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The Black Sea Region in the New Turkish Foreign Policy

Özgür Özdamar
Bilkent University

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Executive Summary

The Wider Black Sea Region has gone through a very significant transformation since the end of the Cold War. Although there have been some successful attempts to provide political, economic and military cooperation, the regionalization attempts are usually considered to be semi-successful at best. This paper begins with a brief historical discussion to provide the background for analysis in the last two decades. Then, four major principles that should guide Turkish foreign policy within the Wider Black Sea Region are discussed, including possible benefits and difficulties associated with them. These principles are: promotion of the BSEC; improvement of bilateral relations with Russia and its inclusion in all multilateral initiatives; prevention of great power rivalry and interstate or civil wars in the Black Sea region.

Introduction

The Wider Black Sea region's (hereinafter: WBSR) political, social and economic transition into the post-Cold War era continues to this day. The end of the Cold War allowed the Euro-Atlantic community to become more active in the region, which led to a gradual shift towards emerging pan-European political and economic institutions. Romania and Bulgaria's NATO and EU memberships, Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU, and the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, albeit incomplete, are some of the instances indicating the region's ardent Euro-Atlantic inclination. Former communist states and newly independent republics in particular have experienced difficulties in their transition to democracy and market economy since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Transition difficulties in the former Soviet space compounded by political polarization erupted after the shift of threat perception within the Euro-Atlantic community after the 9/11 and 3/11 (Madrid) terrorist attacks, which brought heightened US attention towards the WBSR. Since 9/11, the US has strived to legitimize its presence in the WBSR by drawing great attention to energy transit security and asymmetric threats, such as counterterrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and illicit trafficking¹. As the US extended its military and political influence in the regions through defense agreements, support of pro-Western opposition elites against Russia-friendly governments and raising the possibility of further NATO penetration to regional countries, the Russian Federation became defensive. The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia must be observed in this context.

¹ For views on the US. strategy towards the Wider Black Sea Region, see Ronald D. Asmus, Bruce P. Jackson, "The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom", Hoover Institution, Policy Review, June-July 2004. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3437816.html>

At this juncture, Turkey has been caught between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia with an over-securitized agenda of the wider Black Sea region². While echoes of Cold War rhetoric resound over the WBSR, Turkey has shifted most of its foreign policy initiatives to the Middle East, especially after Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2009 and the Arab Spring in 2011.

However, despite Turkey's shift of focus away from the region, the WBSR remains at the forefront of the global political and economic agenda in the second decade of the 21st century due to interrelated geo-economic and geo-political reasons. From the geopolitical perspective, WBSR regained strategic significance when the Euro-Atlantic threat perception dramatically shifted after 9/11 and 3/11 terrorist attacks.³ The region began to be perceived, especially by the US, as the backdoor to the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region⁴. Various former Soviet states along the north and east shores of the Black Sea (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) attained strategic significance in the eyes of the US for securing the Euro-Asian (or East-West) energy corridor linking the energy-hungry Euro-Atlantic system with the Caspian Basin, as well as besieging northern frontiers of the BMENA and Iran.^{5 6} At such a juncture, the US seemed decisive on exerting influence on the shores of the Black Sea, and even for a short while being present in the region. By affirming its capabilities and vital interests, the US strove to convince regional players that it was an inherent stakeholder in the region. The US's application to BSEC for observer status, which was granted in March 2006, attested to this strategy, which can be described as "nowhere prohibited, everywhere present". Furthermore, localized US activity seemed

² Ariel Cohen, Conway Irwin, "US. Strategy in the Black Sea Region", The Heritage Foundation, No. 1990, December 13 2006. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/bg1990.cfm>

³ Mustafa Aydın.2007. "Echoes of Özal's Vision." Bridge Magazine. <http://www.bridge-mag.com/>

⁴ Ronald D. Asmus, "Developing a New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region: Istanbul Paper #2", 27 May 2004, http://www.gmfus.org//doc/07.28_GMF_Istanbul2_Report.pdf

⁵ Mustafa Aydın.2007. "Echoes of Özal's Vision." Bridge Magazine. <http://www.bridge-mag.com/>

⁶ Mustafa Aydın, 2009, "Geographical Blessing versus geopolitical curse: great power security agendas for the Black Sea region and a Turkish alternative," SEBSS, 9:3, 271-285.

to be initiating the color revolutions around the region. From the Russian perspective, the US and transatlantic institutions are unwelcome guests, intruding into the region.

Analyses about Turkey and its foreign policy regarding the Black Sea region must be understood by taking into account the different forces that push and pull the politics of the region. Before focusing on that, this discussion paper will present a brief historical analysis of the Black Sea region from Turkey's perspective. Such an analysis will provide important clues about possible options for Turkey's approach to the region and possible areas of conflict that could occur centuries later. After the background analysis, a discussion of the main principles of Turkish policy in the Black Sea region is presented.

History and Background of the Current Political Climate

The Black Sea region has been a crossroads and an area of interaction between different ethnic groups, nations and civilizations since ancient times. It has served as a barrier and a buffer zone.⁷ Due to its extremely diversified and complicated ethnic and religious structures, the Black Sea region contained numerous ethnic, religious and cultural dividing lines which in the end made the region an area of conflict and contention.⁸

Throughout history, the Black Sea region appeared to be a 'passive geography', a peripheral area close to more significant geographical units. Accordingly, the Black Sea basin has been described as the backyard of the Ottoman Empire, an extension of the Soviet zone of influence, the frontier of Europe and an extension of the Mediterranean world.⁹ The Black Sea region has been dominated by different hegemonic powers throughout its history. The region was first colonized by the Helens from the eighth to the first century BC. Later, the Roman and Byzantine Empires ruled the region until the conquest of İstanbul in 1453 AD. The Ottomans dominated the whole region between

⁷ Jean Dufourco, NATO Defense College and ISIS Paper, 1999.

⁸ Historical background in the following pages are taken from an unpublished report prepared for the Security Commission report of the 'TEPAV Black Sea Project' in 2007. Authors: Özgür Özdamar and Ömer Fazlıoğlu.

⁹ Mitat Çelikpala.2010. "Escalating rivalries and diverging interests: Prospects for stability and security in the Black Sea region." JSEBSS, 10:3, 287-302. .

1453 and 1484. After the Congress of Vienna (1815), Ottomans lost influence and Russia began to extend into the region.¹⁰ Due to the imperial hegemonic powers exerted by the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires, the region had very little interaction with the pan-European political space and remained closed to outside influence. Traditionally, the region had been controlled by dominant power(s), which exercised effective control over East and Southeastern Europe.

After the Crimean War (1853-1856), a commission including French, British, Austrian, Russian, Prussian, Sardinian and Turkish delegates was established to manage navigation in the lower Danube. It was an attempt to establish regional cooperation. Under the Lausanne Treaty (1923) the Black Sea and Turkish straits were internationalized. In 1936, with the signing of the Montreaux Treaty, Turkey secured control over the straits and the USSR became the major naval power in the Black Sea region. After Romania and Bulgaria joined the socialist camp after World War II, the region was under overwhelming Soviet influence. Turkey's joining NATO prevented the USSR's complete control over the region. During the Cold War, the Black Sea was divided by ideological lines. Turkey and Greece defended NATO's southern flank whereas USSR, Romania and Bulgaria belonged to the socialist camp. As it was divided between two rival military blocs, there was minimal political, economic and cultural interaction across the region. In such a politically and militarily tense atmosphere, the region remained closed to outer interaction.

The end of the Cold War enabled the Euro-Atlantic system to interact with the Black Sea states, creating a gradual shift towards the Pan-European political and economic space for the first time in history. In other words, the end of the Cold War meant freedom from the conceptual prison of the Cold War discourse to the Black Sea countries. However, this historical incident did not only mark the establishment of democracy, market economy and grounds for regional cooperation but also unleashed

¹⁰ Jean Dufourco, NATO Defense College and ISIS Paper, 1999.
http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/publications/op_10.pdf?&lang=en_us&output=json&session-id=81d4293dabb2b9f177357a5b655b59dd

the suppressed historical sources of ethnic, national and territorial conflicts.¹¹ The Black Sea region has been experiencing regional instability and comparative insecurity in the post-Cold War period due to ground-breaking systemic and domestic changes. On the systemic level, the unforeseen transition from the bipolar to a unipolar world has created a volatile international political system which falls short of engaging with the conflicts in ex-Soviet territorial space. On the domestic level, the end of communism, the weakening of Soviet institutions, establishment of opposition forces and pressures from separatism challenged the regional stability and security. The emergence of the newly independent littoral states –Ukraine and Georgia- and the completed independence of formerly Eastern bloc countries -Romania and Bulgaria- provided opportunities for cooperation on various issues.

Following the twin revolutions of 1989 and 1991, which led to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the USSR itself, the Euro-Atlantic community focused on anchoring and integrating Central and Eastern European countries stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. During the 1990's, the Black Sea basin “was far from being a priority on the Euro-Atlantic agenda. While the ‘Russia First’ policy aiming to tame Russia had been at the top of the US foreign policy agenda, the Europeans were overwhelmingly engaged with their new ex-communist neighbors and the Balkan wars.”¹²

After the break-up of the USSR in the early 1990s and the decrease of Russia's influence, Turkey's President Turgut Özal initiated a regional cooperation organization. BSEC was set up in 1992 and became a treaty-based regional economic organization in 1998. After an enthusiastic start, BSEC did not prove to be a complete success. Conflicts that appeared in the region after the end of Cold War shadowed the prospects for further regional cooperation. In addition, BSEC is not a political organization that could

¹¹ Mitat Çelikpala.2010. "Escalating rivalries and diverging interests: Prospects for stability and security in the Black Sea region." JSEBSS, 10:3, 287-302.

¹² Mustafa Aydın.2007. "Echoes of Özal's Vision." Bridge Magazine. <http://www.bridge-mag.com/>

serve to resolve the conflicts in the region. The region regained its strategic importance in the US and the EU's eyes after the 9-11 and 3-11 terrorist attacks. America's heightened interest in the region, the transatlantic alliance's relations with the opposition in former USSR countries, the push for more democratization, high level energy diplomacy and support for color revolutions were the highlighted policies of the second half of the 2000s in the region.¹³

Despite those developments, in the second half of the 2000s, Russian influence in the region grew again. Russia successfully backed pro-Russian political parties in the region such as in Ukraine, protected allies' interests such as Armenia and secured the de facto independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia by use of force. On the other hand, Turkey also raised its reservations about military involvement of the US in the region, notwithstanding it is a NATO member itself. Turkey and Russia opposed extending NATO's Operation Active Endeavor (OAE) activities to the Black Sea in 2006. While Russia's concerns were prevention of geostrategic influence by the US, Turkey's major concern was to prevent a revision of the 1936 Montreux Convention by any regional or international power.

The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia also showed the instable nature of the political and security structures in the region. Conflicts inherited from history and USSR policies, as well as the political contest to fill the vacuum created by the fall of the Soviet Union still threaten greater political and economic cooperation in the region. The region should play a greater role in Turkish foreign policy since its relations with the EU have cooled off, and Turkey can only prove its importance in the international system by showing its effects on the surrounding region.

Four General Principles for Turkey to Follow in the Region

Despite the difficult political background that has affected the Black Sea region in the last two decades, there are some policies that, if pursued persistently, may help Turkey bring about a positive transformation in the region.

¹³ Ibid.

The first of these policies entails Turkey's stronger involvement in BSEC projects. Currently, the BSEC focuses on 19 areas of cooperation among the member states' policy areas, spanning from trade and economic development to tourism and natural disasters management.¹⁴ Member states must focus on further developing the existing cooperation schemes instead of re-inventing the regional wheel of cooperation over and over again. As a founding member and advocate of cooperation in the region, Turkey's foreign policy must focus on improving BSEC cooperation projects and boosting the effect of BSEC in the region. More specifically, Turkey should focus a considerable part of its political and economic diplomacy to completing the following projects:

First, the *Black Sea Ring Highway*, long-awaited by all littoral states, must be strongly supported by Turkey. This project involves both the establishment of transportation networks and the harmonization of national regulations on trade, transportation and environmental protection. Increasing trade and tourism will not only contribute to the region's economy but also to its creation of a regional identity.

Second, Turkey must lead the initiatives related to maritime transportation in the region. Black Sea regionalism cannot be created and institutionalized without maritime transportation and cooperation. The sea is the most important geographical entity that binds all neighbors together and creates a region. The effective and economic use of maritime transportation must be provided by BSEC members to create higher levels of cooperation. Therefore, Turkey should be an ardent supporter of the '*Development of the Motorways of the Sea in the Black Sea Region*' initiative and technical cooperation.

Third, Turkey should promote *visa facilitation* policies for businesspeople in all BSEC member states. Turkey should expand the existing cooperation between some BSEC members such as Turkey, Albania and Moldova, and overcome obstacles to cooperation in this area induced by the Schengen system.

Improvements in transportation and infrastructure will contribute to increased trade and industrial relations in the region. To develop these relations further, Turkey

¹⁴ Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website: www.mfa.gov.tr/karadeniz-ekonomik-isbirligi-teskilati.

should also lead economic financing and development projects supported both by IOs such as the UNDP and Turkish financial institutions. Such projects need to involve feasibility reports on existing and new areas of cooperation that can be developed and possible resources that can be used to that end. Increasing the cooperation between the BSEC and the EU could play an important role in this context. As ‘Europe’s next shore’, the Black Sea region is very important for the EU in terms of political and economic development, as well as security concerns. The EU’s experience in regionalism and the economic resources devoted to the neighboring regions must be utilized. Turkey as a candidate country, along with member states Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, can create synergies between the neighboring regions.

Supporting these BSEC cooperation schemes must be the priority of Turkish foreign policy in the region. These policies, however, cannot be properly executed without the support of Russia, by far the most influential actor in the region. Therefore, the second general principle of Turkish foreign policy towards the WBSR should be to improve cooperation with Russia and prevent any condition that could provoke Russia in the region. Russia, despite its problematic relations with former USSR member states and transatlantic institutions, is the single most important actor that could either support regionalization or become an obstacle to it. Similarly, for Russia, Turkey could be either a locomotive of cooperation or an adversary preventing the advancement of Russian interests. Both countries need each other’s cooperation to pursue their interests in the Black Sea region. Therefore, cooperation through the BSEC and bilateral relations, the advancement of relations in the tourism, energy trade and construction sectors must be further advanced. New areas of economic cooperation must also be considered in sectors such as transportation, agriculture, banking and finance. Moreover, Turkey should find solutions which do not provoke Russian security in the region through bilateral and multilateral cooperation schemes. Especially concerning maritime security, Turkey must involve Russia in each initiative, as was the case with BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony. Any naval and other security arrangement that does not involve both countries will be ineffective.

Related to the second principle, namely to cooperate with Russia in the region, Turkey must also prevent the Black Sea region from becoming a great theater of power rivalry and instead offer a ‘Turkish alternative.’¹⁵ The EU and US’s increased interest in the region has both positive and negative consequences. As well as drawing attention to democratization and the promotion of market economies, Russian reaction to the ‘western intrusion’ may prevent cooperation in the region. Therefore, as a third general principle, Turkey should prevent competition between Russia and the West which might turn into a traditional great power rivalry and a series of conflicts. Such rivalry will certainly prevent improvements in political, economic and security-related cooperation. The Russia-Georgia war in 2008, for example, was perhaps an indirect result of the color revolutions and Russia’s reactions to them. Such increased tensions between the US and EU on one side and Russia on the other will only compromise the already fragile regional balance. To prevent such fallout, Turkey must have an evenhanded approach. While Turkey should not disregard its responsibilities and involvement in transatlantic institutions, such an approach also requires concerns over any aggressive intrusions into the region for narrow-minded national gains. Turkey should also defend democratization and the free market economic model without making it look like a competing alternative to Moscow’s interests. That is, Turkey should follow a via media policy to prevent a clash of these different camps in the region. Turkish policy makers must diplomatically create and maintain a careful balance in which smaller actors are protected against the fallout effects of great power rivalries. Turkey’s active role during and after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia is an example of active diplomacy and following such an approach in the region.

The last of the general principles Turkey should follow entails the prevention of interstate wars and military conflicts.¹⁶ After two decades of political and economic development since the end of Cold War, the August 2008 war showed that the Black Sea

¹⁵ Mustafa Aydın, 2009, “Geographical Blessing versus geopolitical curse: great power security agendas for the Black Sea region and a Turkish alternative,” *SEBSS*, 9:3, 271-285.

¹⁶ The debate about prevention of conflicts is adopted from the author’s own: Özgür Özdamar. 2010. “Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 10:3, September 2010, 341-359.

region appears to be quite unstable and insecure. Neither regional political cooperation nor traditional balancing acts could prevent the war. Even worse, the policy-makers should recognize that the so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ proved to be far from frozen, carrying great risks of turning into both interstate and intrastate wars. The US-EU alliance’s ambitions to penetrate the region and Russia’s strong resistance against such efforts have turned the region into a playground for great power politics. Under such circumstances, historical grievances and unresolved conflicts are likely to spark more violent conflicts. Military balance in the region favours Russia and Turkey. Yet, smaller powers seem to perceive resorting to the use of force as a tool to resolve conflicts between and within states. This perception was strengthened by the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, as well as the ineffectiveness of international institutions’ attempts to resolve the regional conflicts. Further interstate conflicts in the region are exacerbated by the protracted nature of conflicts, assertive Russian foreign policy involving the use of force, the lack of effective assistance from international and transatlantic institutions for conflict resolution and some regional actors’ militarization that is reflected in higher defence budgets. Providing security in the Black Sea region seems more difficult than at any other time since the end of the Cold War. Turkey must be aware of these risks and devise policies to minimize them. Turkey should make it clear that it will not favour the use of force between states or any state’s use of force on people. In addition, Turkey must contribute to the solution of regional conflicts such as between Russia and Georgia, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The mediator role Turkey has subscribed to in the Middle East and Africa should also be utilized to resolve conflicts in the Black Sea region.

In order to identify risks, Turkey must monitor military expenditure and activities, particularly by the actors involved in unresolved conflicts. Steady increases in military spending may represent plans to resolve conflicts by use of force. Turkey should cooperate with international disarmament institutions to monitor and intervene in arms races appearing in the region, such as between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Also, minor skirmishes at borders in conflict zones should be monitored carefully and stopped

immediately. These minor battles may create spill over effects that can turn into larger armed conflicts. More specifically, armament by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and its breakaway regions and border skirmishes in these areas must be controlled. Second, Russia's foreign and military policies must be considered carefully regarding the security issues and unresolved conflicts in the region. Russia has a stake in every unresolved conflict in the region and appears to defend these interests more ambitiously than a decade ago. Policies that will antagonize Russia are more likely to fail than succeed. Thoughts of NATO expansion into Ukraine and Georgia should be reconsidered. The most efficient way to deal with Russia may be through joint policy making in international organizations such as the BSEC and the OSCE. Third, international organizations must be provided with more resources to help resolve regional conflicts and prevent militarization. To that aim, national governments with interests in the region should choose to support multilateral policy-making through IGOs. Support behind the OSCE Minsk Group by France, Russia and the US is an example of such efforts. Finally, further regionalization efforts should be fostered to create and maintain a culture of cooperation in the region. Economic and trade policy cooperation via the BSEC platform should be advanced to create multi-layered interdependencies among regional actors. Such dependencies will naturally help resolve conflicts in the long-run and advance cooperation in the security sector in the Black Sea region.

Conclusion

The Black Sea region has been going through a great transformation since the end of the Cold War. This transformation will perhaps be the greatest in its history and will bring political stability and prosperity to its inhabitants. Yet, the process appears to be complicated, difficult and unpredictable. This discussion paper argues that Turkey, as one of the two regional hegemonic powers in the region, must focus on 'inclusive multilateral cooperation schemes' to promote peace, stability and economic development in the region. More specifically, Turkey should place the Black Sea regionalization efforts at the heart of its foreign policy and pursue them consistently. To

that end, Turkey must strive to mobilize the BSEC. With newly emerging capitalist classes hungry for exports, Turkey's economic boom must be spread to the region through the BSEC. Politically, Turkey must be aware of the 'Russian factor' and include it in all its initiatives to prevent confrontation. Therefore, Turkey also must act as a balance between the so-called transatlantic push and Russia, preventing a great power rivalry in the region and protecting smaller actors' interests. Monitoring and preventing interstate war through diplomatic initiatives by Turkey will also contribute to regional development. The Black Sea is perhaps the only region where Turkey can be the major initiator and executor of the main regionalization efforts. It is an opportunity for Turkish foreign policy that cannot be missed.