

The Annexation of Crimea and Türkiye's Balancing Role in the Russia-Ukraine War

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ABSTRACT

Russia's dominance in the Black Sea has diminished since the post-Soviet era. As a result, feeling threatened by the increasing influence of other countries in the region and NATO's advances toward the Black Sea, Russia has created specific problems and crises in the area. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 to further enhance its dominance in the Black Sea and subsequently declared war on Ukraine in 2022. In response, Western states severed ties with Russia and imposed various sanctions. Türkiye adopted a neutral stance. Simultaneously, while supporting Ukraine, it maintained its relations with Russia and displayed a cooperative approach. The aim of this article is to elucidate the balancing role assumed by Türkiye in the Crimea annexation and the Ukraine war. The article analyzes whether Türkiye, according to Morton A. Kaplan's balance of power theory, acts as a balancing power in the Black Sea.

Keywords: Crimea, Russia-Ukraine War, Balancing, Morton Kaplan.

Kırım'ın İlhakı ve Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşında Türkiye'nin Dengeleyici Rolü

ÖZET

Rusya'nın SSCB dönemi sonrasında Karadeniz'e hakimiyeti azalmıştır. Böylelikle, diğer ülkelerin de güç sahibi olmaya başlaması ve NATO'nun Karadeniz'e ilerlemesi üzerine Rusya tehdit hissetmiş ve Karadeniz'de belli sorunlar ve krizler yaratmıştır. Bunun üzerine, Karadeniz'de hakimiyetini daha fazla arttırmak için 2014 yılında Kırım'ı ilhak etmiş ve 2022 yılında Ukrayna'ya savaş açmıştır. Tüm bunlar doğrultusunda, batılı devletler Rusya ile ilişkilerini keserek çeşitli yaptırımlar uygulamışlardır. Türkiye ise bu duruma tarafsız politikalar ile yaklaşmıştır. Bu krizlerde Ukrayna'ya destek olmakla birlikte Rusya ile ilişkilerini devam ettiren Türkiye işbirlikçi bir yaklaşım sergilemiştir. Bu makalenin amacı, Kırım ilhakı ve Ukrayna savaşında Türkiye'nin üstlendiği dengeleyici rolü açıklamaktır. Makalede Morton A. Kaplan'ın güç dengesi teorisine göre Türkiye'nin Karadeniz'deki güç dengesinde dengeleyici bir ülke olup olmadığı analizi yapılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kırım, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, Dengeliyici, Morton Kaplan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Black Sea has been a geopolitically crucial region for centuries, serving as the intersection of Europe and Asia and witnessing various wars and conflicts throughout history (Aydm, 2009, p. 271). Due to its strategic location as a transit zone between Europe and Asia, the presence of energy corridors, and diverse natural resources, the Black Sea region is of paramount importance for ensuring security and stability (Çelikpala, 2010, p. 6). It gained increased significance after the Cold War, becoming known as the Wider Black Sea basin. The fact that both the eastern and southern coasts of Europe and the southern and western coasts of Russia border the Black Sea has brought about power struggles (Sezer, 1996, p. 79).

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia held a dominant position in the Black Sea, limiting the roles of other states. However, after the USSR's collapse, the region became globally attractive, leading to increased dominance by other states. NATO's expansion toward the Black Sea and the strengthened positions of states with Black Sea coastlines posed a threat to Russia, prompting it to exert pressure on Georgia and Ukraine. Türkiye, along with Romania and Bulgaria, being NATO members with a coastline on the Black Sea, contributed to NATO's increased influence in the region (Özdamar, 2010, p. 341-342).

To alter the power balances in the Black Sea, Russia initiated the Georgian crisis (Newitt, 2023). Subsequently, to further enhance its power and dominance in the region, Russia annexed Crimea (Delanoe, 2014, p. 379). In 2022, Russia initiated the war with Ukraine. Western countries anticipated a major conflict, but Russia warned against external intervention. Consequently, Western nations imposed various sanctions, cutting commercial ties and implementing embargoes on Russia (Ali, 2022, p. 361-363).

The annexation of Crimea and the Ukraine crisis are issues of significant concern for Türkiye due to its geopolitical position. After Crimea's formal annexation by Russia, Türkiye pursued a neutral foreign policy compared to other Western countries. During the subsequent Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye maintained a neutral stance and supported Ukraine. Türkiye aimed to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity and, due to mutual economic dependencies with Russia, continued commercial and economic relations (Çalışkan, 2017, p. 2-4).

The purpose of this study is to examine Türkiye's balancing role in the annexation of Crimea and the Ukraine crisis according to Morton A. Kaplan's balance of power theory. The introduction provides information about the Black Sea region and briefly mentions the crises that occurred in the region. In the second section, the concept of balance of power is explained, followed by an explanation of Morton A. Kaplan's theory, and a connection is established between the power balance system in the Black Sea. The subsequent section discusses the Black Sea in detail, presenting the changing power balances and events from the past to the present. Within the title of the power balance in the Black Sea, Türkiye's role and position in the Black Sea are discussed, providing information.

In the third section, under the title of NATO's expansion and Russia's threat perception, the tension between Russia and NATO from the establishment of NATO under the leadership of the United States to the present is chronologically discussed. Following that, the 2008 Georgia crisis is presented as the first major crisis created by Russia in response to perceiving NATO's advances towards the Black Sea. Subsequently, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war are discussed in detail. Türkiye's neutral policy during the Russia-Ukraine war and its support for Ukraine are explained. The economic and trade relations between Türkiye and Russia are also addressed.

In the fourth section, Morton A. Kaplan's balance of power theory is explained, followed by a discussion of the problems, especially those involving Russia, that occurred in the Black Sea. Türkiye's role in the context of these problems in the Black Sea is discussed. Evaluations are made regarding whether Türkiye, based on the balance of power theory, played a balancing role in the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war.

In the conclusion, the article evaluates the policies followed by Türkiye in the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war according to Morton A. Kaplan's balance of power theory, discussing how crucial Türkiye's presence is for the security of the Black Sea. As a result, it is concluded that within the power balance system in the Black Sea, Türkiye played a balancing role compared to the other five countries and is deemed an important actor/state for the proper functioning of the power balance system. Simultaneously, when evaluating Türkiye's role in the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war, it is concluded that Türkiye played a balancing role.

2. BALANCE OF POWER IN THE BLACK SEA AND TURKIYE'S POSITION

The balance of power is a fundamental concept in international relations that has been interpreted and defined by various individuals. While there are multiple meanings attributed to the balance of power, it is generally defined as one or several states balancing another state or states to maintain equal power. When a state aims to gain excessive power and establish dominance in a region, it forms alliances with other states to counteract this power, thus ensuring equilibrium in the system. This pursuit is an attempt to achieve international stability in a region. Morton A. Kaplan has systemically analyzed this balance of power (Keyik and Erol, 2019, p. 34-35).

Different definitions and interpretations include the following:

The balance of power ensures stability among rival forces. It involves states collaborating to prevent the rapid rise of one state and to prevent it from becoming a threat. Hence, the balance of power is a theory that facilitates the formation of alliances against a threatening state, preventing it from becoming too powerful. This theory prevents a state from becoming overly powerful, ensuring stability in the system. However, shifts in the balance of power can lead to instability and wars (Andersen, 2018, p. 1).

In situations where competition is more crucial than cooperation within the balance of power system, states can collaborate to soften the competition among them. However, if a

state's primary goal is survival, ignoring the balance of power can disrupt the equilibrium, leading to instability within the system (Waltz, 2001, p. 187).

Morgenthau defines the balance of power as the approximate equal distribution of power among a few states. Fenelon describes the balance of power as actions to prevent a state's neighbors from becoming excessively powerful, emphasizing the preservation of equality and balance among neighbors (Sheehan, 2004).

This article progresses based on Morton A. Kaplan's definition of the balance of power. Kaplan's definition states that the balance of power system involves states forming coalitions to prevent one state from becoming excessively powerful and excluding another state from the system. States create coalitions and alliances to maintain power balances. For the balance of power system to function, there should be at least five actors/states in the system. These states must adhere to certain rules to prevent the disruption and complete collapse of the system (Kaplan, 2005, p. 35).

When considering the balance of power in the Black Sea, preventing Russia from establishing dominance and gaining excessive power requires Bulgaria, Romania, Türkiye, Ukraine, and Georgia to share the same loyalty and consensus on not undermining the system.

Russia's crises in Georgia and Ukraine indicate its attempts to establish dominance. Türkiye, by maintaining its relationship with Russia and simultaneously adopting a neutral stance on the Crimea issue and the Russia-Ukraine war, aims to prevent the disintegration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and its exclusion from the system. The reason behind Europe severing trade relations with Russia is to prevent the strengthening of Russia's potential dominance. The fact that only the USSR and Türkiye had a coastline on the Black Sea before the Cold War, and NATO's attempts to advance towards the Black Sea and establish military bases after the dissolution of the USSR, is also part of Russia's objectives to restrict its former sphere of influence (Horjus, 2021).

2.1. Power Balance in the Black Sea

The Black Sea, extending from the Balkans to the Caspian Sea, has become a crucial region for many countries as a transit passage area following the post-Soviet era, defining the vast Black Sea basin. Positioned both on the eastern and southern flanks of Europe and the western and southern borders of Russia, the Black Sea region inevitably faces power balance issues (Sezer, 1996, p. 79). The boundaries of the expansive Black Sea Basin extend from the Balkans to the Caucasus, Ukraine, Russia, and Anatolia. The expansion of boundaries has brought potential needs and accompanying challenges. Consequently, to avoid potential wars and disputes, all countries with coastlines on the Black Sea and neighboring countries convened in Istanbul in 1992, led by Türkiye. Eleven countries, including Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, and Albania, jointly became members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC). Subsequently, after its enactment in 1999, Serbia and Montenegro joined as a

single country. The main objective of the BSEC is to strengthen the social and economic relationships in the Black Sea basin among countries due to their potentials and geographical proximity, aiming to ensure prosperity, peace, and stability (King, 2008, p. 14).

The fact that Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye, with coastlines on the Black Sea, are NATO members, and additionally, Bulgaria and Romania are EU members, demonstrates that NATO and the EU are not excluded from formations in the Black Sea. (Penzvalto, 2019, p. 88-89). The Black Sea acts as a bridge connecting other regions with coastlines on the Mediterranean and the ocean. Therefore, it serves as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The Black Sea's function as a bridge to other countries, especially Russia's centuries-old attempts to reach warm-water ports, is a significant factor. Russia believes that by doing so, it can also gain power and control in warm seas. The Black Sea, being a transit passage area for energy resources and the transport of oil in the region by sea, holds global strategic importance. Consequently, it is crucial for every actor involved (Oral and Oğuz, 2021, p. 2-3). However, with the Montreux Straits Agreement of 1936 designating Türkiye as the guardian of the Black Sea, it has become more critical for Türkiye than other countries (Penzvalto, 2019, p. 88-89). Historically, the Black Sea has always been more important to Türkiye. Its designation as the "Turkish Lake" in past centuries underscores this importance. The reason for being known as the Turkish Lake is the Ottoman Empire's control of the entire Bosphorus until the weakening period against Europe and Russia after the conquest of Constantinople. Although the Black Sea remained stable and detached from the global agenda until the dissolution of the USSR, it regained attention after the end of the Cold War, with Russia assuming a dominant role (Bayram & Tüfekçi, 2018, p. 6).

Before the dissolution of the USSR, Russia's strong dominance in the Black Sea created a framework where the global roles of each actor were more limited than today. However, after the dissolution of the USSR, the Black Sea became a more attractive center globally, leading to more strategic conflicts. Russia has engaged in struggles to regain its former dominance, consistently exerting pressure on Georgia and Ukraine. The NATO membership of Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye, along with the EU membership of Romania and Bulgaria, has allowed Europe and America to exert influence within the Black Sea (Özdamar, 2010, p. 341-342). Russia attempts to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from turning towards the West by applying pressure on them. Maintaining power over these countries is crucial for Russia's continued dominance in the Black Sea. If it loses power over these countries and the West gains more influence, Russia's power in the Black Sea will be shaken, and it will lose strength. Russia's attempts to become a global power, especially against powerful states like the United States and the United Kingdom, are challenging due to its relatively disadvantageous position. Therefore, Russia is striving to gain more power in the Black Sea, as this would provide more opportunities for it to become a global power.

The background of the Georgia War, the Annexation of Crimea, and the Ukraine crisis up to the present day involves the global powers' games to dominate the Black Sea and

maintain power balance (Horjus, 2021). All these conflicting interests between the West and Russia have made the Black Sea more visible to the United States, prompting the U.S. to develop strategies for the region. However, the regional strategies developed by the U.S. have been thwarted by Black Sea states. Especially preventing the increase of Western influence in the Black Sea has been hindered by Russia, as it believes this would lead to a loss of power. Simultaneously, despite Russia and Türkiye opposing the idea, Ukraine and Georgia, due to the alignment of their security interests, have supported NATO taking on a more significant role in the Black Sea (Larrabee, 2009, p. 302-303).

2.2. Türkiye's Position in the Black Sea

When evaluating the situation of Türkiye in the Black Sea, it becomes evident that Türkiye's role has grown following the dissolution of the USSR. The fundamental characteristics of Türkiye's policies in the post-Cold War era concerning the Black Sea include efforts to maintain peace and stability, encourage economic and commercial centrality in the Black Sea through diplomatic and economic activities, and most importantly, ensure territorial integrity in the region (Ali, 2022, p. 358). Türkiye's increased significance in the Black Sea has led to closer cooperation with countries inhabited by Muslim minorities. Consequently, as Türkiye attains a more crucial position in the region, it has taken the lead in various collaborations, such as the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), and the Black Sea Harmony Operation (OBSH) (Gherman, 2017, p. 38).

The Black Sea, known as the Turkish Lake during the Ottoman Empire's reign, saw the resurgence of Turkish naval dominance after the dissolution of the USSR. One reason for this is Russia's main naval base being located in another country's territory, leading to a decrease in control over its navy and having a smaller coastline in the Black Sea. Additionally, Türkiye's increased focus on defense industry and national shipbuilding since 2004 has significantly elevated Türkiye's role and position in the Black Sea (Çalışkan, 2017, p. 11).

3. NATO EXPANSION AND RUSSIA'S THREAT PERCEPTION

NATO was established in 1949 under the leadership of the United States in response to the security threat posed by the Soviet Union (Oğuzlu, 2019, p. 1). Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, NATO, despite its original purpose becoming obsolete, adopted new objectives. Nevertheless, tensions between Russia and NATO persisted. In the early 2000s, Russia attempted a more balanced policy, and certain developments occurred in its relations with NATO. Despite strained relations, post-9/11 saw increased cooperation between NATO and Russia in countering terrorism. However, as NATO expanded towards the former Eastern Bloc countries, moving steadily towards the Black Sea, it became a perceived threat to Russia, sparking tensions (Yapıcı, 2011, p. 1452). The inclusion of former USSR countries into NATO posed an increasing threat to Russia. Simultaneously, pro-Western color revolutions occurred in former Soviet territories, such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2004 and the Orange Revolution in

Ukraine in the same year. Consequently, leaders with Soviet backgrounds lost power. In 2008, when NATO decided to expand towards the Balkans, Ukraine and Georgia were among the countries considered. The expansion decision encompassed a commitment from Ukraine and Georgia to become NATO members. However, Russia perceived this decision as a threat and demanded reconsideration. One significant rupture between NATO and Russia occurred during the 2008 Georgia crisis (Noi, 2022).

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia with the aim of altering the power balance in the Black Sea and establishing more dominance. Russia seized Osetya and Abkhazia in Georgia. The acquisition of Abkhazia, a coastal region of Georgia, rendered Georgia's influence in the area contentious and subdued a state with a coastline along the Black Sea. Türkiye maintained a dual approach during the Georgia crisis, advocating for the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity despite Russia's assertive behavior. Recognizing that the escalation of the Georgia crisis would endanger the Black Sea and draw external powers into the conflict, Türkiye proposed local solutions and aid to prevent the situation from escalating. Additionally, Türkiye contributed to defending Georgia's capabilities to prevent destabilizing Black Sea security. Emphasizing the need for regional actors to strengthen dialogue, Türkiye proposed the establishment of the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (Alim, 2022, p. 469-470).

The Crimea region first became part of the Russian Empire in 1783, following the declining power of the Ottoman Empire over the Crimean Khanate. The ports of Crimea became crucial for Russian naval fleets, turning it into an immensely significant location for the Russian Empire from that point forward. Despite Soviet battles in the region, Crimea retained its status as a city of heroes in Russian eyes. However, in 1954, it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, becoming part of Ukraine in the latter half of the 20th century (Salushev, 2014, p. 38-39). In subsequent years, misguided Ukrainization policies in Crimea, coupled with attempts to expel the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the peninsula, exacerbated the sense of Ukrainian ownership, alienating the Russian population. Consequently, Crimea declared its separation from Ukraine and swiftly organized a referendum in 2014, leading to an overwhelming majority choosing to join Russia. While Russia considered the referendum legitimate, transparent, and in line with international laws, Western governments deemed it a violation of Ukrainian laws. Furthermore, in 2014, the United Nations declared the annexation of Crimea illegal (Faizullaev and Cornut, 2017, p. 584-585).

The annexation of Crimea by Russia aimed to increase its dominance in the Black Sea and regain its power from the Soviet era. The absence of Ukraine's NATO membership facilitated Russia's actions. The annexation not only enhanced Russia's naval potential and sovereignty in the Black Sea but also revitalized its aspirations for the Mediterranean. Following these events, Russia rapidly strengthened its position, resulting in heightened maritime tensions with the United States and Black Sea neighbors (Delanoe, 2014, p. 379-380).

Examining Türkiye's policy reveals its inability to remain indifferent to the situation in Crimea, considering the Muslim population and historical ties, along with the presence of Crimean Tatar Turks. Despite advocating for the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, Türkiye did not impose any sanctions on Russia, unlike EU countries, continuing its commercial relations. The economic interdependence between Türkiye and Russia played a significant role in this decision. Türkiye supported Crimean Tatar Turks through various activities but fell short of a more robust response (Ereker and Özer, 2018, p. 372-373).

In this context, Türkiye aimed to secure the rights of Crimean Tatar Turks and advocated for the resolution of the Crimea crisis through International Law and Diplomacy. Türkiye, with significant economic ties to Russia in tourism, energy, and trade, sought to address the issue through negotiations rather than imposing sanctions (Özçelik, 2018, p. 75).

Historically, the Ukraine crisis has its roots in the 2000s, starting with Ukraine's refusal to accept Russian influence and its inability to fully join NATO due to political instability. Although Ukraine officially planned to join NATO in 2008, it was later postponed. A president claiming neutrality was elected, and in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea (Ozili, 2022, p. 2). Volodymyr Zelensky was subsequently elected president in 2019. Following President Zelensky's request to join NATO in 2021, Russia deployed troops on the Ukrainian border and launched a special operation. As a result, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and the Russian-Ukrainian war began (Mbah and Wasum, 2022, p. 145). The Russia-Ukraine war, which started in 2022, continues in 2024 (Brik, Mylovanov, Murtazashvili and Murtazashvili, 2024, p. 2)

The reasons behind the Russia-Ukraine war include the Euromaidan protests, internal government instability, and Russian nationalism. The Euromaidan movement began in Independence Square in Kiev due to Ukraine's rejection of signing an Association Agreement with the European Union. The internal political weakness and the resulting instability of the interim government enabled Russia to perceive and act upon Ukraine's vulnerability. Additionally, the majority of residents in Crimea and Donbas speaking Russian facilitated Russian support for actions in these regions. Thus, Ukraine's ethnic tension and Russian nationalism eased the initiation of the war. Russia waged the war to regain influence (Davis, 2021).

Despite the belief among Western states and other countries that the war that started in 2022 might result in a conflict even larger than the Second World War, Russia declared a special military operation in Ukraine, effectively initiating the war. Despite dissenting views from other countries, Russia issued warnings against potential external interventions, emphasizing the possibility of a larger conflict compared to historical wars if such interventions occurred. As a consequence, in 2022, leading countries such as the United States and Western states implemented various economic sanctions, reducing bilateral trade and applying embargoes. In contrast, Türkiye consistently adhered to its active neutrality policy from the outset. Supporting the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity since

the annexation of Crimea, Türkiye refused to acknowledge the annexation. Even when the Russia-Ukraine war started, Türkiye maintained the same policy, not displaying the expected stance by other states. Despite supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, Türkiye did not impose any sanctions on Russia and continued their economic and trade relations. Türkiye's active neutrality policy played a significant role in international relations. One of Türkiye's major diplomatic efforts was mediation for a ceasefire, with talks held first in Antalya and later in Istanbul. When the ceasefire terms were announced, Ukraine reportedly expressed the desire for Türkiye to be a guarantor country (Ali, 2022, p. 361-363). While Türkiye being a guarantor country could contribute to being seen as a country promoting peace internationally, the content and process of the agreement are crucial. One of the notable aspects is Ukraine's willingness to abandon NATO membership, which Türkiye supports (Samar, 2023). Another important event for Türkiye was the success of TB2. Through the Ukraine-Türkiye Technical Cooperation Agreement, Türkiye supplied defense weapons to Ukraine, significantly increasing its naval power. As a result, nine ships from the Russian fleet were destroyed, with at least five targeted by Ukraine's Turkish-made UAV Bayraktar. The use of Bayraktar drones by Ukraine raised concerns for Russia (Kormych and Malyarenko 2022, p. 1251). In this period, Türkiye also played the role of a grain corridor, significantly contributing to easing the global grain crisis through Ukraine's grain exports (Ali, 2022, p. 364). Despite all these actions, Türkiye continued its relations with Russia and did not impose any sanctions, citing mutual economic and trade ties as reasons. Türkiye's demonstrated active neutrality policy ensured the continuation of dialogue between Western countries and Russia (citation). From all this, it can be understood that Türkiye pursued a balancing policy to prevent Ukraine from being marginalized in the power balance system and to prevent Russia from gaining hegemony in the Black Sea.

The concerns about the Transdniestrian issues in the region that declared independence from Moldova in 1990 have brought attention to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, indicating a potential further escalation of the war. The Transdniestrian region, unrecognized by the United Nations, is a de facto republic located as a thin strip between Ukraine and Moldova. Although Russia does not officially appear to provide support to Transdnistria, it provides military and financial assistance. The weak military power of Moldova and its status as one of the poorest countries in Europe are reasons why Transdnistria has not been able to secure its independence since declaring it. The current Transdnistrian administration is unlikely to engage in a war with Ukraine or Moldova. Despite lacking its military power, the redirection of Russian troops to the region would change the course of the Russia-Ukraine war, leading to further complications (Askeroglu, 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine war has demonstrated Türkiye's ability to maintain good communication with its northern neighboring countries. Particularly during a challenging war period with Russia and Ukraine, Türkiye has endeavored to establish balanced and positive relations. In fact, one of the reasons for trying to establish this balanced and good communication is due to Türkiye's economic difficulties during the start of the war

(Oğuzlu, 2023, p. 683). Therefore, despite not approving of Russia's actions, Türkiye, considering its economic situation, has refused to impose economic and financial sanctions unlike other Western states. The reason for this is cited as the mutual economic dependency with Russia. To maintain a peaceful and cooperative approach, Türkiye has displayed a balanced and mutually dependent economic relationship. This good balance in mutual dependence ensures that Turkish-Russian relations continue even during challenging periods such as war. The continuity of this relationship is important for Russia's foreign investments in Türkiye. These foreign investments include the Turkish Stream Natural Gas Pipeline project and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant projects (Kubicek, 2022, p. 795). The approval and initiation of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in Mersin in 2010 and the signing of the Turkish Stream Natural Gas Pipeline project in 2014, facilitating the transfer of natural gas from the Black Sea to Türkiye, have been beneficial projects for Russia's entry into the European market and ensuring the secure supply of energy to Türkiye. The perception of Türkiye as safer in terms of energy trade between the EU and Russia has also been advantageous for Türkiye (İsmayıl & Aliyev, 2016, p. 196; Karagöl & Kızılkaya, 2015, p. 1; Schislyaeva et al., 2022, p. 1989).

Türkiye's positive relations with the EU have contributed to its playing a balanced role between Russia and the EU, enhancing its geopolitical importance by maintaining equilibrium between these two countries. Consequently, Türkiye has strengthened its position as an east-west energy corridor (Schislyaeva et al., 2022, p. 1987). Despite a significant trade deficit and unfavorable economic conditions in its economic relations with Russia, Türkiye considers its commercial and economic ties with Russia highly important (Erşen, 2022, p. 122).

Türkiye has attempted to capitalize positively on the ongoing war and international issues, adopting a balanced policy accordingly. During the war, Türkiye's natural gas imports from Russia doubled. Additionally, Russia viewed Türkiye as an energy hub for exporting oil to Europe, leading to the proposal of the Türkiye-Russia energy cooperation in October 2022. Financially, Türkiye, in response to Western countries imposing restrictions on Swift, did not impose any sanctions but rather used the Mir payment system as an alternative to Swift, which Russia could use. However, under Western pressure, this system was suspended after a while (Cheterian, 2023, p. 1283). Furthermore, in terms of energy, Russia transferred five billion USD to the nuclear power plant it invested in Türkiye. This transfer boosted Turkish foreign currency reserves. Due to its strategic position during the war, Ankara gained prominence diplomatically. Türkiye endeavored to maintain a balance between Ukraine and Russia. According to a senior advisor to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye, Russia is neither an enemy nor an ally. He emphasized the impossibility of negotiations due to Türkiye's dependency on energy imports. Thus, Türkiye's efforts to develop positive and balanced relations with Russia, considering its own economic challenges during the war, can be understood. In this context, Türkiye aimed to pursue a more balanced policy at the onset of the war to mitigate adverse effects on its economy, leading to a more peaceful and optimistic approach in its relations (Cheterian, 2023, p. 1284).

4. TURKIYE'S BALANCING ROLE IN THE BLACK SEA ACCORDING TO MORTON A. KAPLAN'S POWER BALANCE THEORY

International political system theories consist of power balance, loosely bipolar systems, tight bipolar systems, universal systems, hierarchical systems, unit or continuous systems. Among these system theories, historical counterparts include power balance and loosely bipolar systems. The focus of this article is Morton A. Kaplan's power balance theory. The power balance theory involves states within the system forming coalitions to prevent one state from becoming excessively powerful or a weak state from being excluded from the system. States within this system strive to maintain power balances, and specific rules govern their actions for the sustainability of this system. According to Morton A. Kaplan, there should be at least five actors/states/nations in the system, and there are specific rules for achieving power balance in the international system. Ultimately, adherence to these rules can maintain stability in the power balance system. The fundamental rules necessary for the stability of the power balance system include (Kaplan, 2005, p. 35):

- a. Negotiating and enhancing capabilities instead of engaging in warfare.
- b. Engaging in war when unable to enhance capabilities.
- c. Opposing a single actor or coalition becoming excessively powerful within the system.
- d. Halting a war rather than allowing an actor to weaken and be excluded from the system.
- e. Restraining states showing tendencies toward international organization.
- f. Attempting to reintegrate and bring back a weakened and excluded state into the system or allowing another state to join. States must trust each other and protect their national values. If a state fails to protect its national values, allies may abandon it.

There is an actor assuming a balancing role within the power balance system. While the balancing state plays an integrative role, it also prevents the excessive empowerment of a specific alliance, preserving the balance within the system (Kaplan, 1957, p. 691). To perform the balancing role effectively, it requires strong logistical capabilities and a suitable environment. The reasons for Great Britain's successful balancing role in the 19th century were its strong naval power, geographical distance from war zones, and the absence of regional intervention (Kaplan, 1957, p. 690).

Morton A. Kaplan has emphasized that at least five states must exist in the system for the power balance theory to be correctly applied (Kaplan, 2005, p. 35). Under the heading of power balance, it is mentioned that for the Black Sea coastal states, namely Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria, to ensure the system's continuity and prevent its collapse, they need to collaborate and share the same views. Simultaneously, Russia's crises in Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014, and invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are attributed to its desire to be the sole powerful state in the Black Sea. Russia longs for its

dominance during the Soviet era and strives to establish dominance in the Black Sea to achieve this goal (Horjus, 2021).

For these states to provide a secure environment in the Black Sea, their coastal infrastructure defenses need to be integrated and coordinated. Additionally, for the system to strengthen, it is foreseen that the region could be more robust with bilateral and multilateral collaborations between Georgia and Ukraine. Due to the intense relationships of these countries with Türkiye, involving Türkiye in partnerships in specific areas is considered beneficial. According to the 2021 Ukrainian foreign policy strategy, these countries acting in consensus, having high-level regional formats and collaborations, increasing and solidifying their presence in the Black Sea will contribute to international security (Khylyk and Shelest, 2022, p. 4).

Moreover, under the heading of power balance in the Black Sea and Türkiye's position, it is emphasized that before the dissolution of the USSR, the powers of other states in the Black Sea were more limited compared to today. However, after the collapse of the USSR, the Black Sea has become more global, and strategic conflicts between actors have intensified. Russia has started exerting continuous pressure on Georgia and Ukraine to strengthen its position and regain its former hegemony (Özdamar, 2010). Russia aims to prevent the West from becoming stronger by pressuring Georgia and Ukraine. One reason for this is that Georgia and Ukraine are not NATO members, making it easier for Russia to exert pressure on these countries and maintain its power and dominance in the Black Sea. If Russia loses its power over these countries, its dominance in the Black Sea will be shaken, and it will be unable to compete with Western powers. However, if Russia dominates the Black Sea, it can compete with other major powers to regain its former hegemony (Horjus, 2021). The efforts of global powers to dominate the Black Sea and power balance games are evident in the crises of the 2008 Georgia War, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

As discussed under the title of Power Balance in the Black Sea, Russia initially seized the coastal strip of Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia to gain more dominance in the Black Sea, as it would enhance Russia's control (Newitt, 2023). During this crisis, Türkiye adopted a bilateral approach and, despite Russia's assertiveness, advocated for the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity. At this point, Türkiye foresaw that the involvement of external powers in the crisis would threaten the security of the Black Sea and advocated for local assistance and solutions. Türkiye supported Georgia's defense capabilities and proposed the establishment of a cooperation platform involving regional actors to prevent the escalation of the crisis (Alim, 2022, p. 469-470). Türkiye's concerns about the potential shift in power balances in the Black Sea and the emergence of larger security issues in the region are evident, and it appears to be striving to protect the power balance in the region.

While Russia's control of significant ports in the Black Sea will enhance its dominance, it will also facilitate its access to the Mediterranean. For Russia, dominating the Black Sea is crucial to achieving its future goals, undermining the system by becoming an excessively

powerful state, and realizing its ambitions of becoming a superpower. Russia attacked Odessa, Ukraine's most crucial port and one of the largest ports in the Black Sea basin. If Russia seizes this port, it will establish long-term dominance in the Black Sea and take a step toward becoming a superpower, leading to the potential loss of the functionality of the power balance system (Newitt, 2023). Examining Türkiye's role in this system, survey results conducted by experts in Ukraine suggest that Türkiye is perceived as a country attempting to balance between Russia and Ukraine in the war, yet simultaneously displaying an indecisive role. Ukrainian experts' surveys also indicate that Türkiye, compared to other countries in the Black Sea region, relatively provides more support and contribution, receiving the highest scores (Khylyk and Shelest, 2022, p. 4). Türkiye's balanced approach, as mentioned under the titles of Power Balance in the Black Sea and its position in the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war, reflects its consistent goals of preserving the power balance, ensuring peace and stability, conducting economic activities, and safeguarding territorial integrity (Ali, 2022, p. 358). To achieve these goals, Türkiye has pursued specific policies, engaged in regional collaborations, and assumed a leadership role in these partnerships (Gherman, 2017, p. 38).

As highlighted under the title of Türkiye's Crimea Policy in the annexation of Crimea, Türkiye did not remain indifferent and supported the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, contrary to expectations from other states, Türkiye, instead of showing a strong reaction, adopted a more neutral stance. In line with this, Türkiye provided the necessary support to Crimea and continued its trade relations with Russia. Due to Russia's valuable position for Türkiye, efforts were made to resolve crises through negotiations rather than imposing sanctions (Özçelik, 2018, p. 75). Under the title of Russia-Ukraine war, it is emphasized that Türkiye continued its policy of neutrality since the annexation of Crimea. Despite expectations for sanctions from other states and similar expectations from Türkiye, no sanctions were imposed. Türkiye made significant diplomatic efforts during this period, such as mediating between the two countries for a ceasefire and hosting negotiations in Antalya and Istanbul for the war. Türkiye provided defense weapons to Ukraine during this process, resulting in the destruction of about five Russian fleets by Ukraine (Kormych and Malyarenko, 2022, p. 1251). Additionally, Türkiye maintained its relations with Russia, and its reasons include economic interdependence. Intense relations between Türkiye and Russia in trade, tourism, energy, and construction have contributed to the continued stability of their relationship. Türkiye's economic difficulties during the war and Russia's foreign investments in Türkiye necessitated the continuation of their relations (Oğuzlu, 2023, p. 683). Due to its investments in natural gas and energy with Russia, Türkiye has adopted a peaceful and cooperative approach in its relations (Kubicek, 2022, p. 795). The crisis between Russia and Ukraine has highlighted Türkiye's geopolitical importance once again. When the war started, Türkiye did not withhold its assistance to Ukraine, invoked the Montreux Straits Convention to close the straits to warships, and simultaneously maintained its diplomatic relations with Russia (Coffey and Kasapoğlu, 2023).

The Black Sea has always been historically significant for Türkiye. Therefore, Türkiye has been the best at maintaining the status quo compared to other countries in the Black Sea region. The Montreux Straits Convention, ensuring control over Türkiye's access to the Black Sea, has not only been vital for the security of Turkish straits but also of great importance for the security of the Black Sea. Türkiye's control over access to the Black Sea has had a direct impact on maintaining balance and protecting power balances in the Black Sea, restricting NATO's power in the Black Sea and its efforts to expand towards the Black Sea (Baldiran, Bayar and Gençer, 2022, p. 20). Consequently, it has prevented another power from entering the system. Türkiye has made efforts to prevent Russia from becoming excessively powerful and excluding Ukraine from the system to maintain the power balance and prevent the system from collapsing. In general terms, Türkiye has stated that it does not accept Russia's annexation of Crimea. Moreover, despite the imposition of sanctions by other Western states in response to Russia's actions and efforts to persuade Türkiye to follow suit, Türkiye has neither imposed sanctions nor participated in the policies and sanctions applied by Western states. From this perspective, it is clear that Türkiye has strived to protect the security of the Black Sea, maintain the power balances in the region, and make efforts to avoid disrupting the power balance (Alim, 2022, p. 471).

As a result, Türkiye has maintained collaborative and peaceful relations with Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia despite the crises experienced by these countries. In the Georgia crisis, Türkiye proposed local solutions to prevent the escalation of danger in the Black Sea and provided support for Georgia's defense capabilities. Similarly, during the Crimea and Ukraine crises, Türkiye pursued a neutral and balancing policy, supporting the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and maintaining stable relations with Russia. It is evident that Türkiye, considering the power balances in the Black Sea, has played a balancing role in the region.

To view Türkiye's balancing role from a different perspective, as mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, just like Great Britain in the 19th century, which had good logistical power, refrained from intervening in war territories, and played a good balancing role (Kaplan, 1957, p. 690), Türkiye's provision of defense assistance to Ukraine, no intervention in war territories, and relative distance are also in line with this understanding.

According to Morton A. Kaplan's power balance theory, it is emphasized that there is a country playing a balancing role within the power balance system to prevent the collapse of the system (Kaplan, 1957, p. 691). Based on this, it can be seen that Türkiye has assumed a balancing role in the power balance system in the Black Sea and is mindful of preventing the system from collapsing.

5. CONCLUSION

In the Cold War era and before, Russia had a more dominant position in the Black Sea compared to other countries. However, after the Cold War, the Black Sea became a more strategic region, leading to power struggles and shifts in power balances. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's dominance and power in the Black Sea

diminished, and other countries began to assert themselves. As other countries gained power and NATO's efforts to expand toward the Black Sea increased, Russia began to feel threatened in its dominance over the Black Sea. The NATO membership of Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania, coupled with the non-membership of Georgia and Ukraine, facilitated exerting pressure on the latter two countries. The desire of Georgia and Ukraine to become NATO members, along with the perception that NATO would gain more power in the Black Sea, heightened Russia's sense of threat regarding its dominance. As Western states began to gain power in the Black Sea, and Russia's dominance became more limited than during the Soviet era, Russia sought to strengthen its dominance. In line with these reasons, Russia took action, exerted pressure on former Soviet countries, and initially created the Georgia crisis. Subsequently, the annexation of Crimea and the initiation of the war in Ukraine supported Russia's intention to increase its dominance in the Black Sea, feeling threatened by NATO's expansion and the empowerment of Western states. Although Türkiye reacted to Russia's annexation of Crimea, it adopted an active neutral policy. Türkiye has consistently refused to accept the annexation of Crimea and emphasized the need for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. When Russia initiated the war in Ukraine, Western states imposed various sanctions and embargoes. Despite Western states expecting Türkiye to implement similar policies and take a stance against Russia, Türkiye continued its trade and economic relations with Russia. Türkiye maintained its active neutral policy since the annexation of Crimea during the Russia-Ukraine war and expressed its opposition to the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Türkiye provided defense weapons to Ukraine during this war, functioning as a global grain corridor for Ukraine's grain exports. This played a crucial role in alleviating the global grain crisis. Türkiye's adoption of an active neutral policy in the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war, its continuation of relations with Russia despite other countries severing ties, and its support for the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity demonstrate that Türkiye is a balancing country in the Black Sea. Drawing on Morton A. Kaplan's power balance theory, it can be concluded that Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia are within a power balance system in the Black Sea. In this system, it is understood that Russia seeks to weaken Ukraine, which it perceives as a weak country, to exclude it from the system due to its desire to excessively gain power. Thus, Russia aims to render a Black Sea state outside the system and increase its dominance further. When Ukraine is excluded from the system, power balances will be disrupted, and the power balance system will fail to provide stability and collapse. However, Türkiye does not want Ukraine to be excluded from the system and, at the same time, does not want Russia to excessively gain power in the Black Sea. Here, it is evident that Türkiye follows a balancing policy between Ukraine and Russia, aiming to ensure the security of the Black Sea and maintain power balances within the system. Morton A. Kaplan in the power balance theory stated that a country striving to maintain stability, prevent the disruption of power balances, and avoid the collapse of the system is a balancing country. Türkiye assumes this role in the power balance of the Black Sea. In conclusion, based on all these considerations, it can

be inferred that Türkiye is a balancing country in the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war.

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