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The Black Sea

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BLACK SEA INSECURITIES AND ANKARA'S DILEMMAS

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The perseverance of transactionalism in the global arena has deep implications for the security governance of the Black Sea region. In particular, for Turkey, the linkage between the Syria crisis with the Black Sea region due to Russia's increasing presence in the Middle East has augmented its sense of insecurity. This paper thus attempts to explain and assess the factors driving Turkish strategic thinking as its carefully constructed strategy of being one of the two primus inter pares powers has failed to redress the current imbalance in favour of Russia.

The Black Sea Security in Flux

If I were writing about the security governance of the Black Sea region in the immediate post-Cold War era, I would claim that it is in flux.¹ It had the potential to be rearranged, in that some sort of security community could potentially emerge. In fact, in 2010, albeit in the aftermath of the Russian–Georgian War of August 2008, or maybe as a consequence of it, an effort was launched to assess the situation in the Black Sea region, culminating in policy recommendations aimed at enhancing regional synergies. The Commission on the Black Sea issued a report titled “A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region” which was clear regarding its motivations to study the region:

The rationale behind the preparation of this report has been the increased geopolitical volatility of the region, which has proven, time and again, that unresolved issues can ignite into open warfare. Its festering conflicts retard economic development and have the potential to flare up into wider conflagrations. They impact regional stability and security and, unless tackled, threaten far greater international ramifications. But it need not be like this. It is the Commission's conviction that it is realistic to envisage a cohesive, developed, integrated and stable region...²

Writing today, close to three decades after the end of the Cold War, the most succinct assessment is that the region continues to be in a state of flux, but unlike the belief 10 years

1 D. Triantaphyllou, *The 'Security Paradoxes' of the Black Sea Region*, “Southeast European and Black Sea Studies”, 9(3), 2009, pp. 225–241.

2 M. Aydin, D. Triantaphyllou (eds.), *A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region: A Report by the Commission on the Black Sea*, Bertelsmann Stiftung: Germany 2010.

ago by the authors of the aforementioned report, the potential, or dynamic, or aspiration for some sort of regional “positive sum” approach promoting regional solutions for regional problems is hard to envisage. In other words, the region has remained in flux, while at the same time relations among the countries comprising it have become increasingly frayed and conflictual. Domestic tensions have also affected their governance potential and their ability to move beyond zero-sum foreign policies.



the Black Sea region's dynamics, or lack thereof, have been fundamentally altered by the Syrian conflict. Russia's direct involvement in Syria has severely limited Turkey's ability to compartmentalise or limit its relations with Russia to the Black Sea region

A number of factors account for this grim outlook. Some reflect the extended nature of transactionalism in the international order and the patterns that have emerged as a result. Others have to do with domestic dynamics in key stakeholders. With transactionalism having become the norm in the international arena,³ it not only affects interstate relations and, by extension, regional dynamics; it also has an impact on the nature of regimes and states and their ability to generate societal transformation. This, in turn, negatively contributes to heightened tensions between countries in the region.

This is evident in the evolving relationship between the Black Sea region's two powerhouses – Turkey and the Russian

Federation – where their regional agenda has become part of a wider extraregional contest. In other words, the Black Sea region's dynamics, or lack thereof, have been fundamentally altered by the Syrian conflict. Russia's direct involvement in Syria has severely limited Turkey's ability to compartmentalise or limit its relations with Russia to the Black Sea region. This is due to the fact that Russia has expanded its presence in the Middle East, especially in Syria, which Turkey has long regarded as its privileged backyard.

The dynamics between Turkey and the Russian Federation are particularly telling of the aforementioned state of play. The Syrian civil war has fundamentally affected the foreign policy-making ability of Turkey in the Black Sea region. While news reports are dominated by a perceived strategic shift on the part of Ankara, away from the West and NATO, towards Moscow and even Teheran, what needs to be assessed are the motivations behind this shift as well as its limitations. Are they driven by a desire to primarily rethink Turkey's strategic and ideological orientation or by the necessity to recalibrate the ever-growing omnipresence of the Russian influence along Turkey's borders to the north (the wider Black Sea region), the south (the Middle East), and even the west (the Aegean and Mediterranean seas)? Russian activism, which has widened its political, diplomatic, and military presence beyond this immediate neighbourhood, or what is otherwise known as its near abroad, has sent Turkey scrambling to recalibrate its policy vis à vis Russia.

Turkish Foreign Policy Thinking

Two important factors influence the Turkish thinking. The first is the *Sèvres Syndrome*; the second is “*balancing*” between the West

3 See, for example, D. Triantaphyllou, *The Empty Shell of Black Sea Regionalism*, “UA: Ukraine Analytica”, 4(6), 2016, pp. 5–11.

and the non-Western world. Yet both of these are defined under the prism of Turkey, as a member of the West, be it in the traditional Kemalist secular mould, or under the current Muslim/Islamic/nationalist orientation.


The difficult balancing act in terms of how to pigeonhole relations and allow for Turkey to have a certain room for manoeuvre along its borders is at the crux of Ankara's strategic thinking. This particularly applies to the Black Sea region, where Turkey has always considered itself to have a *primus inter pares* role and influence together with Russia over all other regional states. The same can be said of the Middle East, where Turkey, as a regional actor, has cultivated the role of an "insider", as it views the region as "a springboard of power and influence projection", and where Russia as "a self-aware 'outsider,' both geographically and culturally" has treated "Syria as a beachhead".⁴

While the divergences of the conflicting foreign policies of Turkey and Russia in the Middle East, and the Syrian war, came to a head with the downing of a Russian bomber on 24 November 2015, relations since the incident between the two countries have been both on the rebound in the sense that there is extensive communication between the two sides as well as tenuous given divergences regarding the future of Syria proper.

In part, this is owed to the compartmentalisation of their differences, "including over the divided island of Cyprus and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea" as well as the end game in Syria.

As Mitat Celikpala affirms, "If you set aside all those issues, they are good partners for the resolution of immediate interests."⁵ This implies that Ankara's cooperation with Russia stems from necessity rather than from a grand strategic rethink, as the perceived consensus over the division of labour in Syria allows for the former to be an actor on the ground with considerable sway over the future of Syria.

In fact, the April 2018 and the September 2019 meetings of the leaders of Turkey, Russia, and Iran in Ankara were meant to project a sense of unity of purpose as the "leaders have come to believe the real shots regarding Syria are being called in the meetings among themselves. And while [the] Geneva [process] is stalled, if not comatose, conditions on the ground are fast-changing. These three stakeholders in the Syria conflict feel they'd be better positioned to drive change themselves rather than waiting until it starts."⁶



The difficult balancing act in terms of how to pigeonhole relations and allow for Turkey to have a certain room for manoeuvre along its borders is at the crux of Ankara's strategic thinking

On the other hand, as Amberin Zaman, a veteran Turkey observer, notes in reference to the April 2018 meeting, "the picture of unity displayed by the leaders, however, belied the extent to which they also differ

4 A. K. Han, "Pride and Pragmatism: Turkish-Russian Relations after the Su-24M Incident", *On Turkey*, German Marshall Fund of the United State, January 2016, p. 2.

5 Associated Press, *Turkey, Russia Ties Grow Stronger as U.S. Gets Elbowed out of the Middle East*, "Haaretz", 03 April 2018 (access: 22 March 2018).

6 M. A. Suchkov, *Ankara Summit Focuses on Syria's Fate Once War Ends*, "Al-Monitor", 06 April 2018 (access: 05 March 2020).

in their respective priorities in Syria. For Turkey, it is to dismantle PYD [Democratic Union Party] rule. For Iran, it is to ensure the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remains intact. For Russia, it is to consolidate its strategic foothold in the eastern Mediterranean through a mix of diplomatic dexterity and military muscle.”⁷

The Russian consolidation effort to gain a strategic foothold in the Mediterranean and beyond its immediate neighbourhood is the main consideration behind Turkey’s concerns now that the compartmentalisation or the separation from the Black Sea region and the Middle East is becoming an increasingly difficult venture. Ben Steil in an article in *Foreign Policy* correctly reminds us that Russia’s geography orientates its foreign policy actions.⁸ In other words, environmental determinism driven by geopolitics is at the core of Russia’s perceptions of itself.

Geopolitics popularised by H. J. Mackinder, F. Ratzel, and A. T. Mahan stressed the correlation between a land power and a sea power.⁹ Hence, geography rather than ideology has been the key driver of Russian foreign policy predicated on the fact that its “eternal fear of invasion drove its foreign policy then and continues to do so now.”¹⁰ George Kennan’s *Long Telegram* of 1946 basically suggests the same thing when he refers to the “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity”.¹¹ The policy

of containment was thus predicated on the fact that the perception of insecurity in the heartland by successive Russian regimes drives them towards aggressive behaviour abroad.¹² This is very much in tune with Mackinder’s Heartland or Geographic Pivot of History Theory summarised by Mackinder himself is 1942 as: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world”.¹³

The effort to address the perennial sense of insecurity logically drives Moscow to foreign policy adventurism such as the creation and maintenance of protracted conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, as well as gaining a say in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. All these actions, including the annexation of Crimea, are very much reminiscent of Soviet action to annex Ukraine and Belarus in 1922 and the Baltic states in 1940 as well as the creation of East Germany in 1949 in order to countenance what Vladimir Putin described in his 2005 State of the Union address as the collapse of the Soviet Union being the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century.

For Turkey, insecurity also drives its foreign policy. According to Mustafa Aydin, “Turkey lives with a perennial ‘insecurity complex’, or a ‘national security syndrome’... The evolution of Turkish society has been defined by a particular ‘security culture’

7 A. Zaman, *Erdogan, Putin, Rouhani Tout Alliance, Eye US for Next Move*, “Al-Monitor”, 04 April 2018 (access: 08 March 2020).

8 B. Steil, *Russia’s Clash with the West Is about Geography, Not Ideology*, “Foreign Policy”, 12 February 2018 (access: 20 March 2020).

9 L. M. Ashworth, *Realism and the Spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics and the Reality of the League of Nations*, “European Journal of International Relations”, 12(2), 2011, pp. 279–301.

10 Steil, n8.

11 G. Kennan, *The Long Telegram*, 22 February 1946, [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm access: 10 March 2020].

12 Apart from the *Long Telegram*, see also G. F. Kennan, *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, “Foreign Affairs”, July 1947.

13 H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Security: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, National Defense University Press: Washington 1942, p. 106.

that overrides most other considerations.”¹⁴ As a result, geography and history are the principal determinants of its strategic outlook. This implies that its membership in NATO and by extension the Western world since 1952 is “owed a great deal to the country’s geographical position.”¹⁵

The end of the Cold War reaffirmed these fears as Turkey sought to create its own strategic space with a spate of initiatives aimed at addressing its “fear” or insecurity. Thus, Turkey like all other states in Europe scrambled to reconsider its security priorities. The end of bipolarity threatened Turkey’s status as a key flank state for the West and NATO and left it even more exposed to the potential insecurity the post-Cold War environment brought with it.

The insecurity is driven by a deep feeling of not belonging to either West or East and a deep mistrust of great or greater powers historically attempting to carve up the country or at least to interfere in its domestic affairs.

The basic *problematique* for Ankara has always been how to deal with the twin challenges of great power – the United States and Russia in the post-Cold War era – revisionism. In the case of the United States, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the response to the Arab Spring uprisings of late 2010 as well as the involvement in Syria and Libya fundamentally challenged Turkey’s focus on the stability of the regimes surrounding it rather than embracing democracy

promotion. In the case of Russia, the desire since Peter the Great’s rule for a warm water port in the Mediterranean, gaining a foothold in Syria, and the annexation of Crimea have all been contributing factors enhancing Ankara’s sense of insecurity.

The annexation of Crimea has created an additional problem as it fundamentally reshapes the balance of power in the Black Sea primarily to the detriment of Turkey. On the other hand, the “Turkish–Russian partnership is inherently based on defensive motivations on the part of both sides. It is defensive against the potential for further instability in its immediate neighbourhood. It is also defensive regarding the shaping of a new Europe that appears to exclude the two regional powers.”¹⁶ This has led to the fact that for Turkey, “Russia has always been as a counterweight to the West,” and as a result it has “played the Russia card in [its] negotiations with Washington and Brussels on different occasions.”¹⁷

This has been particularly enhanced during the years in power of the AKP, which has led to the emergence of a new foreign policy orientation that is both discursive and ideological as well as applied. It has given rise to a new nationalism – “build a conception of the nation that challenges the premises of Kemalist nationalism.”¹⁸ This new concept implies that Sunni Muslim values have become the core that defines the nation, rejecting the “Westernisation” paradigm of successive Turkish governments. It also implies the confirmation and perpetuation of

14 M. Aydin, *Securitization of History and Geography: Understanding of Security in Turkey*, “Southeast European and Black Sea Studies”, 3(2), 2003, p. 164.

15 S. Güvenç, S. Özel, *NATO and Turkey in the Post-Cold War World: Between Abandonment and Entrapment*, “Southeast European and Black Sea Studies”, 12(4), 2012, p. 538.

16 S. Kiniklioğlu, V. Morkva, *An Anatomy of Turkish–Russian Relations*, “Southeast European and Black Sea Studies”, 7(4), 2007, p. 548.

17 M. Çelikpala, *Russia’s Policies in the Middle East and the Pendulum of Turkish–Russian Relations*, Jamestown Foundation, 05 October 2017.

18 C. Saraçoğlu, Ö. Demirkol, *Nationalism and Foreign Policy Discourse in Turkey under the AKP Rule: Geography, History and National Identity*, “British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies”, 42(3), 2015, p. 306.

“the lone wolf syndrome”, which was brought about by the twin fears of abandonment and entrapment due the reliance on the US nuclear umbrella during the Cold War.¹⁹

The Sèvres Syndrome has also re-emerged as a motivating factor in Turkey’s security strategy. As Emre Erdoğan suggested, “This syndrome, so named in the 1990s, describes a common anxiety that Turkey is targeted by foreign powers aiming to divide the country as provisioned in the Treaty of Sèvres, which the Ottoman Empire was forced to sign after World War I. It was never ratified and implemented but is still taught in the Turkish education system.”²⁰



In the Black Sea region, the carefully constructed strategy of two primus inter pares powers has failed to redress the current imbalance in favour of Russia, leading Recep Tayyip Erdogan to express his fear on the eve of the Alliance’s Warsaw Summit in July 2016 that the Black Sea was becoming a Russian lake

As a consequence, the end of the Cold War also allowed for activism to strengthen Turkey’s position as a key actor in the Black Sea region. First of all, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with the creation of 15 independent states, granted Turkey a physical buffer from Russia’s long reach with the presence of both Georgia and Armenia along Turkey’s borders. The

presence of Azerbaijan also gave Turkey a potential ally in the region not only due to ethnic Turkic kinship but also due to Baku’s emergence as a strong natural resource producer, which has allowed it to resist Moscow’s overreach.

Regional Player or Regional Leader?

Turkey also used the opportunity to launch regional initiatives stressing regional cooperation in a multilevel strategy that included and continues to be predicated upon the country’s positioning as a major regional stakeholder. As a result, in the great energy game, Turkey positioned itself as a vital transit state. It also took the lead in the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization in 1992. It initiated a number of maritime security frameworks such as BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony with the other littoral states in an attempt to keep non-regional actors out of the region. In the immediate aftermath of the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War, it promoted a plan to increase its “soft power” role in the Caucasus with the launch of the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.²¹ Turkey has also been leading the process of trilateral cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan.²² Finally, it has been attempting to achieve a gradual rapprochement with Russia. All the while, Turkey tied its fortunes to the grand design of Ahmet Davutoglu’s Zero Problems with the Neighbours policy, which could not cope with the fast pace of the reshaping of the post-Cold War order. Hence, it has resulted in today’s Cold Peace between Russia and the West, and the redrawing of the map of the Middle East.

19 Güvenç and Özel, p. 534.

20 E. Erdoğan, “The Unbearable Heaviness of Being a Turkish Citizen”, *On Turkey*, German Marshall Fund, 21 February 2014.

21 See E. Fotiou, *Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform: What Is at Stake for Regional Cooperation*, “ICBSS Policy Brief” 16, International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS): Athens, June 2009.

22 See M. Celikpala, *Turkey and the New Energy Politic of the Black Sea Region*, “CIES Neighbourhood Policy Paper” 5, Center for International and European Studies: Istanbul, January 2013.

Consequently, Turkey has had to address both the revisionism of the West in Iraq and now Syria as well as Russia's opportunism and activism in both the Black Sea region and the Middle East. In the Black Sea region, the carefully constructed strategy of two *primus inter pares* powers has failed to redress the current imbalance in favour of Russia, leading Recep Tayyip Erdogan to express his fear on the eve of the Alliance's Warsaw Summit in July 2016 that the Black Sea was becoming a Russian lake.

The domestic context is also a vital contributing factor or determinant in Turkey's foreign policy orientation. The increasingly polarised political and social context is defined by two issues. The first is a desire to reformulate the country's identity. The second is a major resistance and the need for the ruling party and the country's president to stay in power in successive legislative or presidential elections as well as the upholding of referenda they have engineered.²³

Nevertheless, the government's actions are principally predicated upon the traditional or perennial reflexes of insecurity stemming from the Sèvres Syndrome as well as balancing irrespective of the discourse expounded by its governing elite *du jour*. Consequently, the country's involvement in the Atlantic Alliance is non-negotiable as it is the only Western institution in which Turkey enjoys the fruits of full membership. Membership in NATO serves to counterbalance Russia's ability to fully project itself and dominate the course of developments in the Black Sea region as well as the Middle East.

Conversely, the Turco-Russian rapprochement operates as a policy instrument to countenance perceived foreign policy decisions by the United States and other Western powers that could be detrimental to Turkish interests. On the other hand, the reality of the ongoing Syrian civil war, the endeavoured internationalisation of the Kurdish issue, Iran's emergence or attempted re-emergence, and Russia's efforts to use every opportunity to strengthen its hand and project its power regionally and globally leave little room for Turkey to engineer a new, more autonomous course for the country at this stage.

The casting aside of the Davutoglu doctrine with its "emphasis on the 'civilizational' aspects of Turkey's role [...] diminishing" and the ambition to punch above its weight as a "great power" are telling. "In its place, we can observe a more 'transactional', unplanned, ad hoc type of foreign policy, based on expediency. The ideological preferences of the AKP government are still significant but, as Turkey descends into internal crisis, and the Syrian war continues to take its toll, the interests and survival of the ruling party are increasingly paramount."²⁴

Conclusion

This analysis has been limited to a brief presentation and assessment of the policy challenges for Ankara in the Black Sea region in terms of its relationship with Moscow in the current context. An appraisal of the continued lack of a targeted NATO presence in the region in large part is due to divergences among its member states as to the Alliance's role in the region. It

23 The same applies to Russia and its sovereign democracy model of governance under Vladimir Putin. See V. Surkov, *Suverenitet – Eto Politicheskiy Sinonim Konkurentosposobnosti (Sovereignty Is the Political Synonym of Competitiveness)*, [in:] N. Garadzha (ed.), *Suverenitet*, Evropa: Moscow 2006.

24 K. Dalacoura, *A New Phase in Turkish Foreign Policy: Expediency and AKP Survival*, "Future Notes" 4, MENARA Project, February 2017, p. 2.

is also a result of the growing inherent weakness of the European Union to maintain the dynamism of its enlargement and neighbourhood policies that would also highlight further complex challenges.

The same applies to the energy security equation as well as the maritime security dimension, which has been rapidly rising to the top of the security agenda given the relevance of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits as a major maritime chokepoint. In addition, the frequency with which Russian navy ships cross the straits to reach the Russian naval facility in Tartus as part of its greater engagement in Syria should be considered. Nevertheless, the focus on the Russian–Turkish relationship clearly reflects that Turkey’s ability to shape developments in the Black Sea is limited, thereby increasing the region’s insecurities.

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