putin on this sensitive

subject.⁵ Evidently, both countries make mutual concessions at least in service of a profitable bilateral cooperation.

Ankara is concerned by the annexation of Crimea that can substantially modify the existing balance of power such that Turkey will be in an exposed position. Turkey could face a more active Russian policy and open competition with other regional or extra-regional actors (China) in the Black Sea region.

After the growing violence and instability in southeastern Ukraine, on 10 November 2014, the Turkish Foreign Ministry expressed readiness to support President Petro Poroshenko's peace plan to resolve the situation in Donbass, as well as to provide its own territory for the National Congress of the Crimean Tatars.⁶ Even here, Turkey is cautious, and notes that it is still mandatory to explore all the possible consequences of such a step. Ankara does not want to lose its Ukrainian trade partner, with 6.7 billion dollars in trade in 2013, or Russia, for which it has approximately

4 Diba Nigar Göksel, “Turkey’s Russia conundrum: To court or to curb?,” *FRIDE Policy Brief*, No. 185 (September 2014), http://fride.org/download/PB_185_Turkeys_Russia_conundrum.pdf

5 Giuseppe Carpelluti, “Крымские татары: между Турцией и Татарстаном” [Crimean Tatars: between Turkey and Tatarstan], *Eurasia – Rivista di Studi Geopolitici*, 25 July 2014, <http://www.eurasia-rivista.org/Крымские-татары-между-Турцией-и-Татар/21760/>

6 “Ukraine grateful to Turkey for supporting Poroshenko’s peace plan,” *Kyivpost*, 10 November 2014, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/ukraine-grateful-to-turkey-for-supporting-poroshenkos-peace-plan-371275.html>

20 billion dollars in trade.⁷ Apparently, Turkey aspires to maintain balance in the Black Sea region, keeping together all stakeholders with political or economic compromise, and discreetly responding to the prevailing challenges without sacrificing its own interests.

Platforms of Integration or Confrontation?

One of the challenges in the region, Ukraine, is a major destabilizing factor in the emergence of direct violence and profound political divisions in the region. In this context, the instability over Ukraine is a catalyst for Transnistria, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh “frozen” conflict where Russia is an official mediator. In contrast to its much more direct involvement on behalf of Transnistria, in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has interests on both sides. The lack of stability and the dual interests of Russia in Nagorno-Karabakh particularly shape the fluid dynamics of the region and force regional players to form unions. In addition, for a long time, the abovementioned cases are eminent attractors for traditional military-political alliances.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Ukraine’s Western European neighbors will soon become a platform for launching large-scale maneuvers of NATO, whose rapid response team will be able to reach the area of operations in southeastern Ukraine.⁸ Undoubtedly, such maneuvers will constitute a hostile action according to the national security interests of the Russian Federation by directly threatening it.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, NATO has increasingly been extending its reach into the Black Sea and the Caucasus. By accepting Romania and Bulgaria, NATO has expanded its military influence throughout the region, and the next essential step is the acceptance of Georgia and Ukraine. More questionable is that with the latter two states, Russia has a history of conflict: an eight-day war in 2008 with Georgia and its current confrontation with Ukraine. In recent weeks, discussions over Georgia’s acceptance into NATO have intensified.⁹

Accordingly, extending its borders to Crimea with access to the Black Sea was seen by Russia as strategically crucial in connection with threats posed by NATO. The

7 “Trade and economic cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey,” *Foreign economic information portal of the Russian Federation*, http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/tr/tr_ru_relations/tr_ru_trade/

8 “NATO alliance is planning a large-scale maneuvers in Eastern Europe,” *RIA News*, 7 November 2014, <http://ria.ru/world/20141107/1032140799.html>

9 “Hungary believes that the process of Georgia’s joining NATO should be accelerated,” *Ekho Kavkaza*, 10 November 2014, <http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/archive/news/20141110/3235/2759.html?id=26683328>

“*Any threats in the Black Sea region (including those the Crimean Tatars are facing) automatically leave Turkey with a dilemma in terms of favoring Western or Eurasian vector development.*”

Kremlin’s expansionist policy for the last year can be understood as compensating for the former advantageous geopolitical position that Russia held in the region. With the annexation of the Crimean territory, however, Russia is facing socio-political instability, as well as more evident political and military hazards from NATO.

With or without Crimea, it is arguable that Russia would have experienced a tough confrontation with NATO along its own borders in the short-term. In the end, Russia has managed to strengthen

its geopolitical position in the Black Sea region *via* the annexation of Crimea, sacrificing fairly stable relations with Ukraine.

The Document on Confidence Building Measures and Security in the Naval Field in the Black Sea

Initially, the Document on Confidence Building Measures and Security in the Naval Field in the Black Sea was signed in Kiev on 25 April 2002. The initiator of the negotiation process was principally Ukraine. The Document applies to six Black Sea member states – Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine.¹⁰

In accordance with the provisions of the Document, these six members collaborate and maintain contacts in the naval field, as well as invite each other to naval bases, share naval data, and hold maneuvers every year. In December 2013, the 11th annual consultations were held in Vienna under the chairmanship of Ukraine. However, the participation of Ukraine and Russia in the proceedings is now quite problematic.

This type of interaction, in the form of documents and regular meetings, enables collaboration based on selected areas of cooperation. As the interests of particular states converge, regional power rebalancing can take place. This regularized interaction also provides the opportunity to exchange views on addressing challenges in the region.

¹⁰ “The Document on Confidence Building Measures and Security in the Naval Field in the Black Sea,” *The ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 18 July 2014, <http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-dvbr.nsf/6786f16f9aa1fc72432569ea0036120e/006522548723e861c32576f800435a93!OpenDocument>

The South Caucasus Union

One additional scheme of cooperation, the South Caucasus Union, seems less realistic.¹¹ This integration is obstructed as long as the multi-vector foreign policy priorities of its potential members diverge – Georgia gravitates to the US and the EU, Armenia is consolidated around Russia’s Customs Union, and Azerbaijan seeks to establish links with all key global actors. The case is made even more intricate by the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which is a substantial impediment to any regional union.

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Armenia has already chosen its integration platform, as demonstrated when it dramatically changed its political course last year and refused to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. It has instead expressed desire to cooperate within the Eurasian Union.

Armenian authorities claim that collaboration with Russia and joining the Eurasian Union will widen the market for the sale of Armenian goods (particularly given that Moscow has banned imports of agricultural and foodstuffs from European countries in response to Western sanctions against Russia). According to the Ministry of Finance of Armenia, in the first nine months of 2014, exports from Armenia to Russia decreased by 6.5 percent.¹² In the face of this, however, the EU did not renounce competition, but will rather provide Armenia with 150 million euros for reform over the next three years. Perhaps this is due to the expectation that the EU will be able to remodel its Eastern Partnership into a more efficient instrument of regional policy.

Promptly after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, many European experts began to openly criticize the existing European Neighborhood instruments for its lack of capability and inefficiency.¹³

11 “The new alliance in the South Caucasus?,” *Rosbalt*, 28 August 2014, <http://m.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2014/08/28/1308953.html>

12 “Exports of fruits and vegetables from Armenia in 2014 amounted to more than 40 thousand tonne,” *All-Armenian Network*, 7 November 2014, <http://www.panarmenian.net/rus/news/184573/>

13 Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, “Dealing with Turkey After Ukraine: Why the EU Should Let the Enlargement Approach Go,” *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 1-3 October 2014, http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE_C_15.pdf

On this basis, a segmented cooperation in selected areas seems the most promising mechanism of interaction, specifically in the sphere of combating extremism and regional security. Legally, it requires the development and signing of specific agreements in particular areas of cooperation.

Conclusion

As the instability in Ukraine proportionally rises, the importance of the Black Sea region only grows. Having significant geo-economic and energy determinants, this region will become a platform of fully competitive initiatives carried out by different actors. The current rivalry in the Black Sea region is a testimony to its natural development; the emerging conflicts and hidden confrontations had to be disclosed eventually. In such circumstances, states and cooperation platforms benefit only when able to display an effective alternative to existing alliances, and thereby reduce the level of present-day competition, perhaps even cooperating with extra-regional actors. Until then, however, the Black Sea region will be continually torn apart by the competing steps and actions of the key players.