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The Black Sea

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TURKEY'S BLACK SEA POLICY: BETWEEN “RUSSIAN LAKE” AND “NATO'S BACKYARD”

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After the illegal annexation of Crimea, as well as Russia's military campaigns in Georgia, eastern Ukraine, and most recently Syria and Libya, Turkey's role in the Black Sea basin has considerably increased both for the regional countries and for the NATO allies. This article will focus on Turkey's evolving stance in the region, starting with a short overview of historical preconditions, looking at the recent developments, and ending with a brief analysis of the newly emerging trends that will most likely shape Ankara's regional policy in the mid-term future.

Introduction

The Black Sea region presents a good example of a regional system in the epicentre of global politics. While for many years the United States has lacked a clear regional vision and well-elaborated security strategy to deter the resurgent Russia and to manage regional threats, Russian leadership has used this lack of political will, military capacity, and diplomatic unity among the NATO countries to fill this gap with its growing military build-up in Eastern Europe, Crimea, Syria, and Libya.

Turkey holds a special place in this new geopolitical landscape. Both as NATO's second biggest army involved in close military and defence cooperation with Russia, and as an influential regional actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, Ankara has enjoyed significant benefits from this unique strategic position. However, in many cases this geography appeared to be “a curse” rather than a blessing, in disguise, creating difficult dilemmas for Turkish foreign and

security policies, and revealing considerable vulnerabilities in domestic affairs.

Highly personalised decision-making process under the presidency system, lack of professional and unbiased discussions on foreign policy issues in the expert community, side-lining of political opponents questioning the effectiveness of governmental policies on the international arena, unresolved Kurdish question, and an important role of significant diasporas in Turkey, who represent one or another side in the “frozen” or hot conflicts in the region (Abkhazians, Ossetians, Circassians, Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Gagauz, etc.), limit Ankara's space for manoeuvring on the international arena and give other countries additional leverages to influence its foreign policy choices.

As a result, Turkey has historically found itself in a dangerous balancing between the United States and/or NATO allies and the Russian Federation, throwing its weight behind one or another in line with its traditional security reflex – to move close to

the West when faced with an assertive and resurgent Russia, and to use an increased cooperation with Russia as a bargaining chip to get the desired in times of crises with the West.

Historical Roots of Turkey's Black Sea Policy

Turkey's strategic thinking regarding the Black Sea region has been shaped by two major historical traumas:

1) The Russo-Ottoman wars of the 18th–19th centuries, which proved Russian dominance in the region. They also created a myth of “great Russia”, whose interests “have to be taken into account” in this part of the world and whose overwhelming power “does not allow the luxury of not cooperating with Russia” for any regional country.

2) The so-called “Sèvres syndrome”, meaning Turkey's deeply rooted distrust of the Western countries, which is embedded in collective memory as a threat of “being betrayed and weakened by the West”¹. This lack of trust is still defining political rhetoric of the nationalist and conservative parties, including those in the government coalition. In many cases, these sentiments are reinforced with strong anti-American, anti-Western, and nationalist feelings dominating the Turkish society or find support in the Kremlin-instigated Eurasianism concepts. Advocates of a closer cooperation with Russia have reportedly gained more bureaucratic influence as they have assumed some positions in the Turkish

foreign ministry and armed forces vacated by “Atlanticists” in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt².

This psychological and geopolitical trap of being stuck between the two major powers resulted in Turkey regarding the Black Sea as either a “Russian lake” or “NATO's backyard”. As a result, multilateral regional diplomacy became instrumental for reaching Ankara's goals of a status-quo stability and regional leadership.

Turkey has been the main driving force behind the regional integration processes since the early 1990s, when it initiated the first regional organisation based on ideas of economic cooperation. Extending the “Black Sea area” to include six littoral states, as well as Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece, Albania (and later – Serbia), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) initiative emerged in 1992 giving a rare opportunity to bring 12 countries under the umbrella of the Ankara-led multilateral regional organisation. By bringing together countries from different geographies – from the Caucasus to the Balkans – Turkey prioritised a more inclusive approach, which allowed it to claim a leading role in a much broader and complex regional architecture.

Many experts believe that “such grouping of those states clearly indicates the absence of a conception of the Black Sea region, as a single entity of littoral states, in Turkey's foreign policy thinking and strategic planning”.³ To quote D. Lynch, every time “when the focus of the regional

1 The Sèvres Syndrome is a popular belief in Turkey that some outside forces, especially the Western countries, have a hidden agenda to weaken or divide the country. The term originates from the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed after WWI between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers. The treaty marked the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire and led to the occupation of considerable territories by Britain, France, Italy, and Greece.

2 S. Flanagan, S. Larrabee, et al., *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership* and the U.S. Army, RAND Corporation, 2020, p. xix


3 S. Petriashvili, *Where Is the Black Sea Region in Turkey's Foreign Policy?* “Turkish Policy Quarterly”, December 2015 [http://turkishpolicy.com/article/777/where-is-the-black-sea-region-in-turkeys-foreign-policy#_ftn16 access: 03 May 2017].

heavyweights, such as Russia and Turkey, has been toward the region, their objective has been traditionally how this region could potentially become part of their respective spheres of influence⁴ rather than how to create a strong sense of regionalism or to promote the spirit of regional cooperation. Hence, BSEC has become the first step on the way to mapping an autonomous regional system under Turkey's leadership.

At the same time, the "regional solutions for regional problems" approach, adopted by Ankara and very much welcomed by Moscow, was called to prevent the militarisation and "internationalisation" of the Black Sea basin in case of a wider presence of the NATO navy or military bases in the region. Historically, one of the major concerns for Turkey has been to prevent the Black Sea from becoming "a new focal point of global rivalry and conflict"⁵, and in this regard any extension of naval power beyond the existing measures has been regarded by Ankara as a dangerous move to change the status quo and, thus, destabilise the so far "neutral" region. As B. Devlen puts it,

Turkey's position in the Black Sea is based on defending the status quo, and the country opposes interference by outside powers, creating a de facto Turko-Russian condominium in the Black Sea. Very strict adherence to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates the passage of naval warships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits, forms the basis of Turkish policy.⁶

That is why, for instance, in 2006 Turkey and Russia opposed the extension of NATO's Operation Active Endeavour from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. Both countries considered a more active US involvement as a destabilising factor in the region. Officially, Turkey claimed that the presence of NATO warships in the Black Sea might threaten Article 18 of the Montreux Convention, which put restrictions on the number, type, and length of stay of non-littoral states' warships in the "Straits". Besides, Turkish officials argued that NATO was already active in the Black Sea through the presence of the Turkish, Bulgarian, and Romanian navies⁷. However, this raised accusations in the West that Turkey and Russia were striving to establish a "naval condominium" in the Black Sea⁸.

 ***At the same time, the "regional solutions for regional problems" approach, adopted by Ankara and very much welcomed by Moscow, was called to prevent the militarisation and "internationalisation" of the Black Sea basin in case of a wider presence of the NATO navy***

From Turkey's point of view, NATO's Operation Active Endeavour would be redundant to the Black Sea Harmony, a Turkish national operation to patrol the Black Sea basin, which was later expanded

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- 4 D. Lynch, *A Regional Insecurity Dynamic*, [in:] D. Lynch (ed.), *The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, EUISS: Paris 2003, p. 10.
 - 5 M. Celikpala, *Escalating Rivalries and Diverging Interests: Prospects for Stability and Security in the Black Sea Region*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies", 10(3), 2010, p. 289.
 - 6 B. Devlen, *Don't Poke the Russian Bear: Turkish Policy in the Ukrainian Crisis*, "Norwegian Peace-Building Resource Center Policy Brief", May 2014, p. 2.
 - 7 G. Winrow, *Turkey and the Greater Black Sea Region*, [in:] N. A. Guney (ed.), *Contentious Issues of Security and the Future of Turkey*, Ashgate Publishing: Farnham 2007, pp. 130–131.
 - 8 V. Socor, *Black Sea Watch*, "Eurasian Daily Monitor", 2(34), 17 February 2005 [<https://jamestown.org/program/black-sea-watch/> access: 21 February 2020].

to littoral states, and to BLACKSEAFOR, another regional initiative led by Turkey⁹. As Turkish analyst S. Koru said, “With most of these initiatives, Turkey was careful to work with regional countries only... [since] Ankara wanted to create an institutional framework that would facilitate its leadership in the region. Initiatives by its Western allies would not only undermine the regional legitimacy of this kind of diplomacy, but also overshadow Turkey’s role”.¹⁰

The tendency to keep outsiders off the region became even more evident during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, when Ankara denied passage for two American vessels carrying humanitarian aid to Georgia, in a fear of provoking Russia’s response and further militarisation of the Black Sea¹¹. At the same time, Turkey’s then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan proposed the idea of creating the “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform”, a regional organisation bringing together five regional states (Turkey, Russia, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) to work on the settlement of the conflict. Turkish then-Foreign Minister Ali Babacan explained it by saying that these “countries need to develop a functional method of finding solutions to their problems from within”¹², instead of waiting for help to come from outside.

Since 2008, Turkey’s regional policy has been defined to a considerable extent by this concept of creating “regional solutions for regional problems”, contributing to Ankara’s image of an independent security actor playing a leading role in regional processes while minimising the military and even at times the diplomatic presence of its traditional Western partners. Washington, well aware of Turkey’s concerns about losing its dominant position in the Black Sea basin to the growing US presence, has actively supported trilateral formats of Bulgaria–Romania–Turkey military exchanges and consultations, in an effort to assuage Ankara’s fears of violation of the Montreux Convention¹³.

The idea got initial support from Ankara during the 2015–2016 “jet crisis” with Russia, when President Erdogan reversed his traditional reluctance about NATO presence in the Black Sea, acknowledging that NATO was “absent from the Black Sea”: “The Black Sea has almost become a Russian lake. If we don’t act now, history will not forgive us”.¹⁴ So, when NATO allies agreed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit to initiate the Tailored Forward Presence for the Black Sea region, Ankara pledged to participate in Romania’s multinational brigade under a NATO flag, aimed at responding to Russia’s assertive posture in the region. However, later it

9 G. Tol, *Balance in the Black Sea: Complex Dynamic Between Turkey, Russia and NATO*, “Middle East Institute Policy Analysis”, 18 November 2019 [https://www.mei.edu/publications/balance-black-sea-complex-dynamic-between-turkey-russia-and-nato access: 01 March 2019].

10 S. Koru, *Turkey’s Black Sea Policy: Navigating Between Russia and the West*, “Black Sea Strategy Papers”, July 2017 [https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/07/turkeys-black-sea-policy-navigating-russia-west/ access: 24 September 2017].

11 *ABD gemisine geçit yok (No Passage to the US Vessel)*, “Hürriyet”, 16 August 2008 [https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/abd-gemisine-gecit-yok-9674154].

12 A. Babacan, *Calming the Caucasus*, “The New York Times”, 23 September 2008 [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/opinion/23iht-edbabacan.1.16407371.html access: 2 October 2010].

13 A. Cohen, I. Conway, *U.S. Strategy in the Black Sea Region*, “Backgrounder”, No. 1990, Heritage Foundation: Washington, DC, December 2006.

14 Cited in: A. Binnendijk, *The Russian-Turkish Bilateral Relationship: Managing Differences in an Uneasy Partnership*, [in:] S. Flanagan, S. Larrabee, et al., *Turkey’s Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, RAND Corporation, 2020, p. 126.

“dragged its feet at the creation of a limited maritime coordination function in the Black Sea that the same country promoted”.¹⁵


As the crisis with Russia was soothed and relations with Moscow quickly improved after the failed coup attempt, the idea was criticised by Ankara for bringing unnecessary tensions to the region, provoking further escalation with Russia and replicating the already existing NATO formats of naval cooperation.

Turkey’s Threat Perceptions in the Black Sea Region after 2014

Despite some expectations that after the occupation of Crimea Turkey would become an important security provider in the region as a NATO member and a major naval force, able to deter Russian growing military build-up, this did not happen.

While Turkey has not recognised the illegal annexation of Crimea and has been quite vocal in its support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and condemnation of the human rights violations against Crimean Tatars, it has always been cautious to avoid strong wording on Russian aggression in the region. Ankara has always paid attention to prevent a negative spillover effect from contradictions around the Crimean issue to the generally positive dynamics in its dialogue with Russia. Except for a short crisis in Turkish–Russian relations after the downing of a Russian Su-24 in 2015, the “post-coup” period has witnessed an unprecedented rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara. It was marked with

burgeoning cooperation on a number of key issues, including de-conflicting efforts in Syria, supply of S-400 air defence systems to Turkey, energy cooperation on TurkStream gas pipeline, construction of NPP Akkuyu, etc. This made Ankara’s Black Sea policy largely determined by the desire to resume full-speed cooperation with Russia and to avoid any moves that could potentially threaten the implementation of these plans.



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Regardless of all the important processes unfolding in the Black Sea, the region did not take place among the country’s top security priorities, a recent poll by Kadir Khas University has shown¹⁶. What did raise concerns among Turkish public were economic problems, the war on terror, and heightening tensions in the Middle East: escalation in Syria, Libya, and Eastern Mediterranean, refugee crisis, terror threats (mainly, PKK, YPG, and FETO¹⁷). In this regard, statements made by the Turkish President Erdogan at the 2019 NATO London Summit were quite telling. His initial promises to block the Alliance’s defence

15 B. Toucas, *Turkey Has No Allies in the Black Sea, Only Interests*, “CSIS Commentary”, 13 February 2018 [<https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-has-no-allies-black-sea-only-interests> access: 20 February 2020].

16 *Türkiye Eğilimleri – 2019 (Turkish Trends 2019)*, “Public Opinion Survey”, Kadir Has University, 15 January 2020 [https://www.khas.edu.tr/sites/khas.edu.tr/files/inline-files/TE2019_TUR_BASIN_15.01.20%20WEB%20versiyon%20powerpoint_0.pdf access: 16 January 2020].

17 FETO – “Fethullah Gulen’s Terror Organisation”, recognised by the Turkish government as a terror organisation for plotting the 2016 coup attempt.

plans for Poland and the Baltic States in case of Brussels' failure to recognise Kurdish YPG groups as a terrorist organisation¹⁸ have clearly demonstrated that for Turkey "NATO's eastern flank problem" extends not along the Baltic Sea but across its border with Syria. The disregard by the Western partners of Turkey's sensitivities in the Middle Eastern stalemate has not only deepened the existing crisis in the transatlantic relations but also made Ankara's successful cooperation with Russia instrumental in dealing with its main security concerns in the region.

In Turkey, "having Russia on board" is seen as a key to maintaining stability in both the Black Sea and the wider Middle East. This vision is only gaining ground as Ankara is closely following Russia's growing military build-up on its borders to the north and south. Besides, given the overall dynamics in the dialogue with Brussels and Washington, strengthening of NATO's presence on the eastern borders of Europe is often seen in Turkey not as a guarantee but rather as a threat to its national security. The issue would get even more sensitive if the warships were to come to Istanbul "under the flag of the US", a country viewed as the number one security threat by 81.9% of the Turkish population (leaving far behind Russia, Syria, Armenia, and Cyprus)¹⁹.

At the same time, many Turkish analysts and policy-makers still share naïf beliefs that under the current circumstances "not triggering Russian retaliation", or to put it simply,

"appeasement of resurgent Russia", would be the best policy option to ensure lasting peace in the unstable region. Therefore, there are serious concerns in Ankara that further building of NATO's military capabilities near Russian borders could provoke an unwanted escalation on the part of Moscow, which could be otherwise avoided. The same desire "not to poke the Russian bear" explains Turkey's weak reaction to the 2018 "Kerch incident". After Russia seized three Ukrainian vessels and took hostage 24 sailors, Turkey's Foreign Ministry issued a statement "emphasiz[ing] [the importance of] freedom of passage at the Kerch Strait" and "urg[ing] all parties to refrain from steps endangering regional peace and stability".²⁰

Some pro-government Turkish experts go as far as to suggest that Ukraine should also become a part of this "inclusive dialogue": "As Turkey's partnerships deepen with both Ukraine and Russia, Ankara can also mediate the soothing of the tension between two former brotherly countries... Under these circumstances, the parties, including Ukraine, need to sit together to augment security cooperation in a wide region".²¹ On the political level, among other things, this approach includes calls to send back Ukrainian liaison officers and resume participation in the Operation Black Sea Harmony and BLACKSEAFOR, which have been suspended after 2014.

Jamestown analyst V. Socor calls such policy "a reality-denying position", saying

18 *Turkey Threatens to Block NATO's Baltic Defence Plan over YPG*, "Aljazeera", 03 December 2019 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/turkey-threatens-block-nato-baltic-defence-plan-ypg-191203083651527.html access: 03 December 2019].

19 *Turkish Foreign Policy*, "Research on Public Perceptions", Kadir Has University, July 2019 [https://www.khas.edu.tr/en/haberler/research-public-perceptions-turkish-foreign-policy-2019 access: 15 August 2019].

20 *Press Release Regarding the Tension in the Azov Sea and Kerch Strait*, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no. 321, 26 November 2018 [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-321_-azak-denizi-ve-kerc-bogazindaki-gerginlik-hk_en.en.mfa access: 01 March 2020].

21 E. Yalınkılıçlı, *Turkey's "Near Abroad" in the Black Sea: Ankara's Predicament between Kiev and Moscow*, "Daily Sabah", 16 October 2017 [https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2017/10/16/turkeys-near-abroad-in-the-black-sea-ankaras-predicament-between-kiev-and-moscow access: 18 October 2017].

that Ankara is “clinging to a status quo that no longer existed”: “Turkey does not, and cannot on its own any longer, counterbalance Russia’s threatening power, but neither does it work proactively with its NATO riparian and non-riparian allies to deal with this mounting challenge”.²²

With this being said, one should not overestimate the level of trust in the Turkish-Russian relations. While Turkey opposes NATO presence in the Black Sea basin on a permanent basis, it takes active part in joint maritime exercises and training drills, such as PASSEX or Sea Breeze, designed to increase interoperability of the participating countries on sea, land, and air.

Politically, Turkey has always paid attention to maintaining close cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia, both within the NATO framework and on a bilateral level. Ankara remains a strategic partner and important political-military ally of Ukraine and has significantly intensified defence and security cooperation with Kyiv in recent years, including supply of Turkish professional communication systems and combat UAV’s to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Last year both sides declared the creation of a joint Ukrainian-Turkish venture “Black Sea Shield” aimed at combining technological and industrial potential of the two countries in the aviation, security, and defence spheres²³. As Turkey’s disagreements with Russia on Crimea, Libya, and Syria leave fewer and fewer shared interests holding the two countries together, Ankara sees Ukraine as a feasible alternative in the region to ease its dependence on military and defence cooperation with Russia.

Current State of Play and Prospects for the Future

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea have led to a dramatic change in the security situation in the Black Sea, detrimental to Turkey’s interests. Militarisation and nuclearisation of the occupied Crimean peninsula, enhanced military modernisation of the Russian armed forces, including deployment of new types of strategic weapons in Crimea, development of a modern submarine fleet, and widespread use of the electronic warfare tools have strengthened Russian ability to project its maritime and military power far beyond the Black Sea basin. In fact, together with the occupied territories of Crimea and critical infrastructure in the territorial waters of Ukraine, the Russian Federation has got a unique opportunity to maintain control over a vast area reaching out to Turkey’s national borders. This can be done by using seized drilling platforms on the Ukrainian shelf, as well as underwater pipelines, for military intelligence purposes, installation of radar systems and acoustic stations; blocking free navigation in the western Black Sea under the pretext of critical infrastructure protection; carrying out large-scale military exercises and manoeuvres with provocative moves; denying access to large areas on sea for the ships of third countries, including Turkish vessels. As Stephen Blank sums it up, as a result Moscow has built a combined arms force of land, sea, air, and electronic forces fully capable of denying access to NATO forces seeking to enter the Black Sea during a potential conflict. Now it is building a similar network of anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities against NATO

22 V. Socor, *Turkey Stalls NATO, Clings to Defunct Status Quo in the Black Sea*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor”, 15(116), 02 August 2018 [https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-stalls-nato-clings-to-defunct-status-quo-in-the-black-sea/ access: 15 March 2020].

23 *Ukraine And Turkey Set up a Joint Venture in Precision Weapons and Aerospace Technologies*, “National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine”, 09 August 2019 [https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Diialnist/3345.html access: 15 March 2020].

in both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus, in fact surrounding Turkey to the north, south, and east by Russian troops and enhanced military presence in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, Syria, Armenia, and Georgian breakaway province of Abkhazia.²⁴

The fact that the “Russian bear builds a new lair in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean”²⁵ had already been obvious when Moscow supplied its S-300 and S-400 air defence systems to Syria to defend the Assad regime from NATO aviation. Turkish experts warned back then that Russian Black Sea and Syrian “A2/AD bubbles” should raise concerns in Turkey because “they spell an end to the relative naval superiority that Ankara had established in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean after the Cold War”. One of the critical articles dated back to 2017 suggested that “while Russian-Turkish relations appear better in recent months, the future is uncertain – if a crisis erupts similar to the November 2015 shooting down of a Russian Su-24 by a Turkish F-16, Ankara would face fearful odds against Moscow”.²⁶

This is exactly what happened in early 2020, when 59 Turkish soldiers were killed by the Russian (-backed) forces in several airstrikes amid a mounting Syrian government offensive to capture Idlib²⁷. The

tensions grew so heightened that several media outlets reported that Erdogan was “considering closure of the Bosphorus for the passage Russian vessels” as one of the possible options “on the table”²⁸. According to the Montreux Convention, the passage of warships through the Straits “shall be left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish government” “in time of war, Turkey being belligerent” (Article 20) or “should Turkey consider herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war” (Article 21)²⁹. Though this is highly unlikely to happen in the case of Idlib, taking into account possible repercussions of such decision, this would have created an important precedent of Ankara’s using the Montreux Convention to restrict Russia’s access to the Mediterranean.

In this regard, it would be not least interesting to see the geopolitical implications of the construction of a new “Canal Istanbul”. The provisions of the Montreux Convention regulate passage through the “Straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus comprised under the general term ‘Straits’”.³⁰ However, it rests uncertain about any other artificial waterways. While the project has raised heated debate among maritime law experts, President Erdogan recently said that the convention was only “binding” for the Turkish Straits, and Canal Istanbul would be “totally outside

24 S. Blank, *Putin’s Dream of the Black Sea as a Russian Lake*, “Newsweek”, 07 March 2016 [<http://www.newsweek.com/putin-dream-black-sea-russian-lake-476321> access: 15 March 2020].

25 B. Kurtarcan, B. Kayaoglu, *Russia, Turkey and the Black Sea A2/AD Arms Race*, “National Interest”, March 2017 [<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-turkey-the-black-sea-a2-ad-arms-race-19673> access: 10 October 2017].

26 Ibid

27 *Dozens of Turkish Soldiers Killed in Strike in Idlib in Syria*, “The Guardian”, 28 February 2020 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/27/dozens-of-turkish-soldiers-killed-in-strike-in-idlib-in-syria-reports-say> access: 28 February 2020]; Joint Coordination Centers Will Be Established with Russia for Idlib, “Hurriyet Daily News”, 13 March 2020 [<https://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/joint-coordination-centers-will-be-established-with-russia-for-idlib-minister-152953> access: 15 March 2020].

28 *Turkey May Close the Bosphorus to Russia Warships*, “Middle East Monitor”, 24 February 2020 [<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200224-turkey-may-close-the-bosphorus-to-russia-warships/>].

29 *Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, Preamble*, Montreux 1936, p. 215 [<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20173/v173.pdf>].


30 Ibid., pp. 225–227.

Montreux”³¹. If so, this would mean a drastic change in Turkey’s almost century-long tradition of seeing the Montreux Convention as the alpha and omega of its Black Sea policy that had to be respected no matter what.

All attempts to suggest any amendments to upgrade the 1936 convention in line with the technical characteristics of modern warships have been met in Ankara with a strict rejection. Now, if the Montreux provisions will not be valid for the new channel, apart from being a new trade route, Canal Istanbul might create a completely different geopolitical landscape in the Black Sea. This would give Ankara much more flexibility in foreign policy decision-making and would considerably strengthen its hand at the negotiation table with both Moscow and Washington.

As Turkish Ambassador Tuygan noticed, “For centuries, Russia’s dream was to have Istanbul, the Marmara region and the Straits. This can no longer be the case. ... Russia would prefer the continuation of the Montreux order to avoid new uncertainties and challenges, particularly after the annexation of Crimea with Sevastopol home to its Black Sea Fleet”.³² While for Russia this change signals new uncertainties in a formerly “safe Russian harbour”, for Ukraine it might open a new window of opportunity. Some of the advantages might include extending the duration of stay for the navy of non-littoral countries or giving a chance to start liquid gas supplies, which have been impossible so far³³. Now, as the NATO warships and LNG-tankers have to

cross the Bosphorus on their way to the Black Sea, they fall under the provisions of the Montreux Convention and the norms of maritime safety in the overloaded strait. However, these vessels might be exempt from such restrictions if they come via Canal Istanbul, which is not mentioned in the convention. The official launch of the project was declared for 2020 and the construction works are due to be done by 2027. Until then, all parties will have time to practice navigating the turbulent waters of the Bosphorus and big politics.



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Conclusions

After the end of the Cold War, Turkey tried to improve its relations with the neighbouring countries, diminish its dependence on traditional Western allies, and backed the idea that regional stability should be the responsibility of the regional states. This concept worked rather well in times of concerted efforts with Russia to counterbalance US/NATO influence. While it often made Ankara and Moscow tactical allies, it did not do much to strengthen mutual trust or contribute to their strategic

31 A. Tuygan, *The Montreux Convention: Russia’s Perspective*, “EDAM”, 28 January 2020 [<https://edam.org.tr/en/the-montreux-convention-russias-perspective/>; access: 15 March 2020].

32 Ibid

33 *Ukraine’s Plans for LNG Imports Face Turkish Resistance*, “Reuters”, 06 February 2013, [<https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-turkey-lng/ukraines-plans-for-lng-imports-face-turkish-resistance-idUSL5N0B65Y320130206>; access: 15 March 2020]; *Turkey Says No to LNG-Tankers in the Bosphorus Strait, Cuts off Black Sea Shipping*, “Oil and Gas 360”, 24 March 2015 [<https://www.oilandgas360.com/turkey-says-no-to-lng-tankers-in-the-bosphorus-strait-cuts-off-black-sea-shipping/>; access: 15 March 2020].

partnership in the long run. However successful the cooperation between the two countries might have been, historically, strategically, and even psychologically, Ankara and Moscow have always remained rivals for dominance in the Black Sea, control over the Straits, and, ironically, seeking better positions in their dialogue with the West.

Today, with changing dynamics in the regional security environment, the main interest of, and the main challenge for, the pragmatic Turkish leadership is still maintaining a smooth balance between the two extremes: “opening” the region to the growing NATO presence (often seen as a threat to the regional or Turkey’s own national security) or letting Moscow convert the Black Sea into a “Russian lake”. In the mid-term perspective, despite Turkey’s growing divergences with Russia on Syria, Libya, and other issues, Ankara is still highly unlikely to go down the path of escalating tensions with Moscow.

In times of crisis with Russia, Turkey might show more willingness in developing naval

cooperation with the non-littoral NATO states. However, it will most probably use this flexibility as a bargaining chip in its dialogue with partners both to the east and to the west, rather than actually support the enhanced presence of the Allied forces in the Black Sea. The Turkish formula “keep the Americans out, regional states in, and the Russians down”³⁴ has proved its efficiency over the years and Ankara is very unlikely to change it in the foreseeable future – unless it decides to reinforce its last element.

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34 The original phrase “NATO was created to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down” belongs to Lord Ismay, NATO’s first secretary general (1952–1957).

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