WHERE IS THE BLACK SEA REGION IN TURKEY’S FOREIGN POLICY?

Black Sea regional analyses often assume that Turkey holds the role of a regional leader pursuing its intra-regional interests. In contrast to this perspective, this article will present evidence verifying an absence of a Black Sea regional conception in Turkey’s foreign policy. It will show how Turkey’s vision related to the Black Sea is limited to maritime security and control of the Turkish Straits. As this study reveals, even if Turkey perceives itself as a regional leader, this region does not include the Black Sea; Ankara has far bigger ambitions, seeing itself in the center of the Afro-Eurasian geography. Such an approach to the Black Sea region makes it very unlikely for Turkey to promote regional integration, much less see itself as part of the region at all.

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ith the longest shoreline among all the Black Sea littoral states, Turkey’s outlook towards the Black Sea region is greatly preconditioned by its historical background. For centuries, starting from the conquest of Crimea in 1475 up to 1774 when the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca was signed, the Black Sea was regarded as an Ottoman lake and had gained the status of an inner sea of the Empire.\(^1\) The Ottoman Empire enjoyed the exclusive right to control the Turkish Straits, which required all foreign vessels passing through the Straits to obtain permission from the Sublime Porte. The Straits were internationalized in 1923 via the Convention on the Turkish Straits under the Treaty of Lausanne, thus reducing Turkish influence on the Black Sea, but in 1936 Turkey secured its sovereign right to control the Straits with the signing of the Montreux Convention. This historical background influenced Ankara’s conception towards the Black Sea region and contributed to the establishment of Turkey’s own self-perception.

When talking about how the historical background that preconditioned Turkey’s current role in the Black Sea region, the importance of the Montreux Convention cannot be overstated. It is not just an international treaty that provides Ankara with a sovereign right to govern the passage of ships through the Turkish Straits. It carries much more significance. For one, it has led to Turkey playing a central role in the Black Sea region in the areas of energy security, frozen conflicts, and other security-related issues, which go beyond the regional context and become international concerns.\(^2\)

Among Turkish officials, there is a fear that the US has a desire to become more active in the Black Sea region, and some of them have called for certain adjustments to be made to the provisions of the Montreux Convention. The existence of such plans is verified by the statements of former US Ambassador to Ankara Ross Wilson, who underlined the possibility of entertaining certain rights over the Black Sea. Such rights originate from the Black Sea’s status as international waters, and it is apparent that Washington desires to benefit from this right.\(^3\)

If such a scenario becomes a reality, this will certainly undermine the role and influence of Turkey over the Straits and policies related to the region. Consequently,

\(^1\) There is even a quote in a 17th century Ottoman statement stating that the Black Sea is an Ottoman lake.


\(^3\) There are several official agreements that are used as a basis of the US claims over the Black Sea, among which one can find the 1954 US special privileges agreement, annexes of the Defense Cooperation Agreement of 1980, and its 16 March 1987 extensions on Konya. Further details about the US-Turkey approaches to the Montreux Convention and its influence on their vision towards the Black Sea can be found at: Sinan Oğan, “The Black Sea: New Arena for Global Competition,” Turkish Policy Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2006), http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/762/the-black-sea-new-arena-for-global-competition-summer-2006/
Ankara’s aim is to ensure that no other regional or international powers will penetrate the area and threaten its dominant role.\(^4\)

How did these fears and concerns related to the sovereign right of Turkey over the Straits impact its policies towards the Black Sea region? Ankara not only prioritized maritime security, but also separated it from other issues related to the region. As maritime security is of crucial importance for Turkey, the larger debate regarding gradually transforming into an institutionalized regional player speaking with a single authoritative voice around the wider Black Sea region becomes secondary.\(^5\) Such prioritization is reflected in different ways in the foreign policy of Turkey, starting from the development of maritime security cooperation in the Black Sea region.

**Turkey’s Maritime Security and Black Sea Regional Leadership**

The analysis of Turkey’s maritime security will begin with a discussion about the initiative BLACKSEAFOR. It was established in 1998, with founding documents being signed in 2001 in Istanbul, and was revived after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Besides Turkey, all other Black Sea littoral states – namely Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia – participate in the initiative. Initially, aiming at humanitarian aid and search and rescue operations, it expanded its scope to include the prevention of terrorism, organized crime, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and trafficking. 2003 marked the creation of the Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Centre (BBCIC), responsible for fostering information-sharing about illegal maritime activities in the Black Sea region. In 2004, Turkey started another initiative, Operation Black Sea Harmony, with the intent to increase the ability and interoperability of the Black Sea littoral states to respond to changing security challenges.\(^6\) Ankara believed that maritime security of the Black Sea region was the main objective of the littoral countries, while solving some other issues could allow


On one hand, one could perceive all those initiatives as not only tools of ensuring greater maritime security, but also a good opportunity to make the Black Sea littoral states closer to one another. Some could argue that even if it was the primary reason why Turkey proposed those ideas, their implementation could contribute to the better integration of the littoral countries. However, in reality, it is very hard to show any reliable signs of this integration through maritime security cooperation under Turkey’s leadership.8

Turkey’s efforts in this regard, even if they unify the Black Sea littoral states as signatories, cannot truly contribute to their real coalescence. Further, all Black Sea maritime security initiatives of Ankara reveal the lack of a Black Sea regional conception, in primarily two respects. Firstly, Turkey lacks a clear stand-alone Black Sea regional conception, an assertion further unpacked below. Secondly, Turkey’s securitization of the maritime area in its efforts to preserve and enhance its leadership role over the Black Sea does not allow other powers, including NATO and the US, to increase their presence there. Some might disagree with the latter point of view, being more prone to believe that Ankara tried to use its naval strategy to contribute to the consolidation of NATO’s superiority in the wider Black Sea region.9 With naval security strategies, Turkey tried to show that with three littoral states (Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria) already being NATO members and taking care of the Alliance’s security, there was no need for a separate NATO presence10 in the Black Sea region.11

**Beyond Maritime Security**

While Turkey is seriously interested in maritime security and is actively engaged in its achievement, the same drive and interest can hardly be noticed in other areas.

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8 We do not consider the initiatives themselves as signs of integration or a bigger regional coalescence, as we see them as tools in the hands of Turkey preserving the status quo.
11 Turkey has historically opposed the entry of non-littoral warships and vessels into the Black Sea; one of the examples of this is the 1947 case when Ankara did not allow the *USS Missouri*, sent by Americans as a sign of support to Turkey (by that time suffering from the pressure from Stalin) to enter the Black Sea.
related to the Black Sea region and its development. Even though Turkey is one of the two important regional powers along with Russia, its official foreign policy vision neither reflects nor includes any specific Black Sea regional goals and/or interests. Without a clear Black Sea regional conception Ankara cannot expect to be a leader for the region, nor can it effectively contribute to the development and implementation of Black Sea regional policies.

When talking about the influencing factors in the foreign policy priorities of Ankara, Turkey’s policy elites underline the country’s location in the intersection of different foreign policy dynamics. What is also interesting is that Turkey is perceived as an epicenter of “Afro-Eurasian geography.” Furthermore, the part of the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey that discusses Turkey’s conception towards different regions lists the following 11 regions, again, without even mentioning the Black Sea region: European countries, Balkans, Southern Caucasus, Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, North America, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, East-Asia and Pacific, North Africa. Interestingly enough, the list of European countries includes all of the Black Sea littoral states (Russian Federation, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine) except Georgia, which is included in the South Caucasus region. It is also interesting to see that while Georgia is perceived as a Caucasian country, Belarus is perceived as part of Europe.

Such grouping of those states clearly indicates the absence of a conception of the Black Sea region – as a single entity – in Turkey’s foreign policy thinking and strategic planning. In addition, Turkey does not see the Black Sea littoral states as one group, regardless of the fact that they are unified not only geographically by the sea, but also under the umbrella of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which was also initiated by Turkey in 1992. Furthermore, seeing Romania and Bulgaria as not only European countries, but also as Balkan states, Ankara underlines the role of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) that brings together Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, Croatia, Moldova, and Montenegro and represents “a symbol of the common will of the countries of the region to improve

12 “Synopsis of the Turkish Foreign Policy,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey (MFA of Turkey), http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa
13 “Regions,” MFA of Turkey, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?e55ad6a5-1b09-4788-a51c-2c1cae96fd0d
14 MFA of Turkey.
15 MFA of Turkey.
cooperation among themselves and to bring lasting stability in South East Europe.” This further contributes to the argument that there is no conception of the Black Sea littoral states as a single entity. Rather, Turkey applies differentiated approaches to Romania and Bulgaria as European and Balkan countries (underlining the importance of businesses in Turkey-Romania relationships, and mutual support in the area of Euro-Atlantic integration as well as Turkish investments in case of Bulgaria). At the same time, Turkey treats Georgia as a member of the Caucasus region. Caucasian dynamics vis-à-vis Georgia are mainly described as a continuation of historical linkages, geographic proximity, and the importance of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Special attention is paid to Ukraine’s location between Russia and the EU; Turkey’s relations with the former are mainly triggered by the High Level Strategic Council with a focus on trade and visa liberation.

The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey has a special link to maritime issues. But here again, the Black Sea is not mentioned (only Aegean and Mediterranean); instead, a section on the Turkish Straits links us to the Montreux Convention implementation. Only there does the MFA website start talking about the Black Sea. However, the key focus is on the principle provisions of the Convention ruling and/or restricting the passage of various vessels.

The structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey further reflects the lack of the strategic importance or priority of the Black Sea region. In the official organogram of the Ministry, nothing is mentioned related to the Black Sea under either directorates or sub-directorates covered by undersecretaries or deputy undersecretaries.

Given the aforementioned facts, it can be posited that that without Turkey having a clear regional conception of the Black Sea region, it will suffer from poor coalescence. Unless Ankara starts building its foreign policy with Black Sea regional imperatives in mind and contributing to the enhancement of intra-regional dynamics, the weak sense of regionness among the countries of the Black Sea region will become even weaker. Turkey is one of the powerful Black Sea countries with the ability to project its influence not only on its neighbors, but also beyond. According

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16 MFA of Turkey.
22 The organigram accessible on the Turkish MFA website also shows some abbreviations that are not explained or described anywhere else; it is not clear either whether those abbreviations are in English or Turkish (while the organigram is in English some complete titles still have abbreviations with Turkish letters under them); however none of those abbreviations are either BSR that can be unpacked as the Black Sea Region, nor WBSR (wider Black Sea region), nor BSEC, accordingly we believe that our conclusions about the absence of the Black Sea region is still valid.
to Ankara’s particular interests, it has been pursuing various bi- or multi-lateral relationships with Black Sea countries. However, this is not enough to facilitate intra-regional cohesion and integration. Without a strong internal push for the coalescence, the Black Sea will stay for long (if not forever) a region-to-be.

Against that backdrop, Ankara should first and foremost identify and agree on what it conceives under the Black Sea region, which countries stay inside and outside of the region (considering the existing disagreements between Russia and Georgia, conflict between Russia and Ukraine etc.), and what the region should pursue as a foreign policy player. Turkey might want to develop a vision and then unify others around this vision. This will further enhance the influence of Turkey in the wider Black Sea area, as well as contribute to greater stability in the case of successful integration.

**The Influence of EU Aspirations and Other Regional Perceptions**

Another issue that has contributed to the complication of the development of a clear Black Sea policy and/or a conception of Turkey is related to the country’s aspirations of accession to the European Union.

On one hand, Ankara has considered its active engagement in Black Sea regional affairs as contradictory to its EU membership aspirations. Countries aspiring for EU membership often perceive their belonging to any other regions as a hindrance because they want to be perceived as being within the EU bloc. That was the case of Romania and Bulgaria before their membership. Building and strengthening Black Sea regional cooperation ties would, first of all, mean working closely with non-European Russia and Azerbaijan. Partnership with those countries could raise lots of questions among EU officials about Turkey’s identity and its European-ness. This in itself could further suspend Turkey’s complete European integration, a goal Turkey has been pursuing for a long time without much success. Consequently, aiming at avoiding and/or mitigating additional challenges on its way to EU membership, Ankara tried to be less active in the Black Sea region.

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23 While Azerbaijan is not a Black Sea littoral country, it is closely linked (especially from the perspective of energy security and collaboration) with other Black Sea littoral states, including Georgia, Turkey, and Russia. Consequently, it is still be part of even the most unstructured and inconsistent thinking around the Black Sea area among Turkish politicians. Historical and cultural linkages further contribute to this.

On the other hand, whenever the process of Turkey’s final EU integration slowed down or was hindered by barriers on its way, Ankara would start engaging more actively with the Black Sea states, especially Russia. Considering the importance of energy resources and respective pipeline policies, Turkey would not be able (nor willing) to stay away (especially for long) from the not-so-European Azerbaijan. The Russian Federation also was and is a strategic, economic, and political partner for Turkey from which Ankara cannot isolate itself. These challenges could be considered to have triggered Ankara’s relatively active engagement in Black Sea regional affairs (or at least have fostered some bilateral relationships within the region).

However, this circumstantial engagement with the region also showed that Ankara did not have any concrete conception of how this particular part of the world could be approached, nor did it reveal any specific regional interests that could have contributed to or enriched Turkey’s national interests. These circumstances not only impeded intra-regional integration (at least among the Black Sea littoral states) under Turkey’s leadership, but also made this integration less possible.

As it becomes clear from the analysis above, Ankara pursues its foreign policy with its neighbors around the Black Sea and elsewhere on the basis of bi- and multi-lateral relationships. It also becomes once again affirmed that the major focus of Turkey’s foreign policy vis-à-vis the Black Sea region is mainly linked to the preservation of the status quo in the maritime domain. This would include not only keeping the Montreux Convention requirements valid and in force, but also preventing a penetration of any other power into the region that might possibly change the so-called regional balance, thereby questioning Turkey’s sovereign power over the Straits. Against this backdrop, it can be argued that despite the fact that Turkey is one of the most powerful and influential Black Sea littoral countries, it has not, and cannot, create an internal drive for intra-regional coalescence.

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