

UKRAINE AND NEW SECURITY PARADIGM FOR THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

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ABSTRACT. Russia's second invasion of Ukraine initiated in February 2022 serves as a definitive break in the security of the wider Black Sea region. This article first explains the problem the region is currently facing and calls for a new concept to ensure the collective West's more active presence in this geographic area. The strategy should also involve measures to contain a more aggressive Russia. It will be argued that Russia is unlikely to abstain from further destabilizing the Black Sea region and will use more coercive methods to preserve its dominant position. The article begins with elaborating the idea of the Black Sea not as a space of competition, but as a space of economic cooperation. The Black Sea has not always been a region of economic and military divisions, but quite often served an interconnector of several intersecting regions with different cultures and economic models. The article then, drawing upon this short historical analysis, pays special attention to Turkey's changing position and presents a set of political moves the West can pursue to improve its rather weakened position in the wider Black Sea region.

KEYWORDS: UKRAINE, GEOPOLITICS, BLACK SEA.

INTRODUCTION

The security environment in the wider Black Sea region deteriorated since the war in Ukraine in 2014 and Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula. The precarious status quo that had existed since the end of the Cold War was upset by Russia's coercive behavior as well as its military maneuvers in the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait. The situation further deteriorated in 2022 when Russia mounted a full-scale attack on Ukraine in order to solve the "Ukraine issue" by invading Kyiv and setting up a new pro-Russian government.

Numerous analyses and scholarly books on the Russian aggression against Ukraine use the Russian-Turkish wars of the 18th and 19th centuries to support the idea that the Black Sea region has been historically unstable and prone to military escalation. Yet, while wars were indeed fought, and simultaneously several powers were perpetually vying with one another for influence on the other side of the ocean, there is also different perspective on the region. In this story, the Black Sea, despite always being surrounded by opposing nations, the Black

Sea was a hub for trade. Trade grew, resulting in close interactions with littoral states. Consider the period of Greek colonization beginning in the eighth century BC. Colonies on the Crimean Peninsula and in what is now western Georgia made it possible for trade to occur in the area. The coastline of modern-day western Georgia was tightly connected with important towns in Asia Minor and Crimea throughout the Roman or Byzantine periods (up until the 7th or 8th century AD).

Despite conflicting information in historical sources, the unified Georgian was a driver behind a wide spectrum of industrial activity that linked western Georgia to Byzantium, the Crimea, and eventually the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, there was such a strong economic connection during this time that Georgian traders even traveled far and wide into the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. They also maintained close contact with Italian traders who were running ships and had colonies in Crimea and some Georgian cities beginning in the late 13th century.

Even the era of the great empires from the early 18th century in the vicinity of the Black Sea cannot be

viewed merely as a period of constant conflict. Actually, the Black Sea served as a productive intersection between the many economic systems that the Muslim world and Russia represented (the Ottoman Empire). Before World War I broke out in 1914, there was intense economic activity, with Russia shipping the majority of its grain and coal through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to various locations across in the Mediterranean. By the turn of the 20th century, Georgia was also interconnected with the rest of the world, with Batumi serving as the principal route.

The recent deterioration in the security situation around the Black Sea might potentially slow down overall economic growth and halt the inflow of foreign capital. Unexpectedly, the Soviet era might also be referred to as a time of economic collaboration. Oil, coal, and other natural resources were shipped from Russian, Ukrainian, and Georgian ports to the Mediterranean. The countries (empires) around the Black Sea have thus had even longer periods of considerably greater economic cooperation throughout the course of the previous several centuries, notwithstanding the wars we are aware of in history.

Regarding the current deterioration of the security situation in the Black Sea, it may have a negative impact on total economic activity as foreign investment may be curtailed or relocated. Today's geopolitical environment in the Black Sea is more chaotic and unpredictably arranged than it was in the 19th century. When the Russian and Ottoman Empires clashed, there was a certain order in place; today, however, Russia's behavior is largely unpredictable and this keeps NATO at bay. To improve the geopolitical situation in the wider Black Sea region, the present article contends, much will depend on Turkey's position and how the collective West will handle its rather complicated relations with Ankara.

TURKEY'S NUANCED POSITION IN THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

In the larger Black Sea region, Turkey's foreign policy is experiencing fundamental changes. Neither Russia's assault on Ukraine nor its decision to send peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh as a result of the 2020 war marked the beginning of change in Turkish foreign policy. Instead, Russia's recent behavior simply accelerated a process that began in the 2000s when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, occupied and recognized the in-

dependence of its two territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Then began war in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea followed by a full-scale invasion in 2022.

Ankara has exercised caution to avoid breaking point in relations with Russia and has tried to base its foreign policy mostly on balancing between Russia and Ukraine. Overreliance on either of them would be deeply uncomfortable for Ankara. Yet keeping this equilibrium has grown more challenging over time. Russian military pressure on the larger Black Sea region has increased leading many in Turkey to rethink how the country should be reacting to Moscow's excessive behavior. There is no likelihood for Turkey to successfully preserve the equilibrium it has so far sought because this region has served as a buffer zone for Turkey against its traditional enemy. Numerous tenets of Ankara's plan must unavoidably be reexamined in light of Russia's bullying behavior. Turkey will continue to refrain from diplomatically challenging Russia, but Ankara now sees increased economic and military ties with Ukraine and the South Caucasus republics as the only way to deter Moscow.

As a result, Turkey is beginning to perceive Russia's southern borders as weak and vulnerable areas where it is possible to puncture Moscow's influence. It is the region where Ankara has the best chance of advancing both its security and its economic ties. The alternative might be quite expensive for Turkey. Losing the buffer zone would tip the military scales permanently in Russia's favor. It would restrict Ankara's flexibility and willingness to take on a significant geopolitical role in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. Turkey's potential options will be greatly outweighed by constraints.

Despite being threatened by Russia, Turkey is in a good geopolitical position mostly due to its membership of NATO. Additionally, Turkey's strategy, particularly its investments in bolstering the defenses of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine, aligns with Western policies against Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West and Turkey have worked toward diversifying the economy and foreign ties of the South Caucasus states. Thus, it is very likely that their regional cooperation will become more tangible amid the war in Ukraine.

The changes in the larger Black Sea region precipitate the emergence of a new geopolitical order for Turkey. This new system will be inherently more chaotic with a great doze of instability and uncertainties. Additionally, it will be hierarchical, with China and America taking the lead and others, smaller actors, exercising influence mostly on a local basis. These adjustments will

be seen in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region, where Russia obviously wants to be a dominant force, but unlike under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, it is not possible to establish an exclusive order. This calls for having sufficient resources, which Russia's struggling economy does not have, especially after being heavily sanctioned by the West. Russia is slowly losing its prestige as seen by the overuse of force in the South Caucasus where a big number of military bases is being established in the area in order to maintain influence, with the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh serving as a glaring example.

Because of Russia's aggressive foreign policy over the past 20 years, pro-Western sentiment has been fairly strong in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. However, skepticism and the realization that the West is not doing enough has been growing. Moreover, Russia is expected to further increase pressure on Georgia and Moldova to give up their aspirations of joining NATO and possibly even the EU as it is likely to succeed in at least some of its objectives.

These are the facts that are widely discussed by the Black Sea countries. Another issue is that Western engagement with the separatist territories is weak. Undoubtedly, the sovereign governments themselves place severe restrictions on the interaction with the separatist entities (Abkhazia, Ossetia, Transnistria, and Donbas). However, it is more so as a result of the West's lack of soft power initiatives to assist isolate those regions from Russian influence, as well as its lack of strategic vision. Therefore there is an urgent need for the West to have a longer-term strategic vision for the Black Sea region.

TOWARD A NEW BLACK SEA PARADIGM

Moscow's aggressive foreign policy helped to reduce tensions in the transatlantic community. Even within the EU, there seems to be a growing consensus that Russia poses not only a serious threat to the liberal order but also has a potential to completely overthrow it. A major impetus has now emerged to establish the groundwork for a comprehensive Western policy in the Black Sea. This area has to be increasingly viewed as a battleground between the Western and Russian totalitarian systems. Whoever gets to control this theater will also be able to establish the ground rules for the conduct of international affairs.

First the West needs to elaborate a clear strategy which will include the separatist territories. So far there is little evidence to suggest that discussions taking place about how to deal with Crimea, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Donbas, the regions which are all near to or bordering on the Black Sea. It would be pointless to develop a regional perspective without taking those territories into consideration. Economic tools, a stronger emphasis on the inviolability of sovereign territory, and a series of severe penalties should be applied to those who choose to recognize separatist regions as independent.

Improving ties with Turkey is a critical element for elaborating a long-term Black Sea strategy. Ankara is wary of Russian military adventurism and looks for the West's more active involvement, which however, should not limit the space for Turkey's foreign policy. At the same time, it is unlikely that Ankara will be eyeing complete break with Moscow. The West therefore needs to a careful strategic thinking will lay the groundwork for pulling Turkey closer to itself.

The alternative is a hopeless state of global security. Russia has been systematically setting the groundwork for a decisive assault on the current world order with such tiny moves as in Abkhazia and Donbas before 2022 and now more broadly throughout the entirety of Ukraine. Additionally, it weakens the West's capacity to portray itself as a strong soft power. After all, the liberal democracy's softer side is largely what draws people to it.

Russia is now acting as a catalyst for the profound changes taking place in the transatlantic community. The momentum behind the quest for a long-term vision for separatist territories surrounding the Black Sea should increase as confidence in NATO and other multilateral institutions increases. It is become harder and harder to maintain Russia's vast separatist empire, both militarily and financially. This offers geopolitical potential in the long run.

To create a long-term strategic vision, you need partners you can trust and the courage to do so. The absence of the two elements in the Black Sea weakens the West's position. Reliance on Turkey could prove to be a substantial improvement for NATO and the US in reversing the development amid growing Russian influence. Another significant player is Ukraine. Georgia is also important, but the West needs to invest enough of economic and security basis into relations with this country. Its ports are critical for the West to project its economic power into the South Caucasus and further into Central Asia. In case Georgia with support from its

Western partners constructs the deep seaport of Anaklia, which has been stalled over the past several years, the country's ports infrastructure could be used for military purposes too.

Generally speaking the United States and the European Union are finding it difficult to respond appropriately to the altered military balance in the Black Sea as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war of 2022. Russia's war showed that the collective West is still very much a viable entity and that talks on the demise of the trans-Atlantic unity were premature.

In the Black Sea region, the West as a whole is seeing significant changes. In terms of contemporary Eurasian geopolitics, this is by far one of the most vibrant geographical locations. Not only are there several active military engagements taking place there, but there are also clashes between various geopolitical systems. Russia sees the area as a launching pad for its geopolitical objectives in the southern Mediterranean. Moscow is constructing a new worldview based on hierarchy and regionalism, which assumes that the West's projection of power into the Black Sea region must be limited.

The problem is that the West does not possess a clear vision on how to deal with Moscow. It is not that Russia has become exponentially stronger than before. Surely, it is much more ordered and militarily powerful than in the 1990s, but Russia's pillars of power are still weaker than that of the collective West. In other words, in case of a more streamlined foreign policy, the EU and the US could build a powerful foreign policy agenda with reliable tools to blunt Russia's military and harmful economic moves. But the willingness to pursue a concerted effort is certainly lacking.

The Black Sea region is still geographically separated from the trans-Atlantic community. This explains why the US and NATO member states have been relatively cautious to contribute militarily. Additionally, despite its apparent weakness, Russia is unlikely to stop trying to exert influence on its immediate neighborhood. The sheer size of Russia in relation to its neighbors in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Ukraine, and Belarus will compel Moscow to seek an order-building that is comfortable to the Kremlin, regardless of whether it is governed in a completely democratic or wholly authoritarian manner.

As a result, the issue the West is facing is one that will take time to resolve, and the Black Sea region is where it gets competitive with Russia. The US and NATO lack a strong ally or even a trustworthy partner in this

area to build a strategic approach. Ukraine is undoubtedly a potential, but it is still fragile on the inside. Romania and Bulgaria are not perceived to be players willing to take on the role, while Georgia is smaller, weaker and without Western military support highly vulnerable to Russia's military moves.

Turkey is the only Black Sea country that could serve as an anchor for the West's strategy. The nation is well-positioned to fend off Russian actions militarily, economically, and geographically. However, tight coordination with the US and the NATO alliance will be necessary for an effective opposition. Differences between Ankara and the West must be overcome in order to do this. Turkey and the West truly have comparable worries about Moscow's power projection, despite the fact that it is not an easy undertaking. It is essential that both parties demonstrate a sincere desire to strengthen their bilateral relations.

The Turkish approach to the Black Sea and Caucasus, particularly its investments in bolstering the defenses of Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, is consistent with Western policies against Russia as well as with Western interests in these areas more broadly. Similar to Turkey, the West is eager to import oil and gas from Azerbaijan and to invest in Georgia's pipeline and train infrastructure. The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), the South Caucasus Pipeline, and Turkey's larger goal to establish itself as a regional hub. The security of the land route leading to the Caspian Sea is a concern shared by the West and Turkey. This creates a small but vital connection to Central Asia, where the West has little power but where Turkey, with its ambitions to play a larger economic and political role, building on historical and cultural linkages, might potentially become a conduit of western interests, as it did in the 1990s.

Turkey has unavoidably been forced to respond as Russia has increased its power and military presence along Turkey's borders. Ankara is gradually turning its attention back to the Black Sea and the South Caucasus while its commitments in Syria are absorbing political energy as well as military and economic resources in order to balance and oppose Moscow. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine are now the cornerstones of Turkey's opposition to Russia. Turkish and Western interests overlap, as seen by Turkey's efforts to restrain Russia and guarantee the security of the oil and transport corridor in the south Caucasus.

The US appears to be progressively delegating portions of its responsibilities to strong regional actors

in order to restrict or blunt Eurasian powers, and the West's reliance on Turkey would fit into comparable patterns around the world. In the Indo-Pacific, AUKUS and QUAD are about America arming regional states to protect themselves against what is perceived as China's pursuit of a new order. Washington's position becomes more complicated rather than completely withdrawing, as some have suggested. It will act as an anchor behind the regional structure, putting its financial and military might behind a group of participants. However, America needs powerful actors if it is to pursue this program. There are several such states throughout Asia. Turkey is a possible candidate in the Black Sea region.

Making Ankara a crucial component of the West's Black Sea strategy should not be done only to provoke Turkey into a future military conflict with Russia. Ankara will take care to stay away from it. Long-term planning should focus more on boosting the military capabilities of the countries along the Black Sea so that any prospective military operations by Russia would be more expensive.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, it needs to be emphasized that the Black Sea has not always been a sea of conflict. The space is also famous for economic activity and cooperation. The article also traced in detail how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has ushered in a new period in the present world order. The focus is on the wider Black Sea region, which arguably has turned into the most dynamic region in Eurasia. No other place in the supercontinent has proved as vibrant as the Black Sea. Yet, the West still has to agree on what path to follow in the region. The EU, NATO or the US lack a vision on how to address the Russian aggression. It is therefore a high time to advance a clear-cut strategic concept which would safeguard the interests of Ukraine, Georgia, and other small and vulnerable Black Sea states. In this article it was argued that a critical element in the new strategy is Turkey. Improvement of relations with this geographically and militarily important state could serve as a cornerstone of the Western strategy.

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