

Geopolitics of the Black Sea

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Abstract

Geopolitical competition occurs among great powers for control over territory, natural resources and other important geographical positions or places (such as ports and harbours, canals, river systems, etc.) Recent developments show that Black Sea is a region of opportunities and challenges. Is the Black Sea an area of contention or cooperation? This question is the main research question of this article. The attractiveness of these opportunities pushes many international actors including the NATO, EU, and US to get involved in the politics of the region despite the challenges existing in the region. The Black Sea constitutes a region where the interests of four geopolitical entities intersect, namely, the EU with its “Neighbourhood Policy of the EU and new EU countries in the Black Sea”, the USA in search of a gateway to Eurasia, “Broader Middle East”, and North Africa, the NATO with 3 Allied countries in the Black Sea, the Russian Federation, and lastly Turkey; all having potential contradictory geopolitical interests which may lead to conflictual situations in this area. In this scope, firstly, dynamics of geopolitics will be elaborated. Secondly, history of the Black Sea will be reviewed, thirdly the Western interest in the Black Sea region will be discussed. Finally, the balance between the regional actors and western actors in the Black Sea will be considered.

Key words: *Geopolitics, European Union, Black Sea, European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, Russia, NATO.*

Introduction

Geopolitics can be defined as interplay among countries, empires which are in a distinct geographical setting. Ever since the beginning of time, geography has been the determining function of geopolitical positioning, whether it be land strength or sea strength. If a country is isolated or an isle country, it is more likely that its armada will develop better, and so on, a country located on a continent is likely to be oriented towards land. In some circumstances, sea and land orientation develop together, this can be seen in countries, which are located on a landmass, but also have shores to ocean. The geopolitical position of a country is not the utter definer of its orientation. A country with sea orientation can be observed to have strengthened its land power and vice versa for a country on a landmass. (Sempa, 2002).

Geographical position—where a country is located relative to other countries—is more important than size. The study of world history shows, for example, that countries located wholly or mostly in the Northern Hemisphere have had the greatest impact on world politics. Until the twentieth century, world politics was dominated by countries located on Eurasia, its offshore islands, and Africa, north of the Sahara. For many centuries, the Western and

Southern Hemispheres were little more than the objects of Eurasian colonial powers. Other factors that affect a country's ability to play a significant role on the world stage include population, economics, technology, military power, and character of government. Those factors, however, unlike geography, are subject to change over time. Geography is constant, though its impact can change. Technological and scientific advances can alter the effects of distance, topography, and climate. In the twentieth century, the centrepiece of U.S. foreign policy was to prevent a hostile power or alliance of powers from dominating Europe or East Asia (containment).

Geopolitical dynamics in The Black Sea region, a “security complex”

The Black Sea region defined as the land- and seascape from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from the Ukrainian and Russian steppe to Anatolia is once again squarely within the field of view of European policymakers. The European Union (EU) and NATO now border the Black Sea on the west. Turkey, an EU accession country and NATO member, borders it to the south. Members of the Council of Europe and two NATO aspirants border it on the north and east. A region that a decade ago was on the far edge of Europe's consciousness.(King, 2004)

Oil and gas have become strategic weapons, with the latest Russian blockade on gas supplies to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova commonly regarded as the first step in a new energy-based real politic form. In the region, too many "frozen conflicts" have been aggravated following the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving an unresolved residue of land disputes, weakened governments, inadequate institutions, corruption, minority issues, and growing tension as an asymmetric danger of immigration, illegal immigration, arms transfers and drugs.(Pascu, 2006). In terms of geopolitical dynamics, the Black Sea region today represents a “security complex” with a strong intersection of interests, often of a mutually contradictory nature, of a number of regional and great powers, but also of various non-state actors. The secondary lines of confrontation (Russia vs. NATO, Russia vs. Georgia, Azerbaijan vs. Armenia, and Turkey vs. Armenia) and may well significantly shape the geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea region in the days to come.

Black Sea History

From a geopolitical point of view, the historically and culturally rich Black Sea region has witnessed the intersection of European and Asian great empires' interests to dominate the regions' maritime routes, and their ambitions to control this strategically important juncture. The region has been at the crossroads of different civilizations.

The Byzantines, Ottomans and eventually Russians have established some legacy about being the garden of one country or another across history; that being said, the profound geopolitical reforms as of the end of the Cold War have resulted in an entirely new configuration in the Black Sea region. In other respects, for the first time since ancient times, a genuinely pluralist global culture has arisen around the Black Sea. This increases hope for new stability in the region, along with the rise of national organizations proficient enough to compensate for the fundamental flaws of wider global mutual security contracts.(Aydın, 2005)”

The Black Sea region is neither possible nor desirable. It is hence recommended to abstain from defining the ‘Black Sea region' definitely. The geographic collaboration should operate on the basis of functional relationships (Manoli, 2011).

Lord Palmerston famously remarked that nations have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, only permanent interests. Geopolitics help statesmen determine their country's interests, and help them distinguish between enduring and transient interests. Those interests can, of course, change over time among the wider Black Sea region, which includes the littoral states of Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In history, the states that had control over the Turkish Straits were all imperial powers. This has deterred extra-regional powers from aiming to establish their naval forces in the Black Sea to use it for their own strategic interests. In other words, as long as the passages through the Turkish Straits were ruled by a stable regime, the Black Sea has remained as the "Water of Peace". Today, this kind of regime is established by the Montreux Convention of 1936. As commonly known, this Convention precludes extra regional powers from establishing permanent naval forces in the Black Sea by imposing limits on battleships with regard to their tonnage, number and the duration of their stay in the Black Sea, while it sets up a fully liberalised passage regime for merchant vessels.

The Georgian war of 2008 and the political crisis of 2014 in Ukraine, followed by a referendum in Crimea have changed the pattern of post-Soviet states drifting toward EU and NATO influence and away from Russia. The 2008-2014 developments in the wider Black Sea region brought it back to the military-strategic map of Russia-Turkey and Russia-NATO relations. However, the newly emerging Russian and Turkish interest in the Black Sea was not purely military and geopolitical in nature. The U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on Russia after 2014 and Russia's aggravated relations with Ukraine made Russia turn to Turkey in its search for wider international support and alternative transit routes for Russian oil and gas to Europe, bypassing Ukraine, thus adding a political-economic dimension to Russian-Turkish interaction in the Black Sea region.

Such developments dramatically coincided with the declining safety conditions throughout the Black Sea region across the 1990s and 2000s. General understanding back then was that the competition between both of the world superpowers, the U.S. and as well as its probable rival, China, was gradually shifting the density of geopolitical rivalry to the economic powerhouse of the new world, Asia-Pacific. First, Russia's growing unrest with the EU and NATO over their "mutual neighbourhood" in the Caucasus and Ukraine and second, the unimagined growth of DAESH in the Middle East, in addition with the safety and geopolitical parameters that followed have reshaped the geopolitical value of the Black Sea area.(SHLYKOV, 2018). The current competition between the Russian-led integration project of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the EU, which are poorly reconcilable with one another, as the Ukrainian crisis demonstrated, merely added a geo-economic dividing line to the region.

Western interest in the Black Sea

There are major oil and gas reserves in the Black Sea itself, but they are suppressed by those nearby Caspian Sea. These reserves have become a strategic focal point for European States. The Black Sea-Caspian region is critical because it connects not just to central and western Europe but through the Danube first and then to the Rhine, to Russia and to Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that once made up the Soviet Union, to the Middle East and, most significantly, to central Asia. The region is on the road between the oil and gas suppliers and the western customers in the Caspian and Central Asian. The region is both a stepping-stone and a shield for Europe against by the asymmetric threats that could emerge in those three regions, in politico-military sense. This has culminated in the development in the region of a complex oil and gas transport infrastructure. To Western energy markets, both as a source and as a supply path, Black Sea and Caspian countries become more important. The current question is, though, what is the sum of "investment" European States will have to make in order to guarantee the secure use and transport of their energy resources in the area? (Pascu, 2006) In a workshop on this subject, a report funded by US European Command (EUCOM) on 22 March 2019, showed that the UK, France and Germany concentrated more on current political issues including Brexit, migration and the stability of conflict zones in the Middle East and in Africa than on the problems of countries in the Southeast of Europe. (Flanagan & Chindea, 2019). Germany is a crucial ally for Russia—it seems to prove the point that has been chosen for favourable gas supplies from different pipelines. In reality, some analysts were compelled to claim that Russia is convening its new behaviour in international politics specifically in the Black Sea and Caspian regions. (Pascu, 2006).

Multilaterally, in 2004, the EU initiated its European Neighbourhood Policy, including in it, among others, such post-Soviet states as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 became members of the European Union. These six countries also became a part of the EU's Eastern Partnership program in 2008.

NATO's 1994 Partnership for Peace (PfP) program aimed at building stronger security cooperation ties with post-Soviet states, and the European ex-members of the communist block seemed to be able to downplay the old military- strategic rivalry patterns in the Black Sea region. In 2004, Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO. Turkey's long-lasting membership in NATO could have potentially reinforced the influence of this alliance in the region.

Regional actors in the Black Sea

By the early 18th century, the Russian and the Ottoman empires had expanded geographically so that they directly collided with each other in this part of the world. Not surprisingly, they engaged in an intermittent struggle for dominance in the Black Sea region and for control over the straits, nowadays known as the Turkish Straits (İstanbul Strait and Çanakkale Strait), which provide direct access from the Black Sea to the Aegean and Mediterranean.

“The underlying factors for this are the semi-closed sea character of the Black Sea and the fact that the only access to open seas is through the Turkish Straits. Consequently, the control of the maritime transport requires the control of Istanbul. However, historically, the only way to control Istanbul was to lay a siege from land, rather than a battle in the sea. This reason has kept the Black Sea maritime area isolated from military conflicts. In Turkey’s security concept of the Black Sea, the maritime domain and the land of the countries in the region are treated separately. In a broader sense, twelve countries form the Organisation of the BSEC¹, but only six of these countries are littoral states. The problems and challenges these two areas (land and maritime) harbour are distinct from each other in nature and scale; hence, they each require separate frameworks for solution. If the clear distinction between these two dimensions is not taken into account, defining and analysing the challenges and needs of the Black Sea, and developing the best way and means to cope with these challenges in a cooperative manner would become even harder”.(Karadeniz, 2007).

In this “shared geography,” Russia and Turkey represent “the leading powers with significant resources” and deep “historical, cultural, and economic ties with parts of this geography,” which give them “comparative advantages in the pursuit of resolving key issues in their neighbourhood.”Both countries have numerous interests in this neighbourhood, ranging from economic and energy cooperation to security interaction and cultural interrelations. After centuries-long rivalry between the Russian and Ottoman empires and afterwards during the Cold War period, Ankara and Moscow became closer following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Security and regional strategic balance, then economic cooperation and, finally, energy and infrastructural projects are the key geopolitical dynamics between Turkey and Russia.

Gas is being delivered under the Black Sea through the Blue Stream project between Russia and Turkey, which was built in 2003, thus raising Turkey's reliance on Russian gas from 66% to 80% of its overall gas needs.(Pascu, 2006).

For Turkey, the Black Sea is also an area of traditional geopolitical and economic interests connecting it to the wider reaches of central Eurasia.

Conclusion

The Black Sea region can be defined as an area taking attention of the coastal states in the Black Sea and international actors having diverse and competing interests related to the region. The attractiveness of these interests pushes the EU and the NATO to get involved in the politics of the region despite the challenges existing in the region. Russia has a tendency to see this involvement as an action against its interests in the region since 18th century. Thanks to Montreux Convention, Black Sea maritime area is isolated from military conflicts. In Turkey’s security concept of the Black Sea, the maritime domain and the land of the countries in the region are treated separately.

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¹<http://www.bsec-organization.org/>

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Turkey is an effective and important regional trust broker with its bilateral and multilateral agreements and its close relations with Black Sea region countries.

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