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Turkish Diplomat Tacan Ildem: Negotiations with Russia Should Not Begin with Concessions from Ukraine

“A ceasefire must not become a means to legitimize Russia’s territorial or other gains”

Amid geopolitical shifts, the Black Sea region is gaining special strategic importance. One of the key players in the region is Turkey.

Thanks to its geographic location, a powerful navy, and its status as an influential NATO member, Turkey significantly shapes the balance of power in a region where the interests of not only regional actors, but also global powers intersect.

Glavkom spoke with Turkish diplomat and former NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, Ambassador Tacan Ildem, about NATO’s role, Turkey as a leading regional ally, Ankara’s involvement in efforts to achieve a just peace between Kyiv and Moscow, and the future of Europe’s security architecture. The conversation took place on the sidelines of the Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum 2025.

Ambassador, let’s begin with NATO. How do you assess the Alliance’s role in Black Sea security?

As you recall, beginning in 2014, after the illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO started strengthening its deterrence posture in the region. In 2022, just days after the start of the so-called “special military operation,” Turkey—as a NATO member—took additional deterrent steps by invoking Article 19 of the Montreux Convention. That was a decisive move, providing added maritime security through the restrictions imposed by this international treaty.

In parallel, the three NATO Black Sea littoral states—Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey—joined forces to enhance cooperation in various areas. Notably, the Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group, established last year, stands out.

Currently, its work focuses on mitigating the threat of drifting sea mines, but its scope could expand to include protection of critical infrastructure. Eventually, it may also involve NATO partner countries such as Ukraine and Georgia.

How do you envision this partner involvement?

It will be a gradual process. These countries, for obvious reasons, are not part of the initiative yet, but they could join in the future.

Do you mean after the war ends?

I don’t believe the participating states have set any concrete timelines. But they certainly have the intent and political will to include partner countries. In his speech at the forum, Turkey’s

Deputy Minister of Defense confirmed this intention. He also mentioned that support from other NATO allies would be welcome.

But how, if the straits are currently closed?

Let's be realistic. That can only happen once the straits are reopened. His remarks were made with that future prospect in mind. He emphasized that any potential involvement by other NATO allies in the mine countermeasures group must fully comply with the Montreux Convention.

Under what conditions would Turkey reopen the Black Sea straits?

That will depend on how the Turkish government interprets a peaceful settlement in Ukraine. A ceasefire or suspension of hostilities is one thing, but the declaration that the war is over is entirely different. There must be very strong grounds for that. If such grounds exist, the Turkish government will then assess whether it's appropriate to return to applying the Montreux Convention under peacetime conditions.

What kind of increased NATO military presence in the Black Sea is acceptable to Turkey?

Even with the limitations imposed by the Montreux Convention, NATO's presence in the Black Sea had already grown before the war. Then-Secretary General Stoltenberg publicly stated that the number of days with sustained NATO naval presence in the Black Sea had increased. So clearly, Turkey is not opposed to a stronger NATO presence in the region during peacetime. At the same time, Turkey insists on avoiding unnecessary tension in the Black Sea.

The EU recently presented its Black Sea strategy. NATO—Europe's primary security organization—still lacks one. What's Turkey's view on this?

NATO's principal strategic policy document is its Strategic Concept. The latest version, adopted in Madrid in 2022, explicitly refers to the Black Sea as a strategically important geographic zone. Beyond that, NATO continuously holds discussions and makes decisions on numerous issues—ranging from deterrence and defense to energy security. Therefore, I don't believe NATO urgently needs a separate strategy specifically for the Black Sea.

Ukrainian officials highlight Turkey's crucial role in helping achieve a just peace. What is that role?

On the one hand, Turkey is a strategic partner of Ukraine. Since 2011, we've had top-level engagement between the two countries, with cooperation spanning all areas—including defense industry ties. On the other hand, Turkey has cooperated with Russia for decades. Not all of our Western friends view this positively, but that relationship creates a useful channel for the West and our Ukrainian partners—because Turkey can speak to both sides.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative and prisoner exchanges are clear examples of this constructive role. I'm not saying Turkey will be the only country working to mediate between Ukraine and Russia, but it is certainly among the few that can make a meaningful contribution.

As I said during my speech, the Minsk format was too narrow. This time, any negotiation process to end the war must include a wider range of countries to increase the chances of success.

You also said in your speech that to ensure lasting peace, international peacekeeping or deterrent forces must be deployed in Ukraine to enforce and monitor a ceasefire. Would Turkey be willing to participate in such forces?

I cannot speak for my country, as I hold no official government position. That decision would depend on the government and public support. But if, for example, a “coalition of the willing” proposes a workable format to support Ukraine and peace efforts, then I believe Turkey would consider contributing. Participation in such a force would also have to be fairly distributed, and likely include countries willing to offer security guarantees to Ukraine, at least until it joins NATO.

And statements suggesting Ukraine will never become a NATO member are incorrect. Whether to join any alliance is the sovereign right of every independent state.

Could Turkey be among the countries offering security guarantees to Ukraine?

Again, that would depend on how those guarantees are defined through discussions between Ukraine and the “coalition of the willing.” But I’m confident that, as Ukraine’s strategic partner, Turkey would seriously consider taking on that responsibility.

You also said that talks with Russia must be held from a position of strength. What exactly does Ukraine need to achieve that?

What I mean is that negotiations should not begin with Ukraine making unilateral concessions. If talks start with statements like “Ukraine won’t join NATO” or “Ukraine will relinquish territory,” that immediately weakens Ukraine’s bargaining position. That’s not strength, that’s vulnerability.

There should be a ceasefire, yes—but it must not serve as a tool for legitimizing Russia’s territorial or other gains. Peacekeeping or multinational monitoring forces must be deployed to ensure both sides comply with the ceasefire.

Regarding Russia-occupied territories, they could be granted a temporary status during negotiations, but no formal recognition of Russian sovereignty over them should be made at the outset.

Any resolution of this war must be embedded in the European security architecture, based on well-known principles: respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, independence, the inviolability of internationally recognized borders, and the right of every sovereign state to choose its own alliances.

If we create precedents that challenge these principles, we will build a fragile architecture—one destined to fail—and risk triggering new wars.

How does Turkey view Ukraine's role in the new European security architecture? And what should Europe's future relations with Russia look like after the war?

Ukraine is an integral part of Europe. At the same time, Russia is a player we cannot ignore when thinking about Europe's security structure. We must try to involve Russia—but only if it changes its behavior and commits to the core principles of European security. Otherwise, Russia cannot be part of that architecture.

We must remain open—but also demand that Russia respect the rules.

As for the model of European security architecture, I believe all European actors should begin discussing a new legal and political framework. Previous arms control agreements—like the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, the Open Skies Treaty, the Vienna Document—are no longer functioning. So we need a new framework where these can be rewritten, but the fundamental principles must remain intact.

Should the United States and Canada be part of this new European security architecture, or should it be a purely European matter?

I believe we should follow the precedent of previous legally binding documents that included the U.S. and Canada. American troops are stationed in Europe, and Canada leads NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia. So it's only natural that this transatlantic link continues to be represented in the European security framework.

—Interview by Ihor Fedyk, for Glavkom