

BLACK SEA, A POTENTIAL FRICTION VENUE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST: TURKEY HOLDS THE KEY TO THE REGION

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At the Warsaw Summit of 9 July 2016, NATO heads of state and government for the first time after the end of the cold war period directly mentioned the Russias aggressive actions, including provocative military activities and defined these acts as damaging the Euro-Atlantic security.[1] After referring to Russias destabilizing actions and policies including the ongoing illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and provocative military activities near NATO borders, including in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea, they announced their decision to enhance defense posture by forward presence in the eastern part of the Alliance. In this context, in addition to Baltic Sea region, they stressed the evolving challenges and deteriorated security situation in the Black Sea region and stated their intention to support regional efforts by Black Sea littoral states aimed at ensuring security and stability.

In fact, the game-changer event for NATO and the West in the Black Sea region is the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Up until then NATO has looked mainly to Baltic states and Kaliningrad region for Russian military activities and focused bulk of its efforts in northeastern Europe. Transatlantic policymakers often overlooked the Black Seas importance and this regions critical role in energy and commerce between Europe, Central Asia, Turkey, and Russia.[2]

In fact, the Black Sea region forms the key intersection linking Russia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Access to and from Black Sea is vital for all littoral states end nearby neighbors and a substantial military presence contributes to projecting power into several adjacent regions. For this reason, Russia had endeavored to establish exclusive control of the Black Sea more than two centuries and waged numerous wars to control the Bosporus Straits and the Dardanelles.[3]

Black Sea and the Turkish straits of Bosporus and the Dardanelles are extremely important for the historical Russian quest for warm water ports since the Peter the Great.

A glance at the map shows that after nearly two centuries of effort, the maritime conditions for Russia is still disadvantageous. Although Russia is one of the predominant power of Eurasian Continent, geography has not been friendly to her in term of access to the oceans and the seas. While the other prominent powers of the West like the US, the UK and France have free access to all the oceans and the seas, Russia on the other hand land-locked in the south of Europe especially because of the Turkish straits, partially ice-locked in the northern Europe in the Baltic Sea region and western Europe blocks her entry into the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean. In addition to Europe, she does not have access to the Arabian Sea because of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In the East, China and Korea separate her from the South China Sea. Her sole warm water port Vladivostok in the far east is largely neutralized by the strait of Tsushima which is under the control of South Korea and Japan.[4]

Russian strategists have over the last two hundred years sought to remedy this disadvantage and drawing upon the thinking of Peter the Great considered that acquiring warm water ports where the water does not freeze in the winter is the best option for neutralizing this geographical disadvantage.

Russia has intervened militarily in two countries in the past three years: Ukraine and Syria. It should not come as a surprise that both countries are home to Russian naval bases in Sevastopol and Tartus. Both are warm water ports. The city and naval base of Sevastopol is on the Crimean Peninsula. The city remained part of Russia until its transfer to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1978. Six years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia renounced territorial claims to the city in exchange for a 20-year lease of the warm-water naval base. The base houses Russias Black Sea Fleet and Mediterranean Task Force, the latter of which was reestablished in 2013. The base helps Russia project power in the Black Sea region and into the Mediterranean.[5] Tartus lies on Syrias western coast and has had a Russian naval presence since 1971. The naval base in Tartus is the sole Russian naval base beyond the Turkish straits.

At this point we should remember the new Russian Naval Doctrine to 2020 which was first approved in 2001. President Putin approved the revised version of the document in July 2015. Document is a comprehensive look and revision of Russian naval goals and strategy. The ultimate goal is to restore the Russian Navy as a blue water force which is capable of operating globally, essentially across the deep waters of ocean seas.[6]

The document outlines a plan to have a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean as well as increasing the existing Russian presence in the Black Sea, Atlantic, and the Arctic oceans. As regard to Crimea and Sevastopol, the revised document states that focus should go, inter alia, toward improving the personnel and the structure of the Black Sea Fleet and developing its infrastructure in Crimea and off the coast of the Krasnodar territory. The revised document also focused on creating an A2/AD (anti-access, area denial) zone toward NATO in the Black Sea. Especially this part of the revised document considered as a growing threat to Alliances southeastern flank. In this vein, it is asserted that by dominating the Black Sea, Russia is seeking to project its naval power outward toward Central Europe, the entire Balkan Peninsula and more importantly to Eastern Mediterranean.[7]

It is also claimed that Russia, during the Barrack Obama administration clearly benefited from relative Western neglect of this strategic region and made a great leap forward to lock the basin under its supervision. Per these assessments, neglect of the Black Sea security flank by the West and Russias successful capture or neutralization of the eastern and northern littoral of the Black Sea region have increasingly exposed new NATO and the EU members Bulgaria and Romania to Russia pressure. Amid these developments, Romania urged NATO to strengthen its eastern flank and proposed a regular multinational naval patrol in the Black Sea. Romania also proposed to create a permanent alliance fleet in the Black Sea.[8]

Romanian proposal of regular multinational naval flotilla might include ships from NATO countries bordering the Black Sea, namely Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, but also from Germany, Italy and the US. This proposal did not get the support of Bulgaria. It is reported in the press that Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov said in June 2016 that he wants to see sailboats, yachts, tourist in the Black Sea, not the frigates.[9]

As mentioned above, during the NATO Warsaw Summit in July 2016, important decisions were taken concerning the NATOs Eastern flank in response to Russian ambitious moves. The adopted concrete measures are relating to the NATOs northeastern members of Poland and the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. For the rest of the Eastern flank, despite clear reference to deteriorated security situation in the region, it seems that the concrete decisions concerning the Black Sea were postponed. There was only a reference to support for the regional efforts of the littoral countries. There was not a mention to Romanian proposal for creating a NATO Black Sea fleet, most probably because of the Bulgarian decision to reject the Romanian initiative.[10]

Nevertheless, 16 warships, a submarine (Turkish submarine Dolunay) and 10 warplanes along with some 2800 troops from Romania, Bulgaria, Canada, Spain, Turkey, and the US took part in exercise Sea Shield 2017 between 1st and 11th February which was hosted by Romania. Very recently during the NATO Defense Ministers meeting of 16 February 2017 security in the Black Sea region was discussed. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that presence of NATO presence in the region was examined at the meeting. He said that based on a multinational framework brigade in Romania, it was decided to complement strengthened regional posture in the air and on the land. In this framework eight Allies have committed to provide brigade staff and five Allies have committed land and air forces for training and air policing. It was also agreed an increased NATO naval presence in the Black Sea for enhanced training, exercise and situational awareness, and a maritime coordination function for Standing Naval Forces when operating with other Allied forces in the Black Sea region. As the NATO Secretary General mentioned at the press conference, these measures are announced to show that Allies stand together, united and strong.[11]

From the viewpoints of NATO (or the western countries in general terms) and the Russia the Black Sea security has two dimensions. First one is the security in the Black Sea itself and security of its littoral countries. Second one is the historical ambitions of Russia to project its military power to adjacent regions like Mediterranean and Middle East by way

of its naval capabilities. For the first dimension, NATO (the West) may take measures by sending troops to new NATO member countries like Romania and Bulgaria or deploy anti-missile systems in these countries. In addition to this, if the NATO and the Western countries may have a free naval access to the Black Sea, they would more easily constrain the Russia in the region.

The second dimension of the issue has more strategic weight than the first one. If Russia cannot manage to send her naval force to the Mediterranean through the Turkish Straits of Bosporus and the Dardanelles, it would not be easy for her to project her military power to the adjacent critical regions like Mediterranean and the Middle East. Hence, from the strategic perspective presence of Russian navy and military power in the warm waters of Mediterranean is of great importance for the NATO and the West. In this sense, the Turkish straights of the Bosporus and the Dardanelles are of crucial importance.

Signed on 20 July 1936, The Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits gives Turkey full control over the Turkish Straights, guarantees the free passage of civilian vessels in peace time and regulates the passage of military vessels under the strict control of Turkey. The Black Sea countries cannot pass warships solely designed to carry airplane. They can pass submarines if they are joining their base in the Black Sea for the first time after their construction. As far as warships are concerned, they can pass with the advance notification of 8 days through diplomatic channels.

As to the non-Black Sea countries, they cannot pass aircraft carriers, submarines to the Black Sea. They can pass warships, but aggregate displacement of the foreign warships in the Black Sea may not exceed 45.000 tones and they cannot stay in the Black Sea more than 21 days. They cannot have more than 9 ships at the same time. The passage of these ships is subject to the 15 days prior notification. In addition to all these restrictions, Turkey has exclusive rights in time of war as belligerent party and the passage of warships are left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish Government. If she considers herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war, she has the similar right for the passage of the warships.

As a conclusion, it could be said that Turkey holds the key to Black Sea security. It is an objective fact that especially after the annexation of the Crimea the military balance in the Black Sea region shifted considerably in favor of Russia. This trend of growing Russian military influence in the region is very likely to continue in the coming years. It seems not easy for the NATO and the EU to reverse this development. Although the possibilities that the tensions in the Black Sea will escalate in an open conflict is rather slim, it is important for the NATO and the EU, as a first step, to balance the military capability of Russia as a deterrent for preventing the future serious conflicts. Turkey has the key role to contain the Russian military ambitions not only as the main regional naval power in the Black Sea basin, but holding the key to the Turkish straits of Bosporus and the Dardanelles. Turkeys NATO membership and her prospective membership in the EU is a great asset for the West and especially for the EU to keep the balance at the region.

**PHOTO: https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B_bMrCvU8AASi-h.jpg*

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