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Turkey and Black Sea Security

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For Turkey, the Black Sea was associated with the Soviet threat during the Cold War, and in this regard, a joint Turkish-American “policy of containment” was pursued. The chain of US and NATO military facilities, dislocated along the entire Turkish Black Sea coastline, focused on neutralizing this threat.



US and NATO military facilities on Turkish territory during the Cold War

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent pursuit of a more independent foreign policy by Turkey, Ankara radically changed its perception of threats. It can be said that the interests of the West and Turkey in the Black Sea sometimes not only fail to coincide, but, in many cases, contradict each other.

In addition to its emotional connection to the Black Sea, once known as the "Ottoman Lake", Turkey has the longest coastline on the Sea and, most importantly, controls the gateway connecting the Black Sea to the outside world (via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits). This puts Ankara in a unique position in relation to the Black Sea.

At this stage, we can identify three main issues that are important for a better understanding of Turkey's perspective on Black Sea security.

Turkey and the Montreux Convention

‘The Montreux Convention on the Regime of the Straits,’ signed on July 20, 1936, confirms Turkey’s control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits.¹ This issue in Ankara stands at the level of recognition of sovereignty. Therefore, adhering to its terms is always a sensitive point for Turkey.



The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits

The Montreux Convention also regulates the transit of warships in the straits. This convention guarantees the free movement of civilian ships during peacetime.²

¹ Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montreux_Convention_Regarding_the_Regime_of_the_Straits

² Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montreux_Convention_Regarding_the_Regime_of_the_Straits

The Montreux Convention

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| Consists of 29 articles, 4 annexes, and 1 protocol. |
| Articles II-VII deal with the transit of trade ships |
| Articles VIII-XXII concerns the transit of warships. <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Non-Black Sea countries wishing to send a ship to the Black Sea must notify the Turkish side eight days prior;- The tonnage of the ship should not exceed 10,000 tons;³- The total tonnage of a non-Black Sea country's vessels in the Black Sea should not exceed 30,000 tons (in special cases, 45,000 tons);- Ships can remain in the Black Sea for no more than 21 days.⁴ |

As such, the Montreux Convention significantly restricts the accessibility of non-Black Sea military forces into the Black Sea.

Precisely for these reasons, many now point to the fact that the Montreux Convention was created in the light of the realities of the 1930s, making it irrelevant today and in need of revision. However, due to the fact that the signatory states of the Convention and their legal successors have different interests in the Black Sea, a thorough discussion on its reform is hard to initiate.

The United States is also well aware that the strict conditions of the Montreux Convention are a serious impediment to an American military presence in the Black Sea.⁵

The problematic nature of this convention has already manifested itself many times over. The clearest example was the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, during which the US sought to bring its two hospital ships into the Black Sea to help Georgia. However, the total tonnage of these ships exceeded 69,000 tons, and for that reason, Turkey did not issue a permit for their transit.

It should be noted that in this case, both Washington (demanding passage) and Moscow (with a request to block passage) put serious pressure on Ankara. In the end, Turkey chose not to violate the terms of the Montreux Convention, and instead of these two large ships, three relatively small American warships entered the Black Sea, ultimately delivering said humanitarian aid to Georgian ports.⁶

A few years ago, Turkey announced its intention to implement the grand and ambitious project 'Kanal Istanbul,' which envisaged, parallel to the Bosphorus Strait, the construction of a 45 km

³ http://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/montro-bogazlar-raporu-2014.pdf

⁴ Dilek Barlas, *Etatism and Diplomacy in Turkey*, pp. 166–170. BRILL, 1998.

⁵ Jason, Ditz (16 February 2017). "NATO Seeks Further Buildup in Black Sea, Eastern Europe". *Antiwar.com*. Retrieved 13 November 2019.

⁶ Gokcicek, Bulent, The Montreux Convention regarding the Turkish Straits and its importance after the South Ossetia War, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/4858/09Mar_Gokcicek.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y p. 48-49

artificial canal between the Black and Marmara seas. This would give Ankara more independence in terms of controlling access to the Black Sea.⁷



The Kanal Istanbul Project

Former Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said in January 2018 that Kanal Istanbul would not be subject to the Montreux Convention regime.⁸

A similar statement was later made by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However, without elaborating, the President added that they would "decide upon the matter."⁹

Clearly, these statements provoked a sharply negative reaction from the Russian side,¹⁰ as the Montreux Convention drastically limits the military presence of other countries in the Black Sea, a factor which is particularly important for Russia after the annexation of Crimea¹¹ and Russia's occupation of two Georgian regions.

⁷ "Erdogan's Dream, Istanbul's Nightmare", en.qantara.de/content/the-istanbul-canal-project-erdogans-dream-istanbuls-nightmare Retrieved December 27, 2020.

⁸ Gone, Paul "Moscow Worried about Ankara's Plans for Canal Bypassing the Bosphorus Straits", jamestown.org/program/moscow-worried-about-ankaras-plans-for-canal-bypassing-bosphorus-straits/ Retrieved December 27, 2020.

⁹ Ali Tuygan, The Montreux Convention: Russia's Perspective, <https://edam.org.tr/en/the-montreux-convention-russias-perspective>

¹⁰ Ali Kucukgocmen and Jonathan Spicer, "Factbox: Erdogan pushes 'crazy' Istanbul canal dream despite opposition", December 27, 2019, Retrieved December 27, 2020. reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN1YV15U

¹¹ Alexy Zender, Is there a possibility of leaving the Montreux Convention?, <https://behorizon.org/is-there-a-possibility-of-leaving-the-montreux-convention>

There are many other ambiguities in this matter. For example, the Montreux Convention applies to both straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles). However, if the new artificial canal is built, it will only replace the Bosporus Strait. As such, it is still unclear what will happen vis-à-vis the Dardanelles Strait.

Turkish-Russian relations and the Black Sea

The main questions in Turkish-Russian relations are to what extent the sides will be able to align to each other's interests on a global scale, and how this will affect the various dimensions (including that of the Black Sea).

In the context of strained relations with the West, Turkey, from time to time, has to cozy up to Russia and other strong political poles (Beijing, Tehran, etc.), a fact most clearly reflected in trade and economic relations. Recently, these links were also reflected in the purchase of air defense weapons (for example, Russian-made S-400 missile systems), which has led to significant problems in Turkish-Western relations.¹²

Although Turkey and Russia often cooperate on various issues, these ties are still tactical rather than strategic. The reason is simple: Ankara and Moscow have different long-term goals that contradict each other's interests.

It is because of these opposing interests that the parties often take radically different positions on a number of important international issues, be it Syria, Kosovo, Crimea, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region, Transdniestria, or others.¹³

The main point of contention between Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea is indisputably the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow considers its own territory, while Turkey views it as part of Ukraine. Turkey rightly believes that the rights of the Crimean Tatars, who are historically, linguistically, and culturally close to them, will be best protected precisely under the Ukrainian state, and thus the military balance in the Black Sea will not shift to the Russian advantage.

¹² Zurab Batiashvili, Turkish Foreign Policy in the Context of Regional Security, <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2747>

¹³ Zurab Batiashvili, Turkish Foreign Policy in the Context of Regional Security, <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2747>



The Turkish and Black Sea airspace is covered by Russian missile systems deployed in Crimea

At the same time, the particular geopolitical location of Crimea after its annexation by Russia has a negative impact on Turkish air security, as the Russian missiles stationed there can reach Turkish airspace and hinder the safe operation of Turkish military aircraft over the Black Sea.

There are also other issues wherein the interests of Russia and Turkey on the Black Sea diverge: the issue of Georgia's membership in NATO, the occupied territories of Georgia, and Transnistria, among them.

The subject of where Turkish and Russian interests coincide relates to non-Black Sea countries' military accessibility to the Black Sea. Turkey, which has the strongest navy among the NATO member states in the Black Sea, considers this region not in the NATO, but mainly in the national context. That is why it is always suspicious, and often even jealous, of NATO initiatives related to the Black Sea.¹⁴

¹⁴ Luke Coffey, No time for NATO complacency in the Black Sea, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/no-time-nato-complacency-black-sea>

Turkey and NATO in the Black Sea

The tense relations between Turkey and the West do not contribute to the strengthening of NATO in the Black Sea. However, despite its specific attitude towards the Black Sea, Turkey also has matters that inevitably require cooperation with the West.

The issues of their common interest also concern the Black Sea, but more in the context of bilateral relations. For example, on February 9 of this year, a joint military exercise was held in the Black Sea with the participation of Turkish and US naval and air forces,¹⁵ which was naturally followed by a protest from Russia.¹⁶

In this case, the timing of the aforementioned exercises is important. Since Turkey is currently trying a rapprochement with the West, military exercises and other joint activities on the Black Sea are relatively easy to conduct.

It is still unclear how the relation between Turkey and the West (and, above all, Turkey and the US) will unfold in the near future, and the possible joint activities of Turkey and the West on the Black Sea will largely depend on it.

So far, what we have seen is more than a month passing since Biden's inauguration, and yet no telephone conversation between the US and Turkish presidents, which is rather an odd precedent in bilateral relations. Instead, Washington has made statements calling for the release from prison of Osman Kavala, an opposition philanthropist arrested in Turkey years ago.¹⁷

Although the Turkish side disregarded this call from Washington, it is expected that similar rhetoric from across the ocean will intensify, possibly attracting the endorsement of Europeans as well. This will certainly not help to improve the Turkish-Western relations, more so when, for some time now, the issue of Western sanctions has been hanging over Turkey like a Sword of Damocles.

Conclusions

- Turkey's position on Black Sea security should be assessed in the context of Turkey-West and Turkey-Russia relations;

¹⁵ Ali Murat Alhas, Turkey, US conduct joint maritime drill in Black Sea, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/turkey-us-conduct-joint-maritime-drill-in-black-sea/2140534>

¹⁶ U.S., Turkey conduct joint navy drills in Black Sea, Russia protests, <https://ahvalnews.com/naval-exercises/us-turkey-conduct-joint-navy-drills-black-sea-russia-protests>

¹⁷ US demands Turkey release philanthropist Osman Kavala, <https://egyptindependent.com/us-demands-turkey-release-philanthropist-osman-kavala>

- The further Turkey distances itself from Russia, the closer it gets to the West, and, conversely, if Ankara distances itself from the West, it will move closer to Moscow. Therefore, having Turkey as an ally of the West is vital for Georgia;
- Even if Ankara moves closer to the West in the near future, it is hardly conceivable that it will reach a point where Turkey can easily change its peculiar attitude towards the prospect of increasing the presence of external forces in the Black Sea (including, above all, the US and NATO);
- Also unlikely is a joint initiative of the West and Turkey to revise the Montreux Convention;
- Obviously, the Montreux Convention is a serious impediment to the military reconstruction of NATO and the West in general in the Black Sea, but its revision is not on the agenda in the near future. It is therefore advisable to start thinking about and discussing alternative projects;
- One such alternative might be a rotational patrol of the navies of NATO member states, which also enter the Black Sea ports of Georgia and Ukraine. This would improve the security environment in the Black Sea. Serious work has to be done in this regard with NATO member states (and especially with Turkey).