

Türkiye, NATO, and The Black Sea: Regional Security and Strategic Dynamics

Türkiye, Nato ve Karadeniz: Bölgesel Güvenlik ve Stratejik Dinamikler

Sibel KARAKAYALAR 

ABSTRACT

The Black Sea, which extends from Europe to Central Asia and the Caucasus, is at a strategically important point. The Black Sea Region is also of great importance for Europe because it is an important junction point where the north-south and east-west corridors intersect. Those who dominate the region or manage to maintain control of the region can gain influence in the European continent, especially in Central Europe and the Balkans, as well as in the South Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and the north of the Middle East. Due to its strategic importance, the Black Sea region has been a flank region between NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and USSR (The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) since the Cold War period. With the end of the Cold War, a new security environment and threats emerged in the Black Sea. Emerging new threats are terrorism, migration and support for arms smuggling. In this study, NATO's policies and activities in the Black Sea region will be discussed and the approaches of Türkiye and the USA towards the Black Sea region will also be evaluated.

Keywords: NATO, Türkiye, USA, Black Sea, Geopolitic

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Kocaeli Sağlık ve Teknoloji Üniversitesi, Türk Dili, Atatürk İlke ve İnkılapları, Kocaeli, Türkiye, sibel.karakayalar@kocaelisaglik.edu.tr ORCID: 0009-0008-1341-6036



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ÖZET

Avrupa'dan Orta Asya coğrafyasına ve Kafkasya'ya uzanan Karadeniz, stratejik açıdan önemli bir noktadadır. Karadeniz Bölgesi, kuzey-güney ve doğu-batı koridorlarının birbiriyle kesiştiği önemli bir kavşak noktası olmasından dolayı Avrupa için de büyük bir öneme sahiptir. Bölgeye hâkim olan ya da bölgenin kontrolünü elinde tutmayı başaranlar, Orta Avrupa ve Balkanlar başta olmak üzere Avrupa kıtasına aynı zamanda Güney Kafkaslar, Doğu Akdeniz ve Orta Doğu'nun kuzeyinde nüfuz elde edebilir. Karadeniz Bölgesi stratejik öneminden dolayı Soğuk Savaş döneminden itibaren Kuzey Atlantik İş Birliği Örgütü (NATO) ile Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği (SSCB) arasında bir kanat bölgesi olmuştur. Soğuk Savaşın bitmesiyle Karadeniz'de yeni güvenlik ortamı ve aynı zamanda tehditler de oluşmuştur. Oluşan yeni tehditler terör, göç ve silah kaçakçılığının desteklenmesidir. Bu çalışmada Karadeniz'in jeostratejik önemi çerçevesinde NATO'nun Karadeniz Bölgesindeki politikaları ve faaliyetleri ele alınacak olup Türkiye'nin ve ABD'nin Karadeniz Bölgesine yönelik yaklaşımları bölgesel güvenlik ve stratejik dinamikler değerlendirilecektir. Bu sayede, geleceğe yönelik stratejik yaklaşımların anlaşılmasına katkı sağlanacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: NATO, Türkiye, ABD, Karadeniz, jeopolitik

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the fifteenth century, the Black Sea has been the focal point of conflict between Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia. This characterization of the region continued into the twentieth century between Türkiye and USSR, which are the heirs of these two states. While the region remained relatively calm during Cold War, significant changes began following its conclusion. The struggle in the Black Sea Region has become multi-sided with involvement of the actors from outside the region to the power struggle. The Black Sea has become an international region today, both in terms of competition and cooperation. In this context, Black Sea is a significant factor affecting the international system.

Asymmetric security threats have emerged after the Cold War and have impacted the whole world. The areas of competition, interest and leverage areas among the great Powers have also shifted. The Black Sea is one of these areas. At the same time, the factors posing threats in the international arena have also shifted and increased in number. This situation has caused a change in the security content. Micronationalism, human rights, environmental issues, epidemics, migration, terrorism, arms and drug trafficking, ethnic conflicts, economic problems etc. are relatively recent problems in international security. These problems also effect the

Black Sea Region. In addition, one of the most significant challenges of Black Sea is energy supply.

As a Black Sea coastal county and also a key holter in the Black Sea region, Türkiye is directly affected by the developments in the region. The security of the Black Sea Region, which has moved from the regional to the global level, has an important place in Türkiye's both foreign policy and national security.

1.1 Geostrategic and Geopolitic Importance of The Black Sea

Located in Southeastern Europe and Northern Türkiye, the Black Sea is a major inland sea in Eurasia. It is connected to the Mediterrenean via the Straits, the sea of Azov via the Kerch Strait, the North Sea via the Rhibe-Danube Canal, the Baltic Sea via the Main-Danube canal and the Caspian Sea via the Volga-Don Canal. It is also connected to the Atlantic Ocean via the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanalles and Bosphorus Straits, the Mediterrenean Sea and the Aegean Sea.

There is no consensus in the definition of Black Sea Region. A narrow definition of the region includes only the countries bordering the Black Sea including, Georgia, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, and Türkiye. A broad definition of the region includes also Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova in addition to these six countries. (Wider Black Sea)

Another view regarding the Black Sea is that the region is a political formation rather than a geographical area. It encompasses not only the countries bordering the Black Sea but also those that influence and are influenced by political developments in the region from Southeastern Europe to the Caspian Sea (1). In addition to all these, there are also views that see the region as part of the "Wider Middle East" Project and define it as the eastern border (2)

According to contemporary geopolitical perspectives, the Black Sea region holds a significant region. Mackinder, in his theory of land domination, describes the Black Sea as providing the easiest Access to the central region. Spykmen, in his Rimland theory, argues that the region connects Europe to the Middle East and Asia.

Mahan, in his theory of maritime dominance, emphasized that the power that dominates the region will also possess the geographical position to control it. Schaklian, in his theory of air dominance, states that the Black Sea Region is geographically situated to dominate the central region and the world island (3). The region, along with experiencing numerous ethnic and political conflicts, has also been highly influential in shaping European history (4).

As is well known, with the collapse of the USSR, the black sea was reshaped, becoming a focal point for global powers due to its geopolitical importance. The Black Sea Region became a political conflict for East and West civilizations. As one of the world's major trade centers, the Black Sea has witnessed numerous wars and conflicts throughout history. This is due to the economic, energy, security and political competition within the region. Furthermore, its geopolitical location has made it a key energy corridor.

1.2. The Importance of the Black Sea Region

The political landscape in the region underwent radical change after the Cold War. In this context, geopolitical and geostrategic balances in the Black Sea Region were reshaped. While the emerging power vacuum in the Black Sea was seen an opportunity for non-regional states, it also brought about security challenges for the Black Sea Region.

The ethnic conflicts that erupted after the end of the Cold War made the Black Sea region a region of intense conflict after the Balkans (5). The dissolution of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact pushed the states of the Caspian and Black Sea regions away from Russia and toward the West. Many of the countries that emerged from Russia's influence became members of Western organizations such as NATO and EU. Due to the policies of these countries to get closer to the West, they will be able to transform the Black Sea Region into a part of the Euro-Atlantic geography, a geography where NATO and EU member states are included, in the coming years. Countries still searching for their identity are undergoing a geopolitical transition from East to West. This can be interpreted as an indicator of the regions's historically trapped position between East and West. Therefore, one of the most important factors shaping the regions's future will be the East-West polarization (6).

The importance of the Black Sea Region has become even more pronounced in Western eyes than before. Influenced by a wide range of factors, the US and EU have increased their interest in the Black Sea while simultaneously opting to develop new and more coherent strategies (7). However, since the early 1990's, the region's geopolitical importance has further increased (8).

Sea The year 2008 was a critical turning point in Georgia-NATO relations. At the Bucharest Summit held in April, NATO announced that Georgia would become a member of the alliance in the future, but did not specify a definite date. In August, a brief war broke out

between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This war threatened Georgia's territorial integrity and increased the importance of its relations with NATO. After the war, NATO established the Georgia-NATO Commission (NGC) with the aim of supporting the country's membership process. (9)

The second factor contributing to the region's importance is the possibility that Russia could regain military, political, and economic strength and become influential in its former spheres of influence, as the Black Sea countries have remained under the influence and dominance of Tsarist Russia and the USSR for the last two centuries. This possibility is viewed by countries in this region as a guarantee of their military, economic, and political security in the future through NATO and EU membership. It's safe to say that the Black Sea region has evolved into a European region with the EU's expansion. With Romania and Bulgaria joining, in particular, the EU has become a Black Sea power (10).

The region's special position in the US's counterterrorism strategy constitutes a third important factor. The notion that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the US, November 3, 2003, in Spain and July 7, 2005, in England, disrupting the security of Europe and North America stemmed from the "Greater Middle East" region, and it was assessed that Black Sea countries would play a significant role in the fight (11). Based on this, the US's new strategy in the Greater Middle East project is as follows: "The Black Sea region has been the gateway to the Middle East for centuries... Every European power in the nineteenth century understood that whoever controls the Black Sea... can control the Middle East. Therefore, if the democratization process in the Middle East is to succeed, the establishment of a democratic, prosperous, and secure structure in the Black Sea Region is a prerequisite." (12).

The fourth reason is that the US generally wants to keep Russia's military activities under control, and in particular, it prefers the Black Sea region as a monitoring center with spy planes, radar stations, and military bases against the possibility of a military operations against Iran (13).

The rich energy resources of the Black Sea and Caspian regions constitute a fifth reason. Furthermore, the Black Sea region holds a strategic position for the US in terms of access to Central Asia and the Middle East. Previously known in the literature as the "East-West Energy Corridor", the region was later renamed the "Black Sea Security Corridor" (14).

Sixth, the Black Sea region holds geopolitical priority for Russia. Russia seeks to control the Black Sea by supporting problems in other countries beyond its borders. In this context, it

supported Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while in Georgia, it supported Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and in Moldova, it supported the Dniester region against its rulers. The seventh and final reason is that, energy supply security has become increasingly important recently. Immediately following the natural gas dispute between Ukraine and Russia, all attention has focused on the Black Sea. The tanker shipping routes and pipeline transit points along the “East-West Energy Corridor” are located in the Black Sea. Therefore, the Black Sea Region stands out in ensuring Europe’s energy security . For all these reasons, the Black Sea Region has become a focal point in the struggle for influence between the East and the West (15).

1.3. Türkiye and the security of Black Sea Region

With the collapse of the USSR, countries bordering the Black Sea increased Türkiye’s trade share. The Black Sea region became a key transit route for transporting energy resources from the Caspian Sea, particularly Azerbaijani oil, to the West. With the shifting balance of power after the Cold War, cooperation in the Black Sea was crucial for Türkiye in ensuring security in the Straits (16).

Regional organizations, international organizations’s policies and initiatives regarding the region, and cooperation among coastal countries are all influential in the security of the Black Sea. Türkiye has been a pioneer in establishing these organizations. These organizations, established with a focus on the Black Sea, have incorporated policies that include the Black Sea.

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) is an idea to establish a cooperation under Turkish leadership that aims to strengthen economic ties among Black Sea coastal countries and contribute to regional security in the medium and long term. This idea was first proposed by Ambassador Şükrü Elekdağ in the early 1990s. Accordingly, developing cooperation in the Black Sea region is essential to elevate Türkiye’s geopolitical importance to a new dimension (17).

Founded on June 25, 1992, through the initiative of Türkiye, the BSEC members are Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, Montenegro, Russia and Türkiye. While the BSEC’s primary objective is to foster stable economic cooperation for the

sustainable development of the countries in the BSEC region, it also aims to foster political dialogue and ensure peace and security among member countries (18).

The Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), led by Türkiye, is the most important military organization in the Black Sea Region. Founded in 2001, BLACKSEAFOR's member countries include Bulgaria, Türkiye, Georgia, Romania, Ukraine and Russia. BLACKSEAFOR is a unique organization that brings together coastal countries that differ greatly in both military capabilities and abilities. It contributes to the development of regional peace and security among its members. BLACKSEAFOR is an agreement signed in Istanbul on April 2, 2001, between the countries bordering the Black Sea.

The main purpose of the BLACKSEAFOR, which is the mechanism of cooperation in establishing maritime security in the Black Sea Region, is to ensure cooperation between the naval forces of the coastal countries in the Black Sea, to ensure their joint action, and to ensure mutual friendship and good relations in the region.

The BLACKSEAFOR's mandate was amended on July 7, 2004, to include organized crime and terrorist activities within its scope of operations. The revised mandate includes preventing NATO's access to the Black Sea. Although Türkiye is a NATO member, it has expressed concern about the expansion of Operation Active Endeavor, organized in the Mediterranean by NATO's new members, Bulgaria and Romania, into the Black Sea region. Bulgaria and Romania, seeking to balance the power of Russia and Ukraine, requested that NATO naval units patrol the region. However, Türkiye, sensitive to the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, did not view these efforts favorably (19).

2. CONCLUSION

Recent developments have transformed the Black Sea into a strategic region, providing the potential for intervention in Russia to the South, Türkiye to the North, Europe to the east, and the Caucasus to the west. Therefore, upholding the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits benefits Türkiye and all Black Sea coastal states. The BLACKSEAFOR's expansion of its sphere of influence in the Black Sea is significant because it demonstrates that external actors are not needed to ensure the region's security. Montreux contributes to the sustainability of this structure by limiting access to the Black Sea by non-coastal states.

However, it should be noted that the Black Sea coastal countries are in competition. The convergence and conflict of interests must be maintained within a conjunctural balance. This will ensure the sustainability of joint power and avoid adventures. Countries in the region should maintain their geographical advantages and continue their cooperation with international organizations such as NATO and the BSEC, strengthening their own regional organizations.

The Black Sea region faces attempts to damage the status quo. Despite NATO's increased global intervention capabilities following 9/11, terrorist activities have not posed a significant threat in the region that would provoke external intervention. Therefore, resolving issues by the coastal states through their own initiatives and regional cooperation would be beneficial for both the region and neighboring countries.

The BSEC and BLACKSEAFOR are important organizations that strengthen political, economic and security cooperation in the Black Sea. These organizations play a critical role in filling the political vacuum and ensuring stability in the region. However, the fact that most countries in the region are not members of NATO or the EU and have little prospect of joining these organizations in the near future should be carefully considered for the sustainability of regional cooperation.

NATO's desire to expand its presence in the region could create unease and lead to new problems in the Black Sea countries. Competition in the region paves the way for the potential use of NATO membership as a political tool. However, NATO's expansion in the Black Sea region does not always align with the political, economic, and security interests of the countries in the region.

In contrast, regional organizations like the BLACKSEAFOR and the BSEC have the potential to fill the political and military vacuum in the Black Sea and are therefore of significant importance. Two of the Black Sea coastal countries are EU members, and three are NATO members, and these countries are also members of the BLACKSEAFOR and the BSEC. NATO continues to coordinate with other international organizations in line with its strategy of supporting alliances established for defense purposes. In this context, NATO could consider conducting its Black Sea activities more in line with the BSEC.

Regional structures are also crucial for addressing political gaps. Expanding NATO's sphere of influence in the Black Sea could delay the resolution of existing problems and could also be the source of new ones. NATO membership, or the desire for membership, could become a source of competition among regional countries, potentially disrupting stability. To

ensure continued prosperity and security in the region, existing organizations must be supported, and these structures must enhance their effectiveness and contribute to the future of the Black Sea.

The Russia-Ukraine War profoundly affected the security dynamics in the Black Sea, reshaping NATO's deterrence and defense policies, and this played a decisive role in regional stability and balance of power in the long term.

Türkiye, with its geographical location and historical responsibilities in the Black Sea region, is a key player in the regional balance. At the intersection of energy corridors, trade routes, and military rivalries, this region has become the arena for power struggles between NATO, Russia and regional countries. Through its role within the Montreux Convention and its cooperation with NATO, Türkiye ensures regional stability and protects its strategic interests. The future of the Black Sea depends on cooperation, balanced policies and sustainable security dynamics.

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