Turkey's Black Sea Predicament: Challenging or Accommodating Russia?

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the development of the new security environment in the Black Sea and its implications for the future of regional dialogue between Turkey and Russia. The radically altered strategic balance in the Black Sea after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 have urged Turkish policymakers to revise their traditional policies toward this region. Yet Ankara currently faces four main challenges in this quest: i) maintaining the status quo established by the Montreux Convention, ii) protecting its interests vis-à-vis Russia's strengthened military presence in the Black Sea, iii) dealing with the significant security implications of the three Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) spheres built around Turkish territories, 4) accommodating the diverse Black Sea policies of its NATO allies without alienating Russia.

Key Words

Turkey, Russia, Black Sea, Caucasus, NATO, Montreux Convention, Jet Crisis.

Introduction

Turkey and Russia are the two most significant regional actors in the Black Sea region. While the former has the longest shoreline among all the littoral states surrounding the Black Sea, the latter has geopolitically dominated the region since the 18th century. Before the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, the Black Sea was mainly viewed as a "Turkish lake" due to the Ottoman Empire's centuries-long regional dominance in the Balkans and Crimea. For many years, this hegemony enabled the Ottomans to exercise absolute control over access to the Black Sea through the Turkish

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Straits. Yet the Ottoman supremacy was challenged by an ever-expanding Russian Empire, which strived to gain access to the Black Sea's warm waters. The Ottoman-Russian wars of the 18th and 19th centuries – including the Crimean War of 1853-1856 – were the most important signs of the fierce geopolitical rivalry between the Ottoman sultans and the Russian tsars over the Black Sea.

Following the dissolution of the two empires after World War I, their successor states- the newly founded Republic of Turkey and the Soviet Union- succeeded in developing a different relationship with each other. Moscow's economic and military support for the Turkish War of Independence in Anatolia started a brand new period in Turkish-Russian relations. Eventually, during the 1920s and 1930s the Black Sea became a region of cooperation between the two countries in parallel with their improved political and economic ties. The Turkish-Soviet dialogue particularly played an important role in the diplomatic process that led to the signing of the Lausanne and Montreux conventions on the regime of the Turkish Straits. Signed in 1936, the latter became the main international document regulating access to the Black Sea for commercial ships and warships. Even though Turkey and the Soviet Union became adversaries as members

of the two opposing blocs after World War II, the geopolitical balance that was established in the Black Sea with their cooperation managed to survive the Cold War.

Moscow's economic and military support for the Turkish War of Independence in Anatolia started a brand new period in Turkish-Russian relations.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided fresh opportunities for the establishment of a new environment of dialogue and cooperation between Ankara and Moscow. The two countries worked together in order to preserve their privileged status in the Black Sea, and built a number of regional mechanisms to check the expansion of Western military influence in the region. Yet the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 urged Turkish leaders to revise their policies about the Black Sea. The Turkish-Russian disagreement over Syria, which triggered a serious crisis between the two countries in late 2015, also significantly hampered the regional dialogue between Ankara and Moscow.

The goal of this article is to discuss and evaluate the development of the new security environment in the Black Sea, as well as its implications for the future of the Turkish-Russian regional dialogue. Although the two countries managed to normalize their relations following the fighter jet crisis of 2015, Ankara still finds it difficult to accommodate Moscow's interests in the region. The rising tensions between NATO and Russia also weaken Turkey's efforts to follow a policy of balance in the Black Sea. In this regard, it can be argued that Turkey currently faces four key challenges in reshaping its Black Sea policy: i) maintaining the status quo established by the Montreux Convention, ii) protecting its interests vis-à-vis Russia's strengthened military presence in the region, iii) dealing with the security implications of the three Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) spheres built around Turkish territories, iv) accommodating the diverse Black Sea policies of its NATO allies without alienating Russia in the region.

Evolution of the Turkish-Russian *Modus Vivendi* in the Black Sea

Despite its longstanding strategic ties with NATO, Turkey's policy in the Black Sea in the post-Cold War period has largely been shaped by its desire to develop a regional cooperation scheme together with the Black Sea countries rather than its Western allies. This so-called "regional ownership" approach brought Turkey's position closer to that of Russia, as it is also in line with Moscow's efforts to curb the rising influence of the EU and NATO in the region.[1] The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which was established in 1992, in particular provided a significant platform in which Ankara and Moscow could gradually strengthen their regional dialogue as well as bilateral economic relations in the field of tourism, energy and trade. BSEC also helped the two countries develop new channels for regional economic cooperation in other sectors, including transportation, agriculture, banking and finance.[2]

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A major outcome of the improved Turkish-Russian dialogue in the Black

Sea has been the establishment of a number of additional multilateral cooperation schemes designed to strengthen regional stability and security. Although Turkey supported the full membership of Bulgaria and Romania in NATO, which eventually took place in 2004, it also launched some important security initiatives in cooperation with Russia and the other Black Sea countries. In April 2001, for instance, the Black Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group (Blackseafor) was formally established with the goal of fostering regional cooperation in spheres such as search and rescue operations, protection of the environment, and mine cleaning.

The idea behind the foundation of such multilateral mechanisms was not only to highlight the importance of Turkey's geopolitical role as a major actor in the Black Sea, but also to prevent the region from turning into a theatre of military conflict between the West and Russia. Ankara's decision to launch Operation Black Sea Harmony in March 2004, which was later joined by Russia and other Black Sea states, can be viewed mainly as a response to NATO's plans to expand its military influence into the Black Sea through Operation Active Endeavour – launched as a U.S.-led initiative in 2001 in the Mediterranean Sea following the September 11 attacks. Although Operation Black Sea Harmony similarly aimed at deterring

terrorism and other asymmetrical threats in the region, it also contributed to the deepening of the Turkish-Russian security dialogue in the Black Sea.

Regional initiatives such as Blackseafor and Operation Black Sea Harmony indicate that maintaining special relations with Russia without alienating its NATO allies was an important pillar of Turkey's Black Sea policy in the 2000s. This has also been one of the main reasons for Ankara's determination to strictly implement the clauses of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates the transit of warships through the Turkish straits of the Bosporus and Dardanelles and guarantees the freedom of passage of civilian vessels in times of peace and war.[3]

The Montreux convention includes a number of restrictions on the transit of warships from non-Black Sea countries, which are not allowed to have more than nine warships in the Black Sea. These vessels, the maximum aggregate tonnage of which cannot exceed 45,000 tons, are not able to stay in the Black Sea for more than 21 days. They must also notify the Turkish authorities at least 15 days before their transit through the Turkish Straits. While aircraft carriers are not allowed to transit at all, submarines of the Black Sea states may cross the Turkish Straits,

although they are also subject to very strict conditions and limitations.

During the Cold War, the delicate balance established by the Montreux Convention played a key role in keeping the Black Sea region away from the geopolitical competition between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. This is also why Turkey and Russia refrained from changing this regime in the post-Cold War period, as it granted them a privileged status in the Black Sea. In 2008, for instance, Turkey invoked the clauses of the Montreux Convention in response to the U.S. request to send its military ships to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits with the purpose of bringing humanitarian aid to Georgia right after the Russian-Georgian war. This was an indication of Turkey's desire to resolve the issues in the Black Sea together with the countries of the region, rather than with external powers, despite its alliance with the U.S. and NATO. It was also the main reason behind Ankara's active mediation between Moscow and Tbilisi during and after the Russian-Georgian crisis.[4] However, Turkey's diplomatic efforts could neither prevent Russia from recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, nor facilitate the de-escalation of tensions between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea in the following period.[5]

The importance of the Montreux regime was highlighted by Turkey once again in 2014 during the crisis in Ukraine. When Russian officials expressed their concerns about the presence of U.S. warships in the Black Sea, one of which was conducting a joint naval exercise with NATO members Romania and Bulgaria, Turkey once again assured Russia that everything was in line with the clauses of the Montreux Convention.[6] In this respect, Ankara continued to follow a cautious policy of balance between the West and Russia in the Black Sea. For instance, although it supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine and rejected the results of the referendum in Crimea, which eventually paved the way for the annexation of the peninsula by Russia, it refrained from using strong language against Moscow, unlike the other NATO members. More importantly, it refused to participate in the Western sanctions against Russia and continued its economic cooperation with Moscow. The announcement of the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline project during President Putin's visit to Turkey in December 2014 in this regard was an important sign of the special economic ties between Turkey and Russia.

At the same time, however, it should be indicated that the crises in Georgia and Ukraine significantly changed the already fragile balance between

NATO and Russia in the Black Sea. Russia's growing tensions with NATO in the post-2007 period- as indicated by Moscow's decision to suspend its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and resume long distance reconnaissance flights near NATO member countries including Turkey's Black Sea coast- weakened the influence of the multilateral regional cooperation initiatives that were founded in the 1990s and 2000s.[7]

Russia's Black Sea Fleet played an important role in Moscow's new strategy against NATO's rising influence in the region. Moscow's objective, particularly after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, was to possess a multi-regional naval power in the Black Sea, which would also allow it to sustain a much larger force in the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East. This goal was hinted at by then-commander of the Russian Navy, Admiral Vladimir Masorin, who said in a speech at the Russian Black Sea Fleet headquarters in Sevastopol in 2007, "the operational zone of the fleet extends across the Black Sea and the Mediterranean all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. It is at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and here we must re-establish the permanent presence of the Russian Navy."[8]

Impacts of the Fighter Jet Crisis

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 further tilted the strategic balance in the Black Sea in Russia's favor, as Moscow started to directly control the Sevastopol naval base, which was previously leased from the Ukrainian government within the framework of an international agreement. This development, however, contradicted Turkey's efforts to maintain the status quo in the region. Sustaining the Turkish-Russian *modus vivendi* in the Black Sea became even more difficult after September 2015, when Russia started direct airstrikes in Syria.

Russia's decision to militarily intervene in Syria raised significant concerns in Turkey.[9] President Erdoğan even publicly criticized the Russian airstrikes, saying he could not understand the rationale of this military intervention given that Russia does not share a border with Syria.[10] Yet Ankara and Moscow failed to resolve their disagreements and eventually in November 2015, Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border due to its violation of Turkish airspace. Following the incident, Ankara sought the support of its NATO allies, while Moscow responded by declaring a

series of economic sanctions against Turkey.

Following the incident, political, economic and cultural relations between Turkey and Russia were almost completely frozen until June 2016. During this seven-month period, Ankara found itself in a very complicated geopolitical situation which entailed the revision of its approach toward the Black Sea. For example, Russia and Armenia signed a security deal for a united regional air defense system.[11] Armenia already hosted two Russian military bases as well as approximately 5,000 Russian soldiers and is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In addition, the two governments made an agreement in February 2016 enabling Russia to provide a 10-year state export loan of up to US$200 million to Armenia with payment deferral until early 2018.[12] Yerevan supported the Russian economic sanctions against Turkey following the fighter jet incident.

Strong military assistance from Russia is crucial to helping Armenia maintain its military advantage over Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, even though Baku also invested immensely in the modernization of its army in the last decade, mainly with the support of Turkey. The strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan is

represented not only by the "one nation, two states" slogan, but also by their grand energy transportation projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline which became operational in 2006.[13] The two countries have also been in close cooperation regarding the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which is viewed by Turkish leaders as a vital project to decrease Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas.

Despite the strong political and economic links between the two countries, it should be noted that Azerbaijan does not have a formal military alliance with Turkey. Turkish military support to Azerbaijan has largely taken place within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Although the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2010, which on paper allows Turkey to take "all possible measures" to help Azerbaijan in case the latter is militarily attacked by a third country, the clause is too vague to indicate a genuine alliance between Ankara and Baku.[14] Moreover, Turkey's military assistance to Azerbaijan has so far been largely restricted to sending advisors and providing training to Azerbaijani soldiers.

Given the fragile geopolitical situation in the Caucasus and Turkey's strategic ties with Azerbaijan, the sudden

escalation of the military conflict between Yerevan and Baku over Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2017 was quite alarming for Ankara. During the four-day violent clashes that killed at least 200 people in both sides, President Erdoğan gave a strong message of solidarity with Azerbaijan and blamed Armenia for the escalation of tensions in the region.[15] It should be noted that Ankara's political support for Baku during the crisis was criticized not only by Armenian President Sargsyan, but also by Russian Prime Minister Medvedev.[16]

Given the fragile geopolitical situation in the Caucasus and Turkey's strategic ties with Azerbaijan, the sudden escalation of the military conflict between Yerevan and Baku over Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2017 was quite alarming for Ankara.

Although Russia played an important diplomatic role in the de-escalation of the latest crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, some analysts viewed the incident as Moscow's signal to Baku that it should be careful about its special relationship with Ankara.[17] It is also important to emphasize in this regard that

Azerbaijan chose to follow a neutral policy between Ankara and Moscow after the fighter jet crisis. President Aliev, for instance, offered mediation to solve the Turkish-Russian spat.[18] It can be argued that close economic relations with Russia, and Moscow's significant influence on the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, prevented Baku from openly siding with Ankara. Yet, Azerbaijan still opened its borders to Turkish commercial vehicles carrying goods to Central Asia after the entrance of these trucks to Russia was restricted by Moscow as part of the sanctions against Ankara.[19]

Apart from the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, Ankara and Moscow have remained at odds with each other regarding other regional conflicts in the Black Sea as well. For instance, Turkey continued to develop its political and economic relations with Ukraine and criticized Moscow's policies regarding the situation of the Tatars in Crimea. During the official visit of Ukrainian President Poroshenko to Turkey in March 2016, the two countries decided to enhance their cooperation in the military-technical field.[20] At the same time, Georgia, which has an uneasy relationship with Russia, emerged as a major strategic partner of Turkey in the Caucasus. Ankara supports the development of Tbilisi's relations with NATO, while the Georgian leaders actively cooperate with Turkey and

Azerbaijan in regional energy and transportation projects including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. The foreign ministers and presidents of the three countries have been meeting on a regular basis since 2012, indicating their commitment to a trilateral strategic partnership.

Russia's Strengthened Military Presence in the Black Sea

As the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia rapprochement continued in the Caucasus, Russia significantly strengthened its relations not only with Armenia, but also with Georgia's breakaway republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[21] The modernization and expansion of the Black Sea Fleet also became an imperative for Russia, especially after the crisis in Ukraine. In 2014, Moscow announced its plans to spend more than US$ 2 billion dollars by 2020 to bolster the fleet, including the procurement of more modern surface ships and submarines outfitted with advanced cruise missiles, as well as integrated air-defense and amphibious-landing capacities.[22] It also deployed three new advanced surface warships in the Black Sea, heavily equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles and other

anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles, in order to respond to all kinds of air, surface and submarine threats. By the time its modernization is completed in 2020, the Black Sea Fleet is expected to receive 30 new vessels of various sizes and classes, including six Bykov-class patrol ships, three additional Admiral Grigorovich-class frigates, and nine Project 21631 small guided missile corvettes.[23]

As a result of this ambitious modernization program, just one year after the annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet had already reached a strategic capacity to serve Russia's regional objectives and become a "blue water" force capable of carrying out extensive operations in open waters.[24] The ships of the Black Sea Fleet are on permanent combat duty as part of the Mediterranean squadron which was re-formed in 2013. According to Admiral Igor Kasatonov, advisor to the Russian Chief of the General Staff, developments in Crimea and Syria justified the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet: "if strikes are launched on targets in Syria from the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea Fleet, if such a task is assigned, can fire at the Gulf area and even further. The fleet has good prospects as long as preference is given to its underwater component."[25]

It should be noted that the Black Sea Fleet makes up only a fraction of

Russia's military power in the Black Sea. Moscow's combined land, sea and air forces, as well as its electronic capabilities, enable it to effectively deny access to the NATO forces seeking to enter the Black Sea.[26] In other words, the main objective of the Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) "bubble" in the Black Sea is to hinder NATO's ability to protect its member states and deliver military assistance to its partners in the region.

The annexation of Crimea has been a crucial turning point in this regard, as the peninsula has been turned into a base to reinforce the Russian naval infrastructure in the Black Sea. Moscow also significantly strengthened its air forces in Crimea and deployed 10 Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers along with patrol and anti-submarine aircraft. In addition, the peninsula was equipped with various missile and coastal defense systems, such as the S-300PMU surface-to-air missile system and the K-300P Bastion-P anti-ship missile complex. In August 2016, Russia also deployed the S-400 system in Crimea, which is known to be one of the most advanced anti-aircraft and missile defense systems in the world.[27]

The radically altered strategic balance in the region was publicly acknowledged by President Erdoğan, who demanded only a few weeks before NATO's Warsaw Summit to introduce counter-measures against developments that had turned the Black Sea into a "Russian lake." In his address to the Balkan countries' chiefs of defense in Ankara, he emphasized the need to transform the Black Sea "into a basin of stability again on the basis of cooperation among riparian countries around the Black Sea."

> A short while ago [NATO Secretary General Jens] Stoltenberg was in Turkey. During his visit I told him: 'You are not visible in the Black Sea. And your invisibility in the Black Sea turns it into a Russian lake, so to speak.' As riparian countries we should live up to our responsibilities. As NATO members, we should take all required steps in all spheres, including the sea, air and ground. Otherwise, history shall not forgive us. And we should also deepen our existing cooperation in accordance with an approach of regional inclusiveness.[28]

Although the Warsaw Summit of July 2016 mainly focused on the enhancement of NATO's forward presence in Eastern Europe, as indicated by the alliance's decision to deploy four multinational battalion-size battle groups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, some key decisions were also taken about the Black Sea. Most importantly, NATO member states agreed to initiate "tailored measures

to increase NATO presence in the southeast of the Alliance on land, at sea and in the air with more multinational land training, combined joint enhanced training, more maritime activity and increased coordination."[29]

The decisions taken at Warsaw demonstrated NATO's intention to move from reassurance to actual deterrence or defense measures vis-à-vis Russia, to reinforce the alliance's eastern flank, which includes the Black Sea region. Accordingly, NATO decided to deploy a multinational framework brigade to be based in Romania and to further discuss military measures to enhance the alliance's collective presence in the Black Sea in subsequent ministerial meetings. Although these measures have yet to be specified, NATO may decide to launch air or sea patrol missions or further increase the number or scope of its joint naval exercises in order to boost the interoperability between the Black Sea countries.

The success of NATO's tailored forward presence strategy in the Black Sea above all depends on the close cooperation of the three NATO members in the region. In other words, "the expansion and credibility of any NATO deterrent largely depends on three littoral NATO states to modernize and reinforce their maritime capabilities."[30] However, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey have

so far failed to unite their efforts in building joint defenses and developing a common framework for security and threat assessment in the Black Sea. Some of the impediments to sub-regional cooperation include budgetary limitations and the three countries' diverging regional interest perceptions.

Moreover, the degree of their bilateral relations with Russia- including their dependence on Russian natural gas-influence Ankara, Bucharest and Sofia's willingness to work with each other regarding Black Sea security. Romania, for instance, has been much more eager to see a stronger NATO presence in the region in comparison to Bulgaria or Turkey, which both have very close economic relations with Moscow. Romania's Craiova and Mihail Kogalniceanu bases also play a very important role as the land and air components of NATO's tailored forward presence strategy in the Black Sea.[31] Additionally, Romania has hosted the Aegis Ashore ballistic missiles of NATO's missile defense system at its Deveselu base since 2016.

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Starting a rotational NATO air patrol mission similar to the Baltic air policing mission, creating a regional maritime task group and establishing a joint fleet with the participation of Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, are some of the ideas on NATO's agenda regarding the Black Sea.[32] However, it should be noted that none of the contemplated steps would be enough to balance Russia's power projection capabilities in the region. Indeed, some analysts believe that the Montreux Convention is an impediment to a robust NATO response against Russia in the Black Sea, since a strengthened NATO presence in the region would require frequent exercises by the navies of the non-littoral states, including the U.S.[33]

So far NATO has only considered a rotational naval deployment in the Black Sea that does not compromise the Montreux Convention. Another proposal, which appears to have some supporters especially in Washington, is to reflag the warships of the non-Black Sea NATO member states with either Romanian, Bulgarian or Turkish flags to circumvent the limitations of the Montreux regime.[34] Yet, it may not be an easy task to convince Turkish policymakers on this issue considering Turkey's historical experience with the reflagging of two German warships in 1914, which eventually triggered the Ottoman Empire's entry into World War I.

Turkey's Reconciliation with Russia

Relations between Turkey and Russia started to normalize in the summer of 2016. In Turkey's case, the fight against DAESH and the PKK became the most important factor as their attacks against Turkish security forces and civilians intensified during the 2015-2016 period. Reconciliation with Moscow, in this sense, became crucial for Ankara in order to take cross-border security measures in the north of Syria. Russia, on the other hand, required the cooperation of Turkey as an important regional actor to secure its long-term geopolitical interests in the Middle East and the Black Sea following its interventions in Ukraine and Syria.[35]

The normalization process in Turkish-Russian relations officially began with President Erdoğan's letter to President Putin in June 2016.[36] The letter was warmly received by Moscow and the two leaders decided to meet in St. Petersburg in August. Yet the failed coup attempt that took place in Turkey on July 15 suddenly gave new meaning to the Turkish-Russian reconciliation process. Moscow expressed strong support for the Turkish government, while the official reactions of Turkey's NATO allies were unexpectedly hesitant and mixed.[37] This created disappointment in Ankara about its

relations with the U.S. and the EU, providing another real impetus for the Turkish-Russian reconciliation.

In August 2016, only a few weeks after the coup attempt, Erdoğan and Putin finally came together for the first time since the fighter jet crisis, restoring the Turkish-Russian bilateral ties. In the following months, the two leaders met many more times and spoke frequently on the phone-particularly regarding the situation in Syria. During Putin's visit to Istanbul in October 2016, they also signed an intergovernmental agreement for the construction of the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline which is expected to supply large amounts of Russian natural gas to Turkey by the end of 2019.[38] In addition, Turkey and Russia confirmed their commitment to finish the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. Ankara also expressed its interest in purchasing Russia's S-400 system in order to develop its own national missile defense, despite the concerns of the NATO officials.[39]

Although cooperation in Syria remained at the heart of the improving Turkish-Russian strategic relations, the two countries also declared their intention to revitalize their dialogue in the Black Sea.

Turkish-Russian relations also rapidly developed in the military sphere. In September 2016, Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov paid a significant visit to Turkey. The most important outcome of this military dialogue was Turkey's "Operation Euphrates Shield," which was launched in August 2016 not only against the DAESH, but also the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG in northern Syria. More importantly, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Iran came together in December 2016 and signed the "Moscow Declaration," which announced a comprehensive ceasefire in Syria and launched a new peace process in Astana between the Assad regime and opposition groups.[40]

Although cooperation in Syria remained at the heart of the improving Turkish-Russian strategic relations, the two countries also declared their intention to revitalize their dialogue in the Black Sea. In line with this agreement, when the NATO Defense Ministers endorsed an enhanced NATO naval presence in the Black Sea, as well as a maritime coordination function between NATO Standing Naval Forces in February 2017, Ankara made reference to the clauses of the Montreux Convention and asked all of the countries to avoid actions that could trigger new tensions with Russia.[41] In addition, the Turkish navy and the Russian Black Sea fleet held joint exercises in April.[42]

Despite these signs of cooperation, it should be noted that Turkey chose to join the Sea Shield 2017 naval exercise with other NATO countries, even though the exercise was criticized by Russian officials.[43] This can be viewed as a sign of Turkey's security concerns regarding the network of A2/AD capabilities built by Russia simultaneously in the Caucasus, Syria and Crimea- given that Turkey is located right at the intersection of these three A2/AD spheres. Moscow also built a similar A2/AD bubble in Kaliningrad when it moved its nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles into the enclave in response to the decisions taken at NATO's Warsaw Summit. It was also revealed at a military parade in Yerevan in September 2016 that Armenia possesses the same Russian Iskander-M missiles.[44]

Although the Turkish public remains strongly skeptical about relations with NATO in the wake of the July 15 coup attempt, it can be argued that Ankara is very much concerned about the rising Russian military presence in the Black Sea. These concerns were aggravated by the statement made by General Gerasimov in September 2016 right before his visit to Turkey. In his assessment of the performance of the Black Sea Fleet in the Kavkaz 2016 military drills, which were held across Russia's entire southern military district on the border of Ukraine including the Crimean peninsula, Gerasimov said, "Several years ago the Russian fleet's combat capabilities were in stark contrast with that of the Turkish Navy. Some even said Turkey was in full command of the Black Sea. Now it's different."[45]

It can be claimed that Gerasimov's statement was rather a response to NATO's plans to increase its military presence in the Black Sea with the deployment of more vessels and strengthening of the fleets of NATO members, particularly Bulgaria and Romania. Yet it also sent a message to Turkish leaders about the way Moscow perceives its military position vis-à-vis Ankara in the region. Therefore, it seems that despite some positive signs and efforts to revitalize their dialogue in the Black Sea in the last couple of years, the region's two most influential countries have changed their stance about the "regional ownership" approach.

Conclusion

In an article they recently penned together, the Turkish and Serbian foreign ministers warned that the political, economic and security challenges in the Black Sea region can only be effectively addressed through increased interaction, enhanced coordination, constructive dialogue,

and focused and result-oriented cooperation."[46] This statement can also be regarded as an acknowledgment of the failure of the extant regional cooperation mechanisms to create effective structures for solving the complicated security problems in the Black Sea.[47] As Tanrısever argues, efforts at cooperation between Turkey and Russia "over a number of issues in the Black Sea region have been guided by their general foreign policy priorities rather than their shared approach to the regional issues."[48] The sheer number of unresolved ethnic-separatist conflicts in the region further complicates the problem. In 2014, Crimea and Donbas were added to the long list of frozen conflicts which already included Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria.

Rising tensions between NATO and Russia have also weakened efforts to enhance the security and stability of the Black Sea region. In February 2017, for instance, the U.S. military claimed that multiple Russian warplanes "buzzed a U.S. navy destroyer in the Black Sea in unsafe and unprofessional maneuvers."[49] Both Moscow and NATO are seeking to strengthen their military presence in the region in a way that can potentially disrupt maritime trade, including energy routes. It is clear that the economies of the littoral states as well as the energy diversification schemes in Europe will be quite negatively affected in the event of a sudden Russia-NATO crisis in the Black Sea.

Yet the radically altered strategic balance in the Black Sea urges Turkey to revise its approach, even though Turkish-Russian relations have significantly improved in the last couple of years.

In its effort to keep the Black Sea a stable maritime domain, Turkey has traditionally preferred collective security mechanisms involving the littoral states in the region. Yet the radically altered strategic balance in the Black Sea urges Turkey to revise its approach, even though Turkish-Russian relations have significantly improved in the last couple of years. Ankara first of all needs to consider developing an effective A2/AD concept to protect its territories and reinforce the security of its allies in the region. This was the main rationale behind Turkey's endorsement of NATO's strategic concept in November 2010 that called for the development of a ballistic missile defense system. Eventually, Ankara agreed to the deployment of an early warning BMD radar in the town of Kürecik in Eastern Anatolia. Yet Russia countered this

move by deploying S-300 and S-400 systems in its southern military district as well as in the territories of Armenia, Crimea and Syria – establishing three formidable A2/AD spheres that cover a large swath of Turkish territory.

Second, and more importantly, Turkey has lost its naval superiority in the Black Sea to Russia since 2014. The delicate Montreux balance which Ankara sought to maintain for so many years has been significantly changed by Russia's accelerated military build-up in the region. Although Ankara and Moscow are currently in a close strategic dialogue with regard to Syria, their differences regarding the conflicts in the Black Sea such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Crimea are far from being resolved. At the same time, Russia's developing military relations with Armenia are a major concern for Ankara, while Moscow is uneasy about Turkey's enhanced strategic ties with the governments of Ukraine and Georgia.

Although their influence has been significantly weakened due to the shifting geopolitical balances in the Black Sea, regional cooperation platforms may still play a key role in managing the disagreements between Turkey and Russia. BSEC, for instance, is still the most comprehensive and institutionalized structure in the region.[50] It should be particularly

emphasized that the meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries at the BSEC Summit in Sochi in July 2016 was a major step in the Turkish-Russian reconciliation process after the fighter jet crisis. BSEC can also act as a platform for providing new momentum to important transnational projects such as the Black Sea ring highway, as well as promoting the development of Motorways of the Sea and visa liberalization policies for business initiatives.[51]

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The tripartite official meetings which in the last few years have become increasingly popular among the countries of the Black Sea can also be helpful in handling the regional disagreements between Turkey and Russia. The creation of a regular meeting format between the presidents of Turkey, Russia and Azerbaijan in August 2016 was quite important in this regard. As indicated earlier,

Turkey has held similar summits with Azerbaijan and Georgia since 2012, while there is also a recently started Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran summit mechanism which held its last meeting in November 2017 in Tehran. Such mechanisms can be utilized more efficiently in order to achieve a breakthrough in the resolution of the regional conflicts of the Black Sea. This could provide much needed momentum for the eroded "regional ownership" approach which had been quite successful in the post-Cold War period in keeping the rising tensions between Russia and NATO away from the Black Sea.

Endnotes

1   Regarding the regional ownership concept, see Sergiu Celac, "The Regional Ownership Conundrum: The Case of the Organization of the BSEC", Ronald D. Asmus (ed.), *Next Steps in Forging a Strategy for the Wider Black Sea*, (Washington: German Marshall Fund, 2006), pp. 215-226.

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