

What Should Turkey Do to Stabilise the Black Sea Region?

Özgür Özdamar¹

Executive summary

With the end of Cold War and the attacks of 11 September 2001, the Black Sea region has been at the intersection of three global players' respective regional points of view. These powers and their approaches are the Russian Federation and its Near Abroad Policy (NAP), the EU and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and the U.S. and its Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) and the Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR) policy. The current destabilisation of the region's status quo as has happened in the form of the Ukrainian crisis is due to EU-Russian rivalry and their approaches to the region in the forms, respectively, of the EU's Eastern Partnership and Russia's Near Abroad Policy. I propose four foreign policy options for Turkey to pursue stability in the Black Sea region. These are: advancement of the frameworks laid out by the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC); development of existing bilateral co-operation with Russia in sectors such as energy and as well as expanding into other possible fields such as security; inclusion of Russia in all multilateral plans of action in the Black Sea region while balancing the great power rivalries and serving as mediator in the regional conflicts. Given the low likelihood of EU membership for Turkey and international and Transatlantic institutions'

¹ Dr. Özgür Özdamar is Director of Fortuna Consulting|Political & Economic Forecasting. He is lecturing at the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University.

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

poor conflict resolution record, these options are the optimal policy choices for Turkey in the region. Turkey should not take sides in the east-west conflict in the region but should rather act as a “balancer” for regional stability.

Introduction

Labelled a “passive geography” that lies on the outskirts of three major power blocs – the Russian Federation, the European Union (EU), and the Republic of Turkey – the Black Sea region’s status within global players’ geopolitical and geo-economic reckonings has undergone transformations towards a region that has seen increased conflict since the 1990s.² There have been two factors behind this development. The first factor is the end of the Cold War where the power gap produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union has paved the way for a politico-economic and a military Euro-Atlantic presence in the region. This was exemplified by the incorporation of Romania and Bulgaria into NATO and the EU, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia³.

The second factor is the September 11 attacks that have expanded the focus of U.S. national security projections into the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA), including the Black Sea.

² Özgür Özdamar, “The Black Sea Region in the New Turkish Foreign Policy”, *EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series*, 2011, p. 5. Mustafa Aydın, “The Commission of the Black Sea: A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region”, in: Valeriya Klymenko (ed.), *Enhancing Security in the Black Sea Region and Prospects for the Turkish-Ukrainian Cooperation*, Kyiv: Razumkov Centre, 2011, p. 23.

³ Özgür Özdamar, “Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region”, in: *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, September 2010, p. 342. Özdamar, “The Black Sea Region”, p. 3.

This picture has been worsened by Russia increasingly seeing a threat in the expansion of a Euro-Atlantic presence in an environment where energy security was prioritised, as well as by the continuing frozen conflicts in Abkhazia, Ajaria, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria, while challenges in the post-Soviet littoral states to build functioning market economy infrastructure and viable state mechanisms created a window of opportunity for external influences⁴. Therefore, starting with the Russia-Georgia War of 2008, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and the armed conflicts between the government and separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, the stability and balance of power in the Black Sea region have been further disturbed.

These turns of events have had three ramifications: (1) the process of democratisation and economic liberalisation in the Black Sea region under the sponsorship of the EU and the U.S. has come to a standstill because of open resistance from Russia, (2) the use of military force either in the form of inter-state or of proxy war holds a significant place in Russia's foreign policy repertoire, and (3) the fiscal, monetary and military limits of Transatlantic endeavours to penetrate into the Black Sea by going beyond Central and Eastern Europe have been revealed⁵. Notwithstanding the priority given to the Middle East after Israeli military operations in Gaza in 2009 and the Arab Spring of 2011 in the foreign policy decision-making agenda, Turkish foreign policy makers have been also forced to pursue a certain type of policy - "policy of caution" - vis-à-vis the great power rivalries in the Black Sea region. This, in turn, has made it an ardent supporter of the status quo in the regional balance of power due to

⁴ Özdamar, "Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region", *op. cit.*, pp. 341-342.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 353-354.

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

the aforementioned geopolitical and geo-economic points of view⁶. The alternative would be for Turkey to have to deal with the implications of this new state of affairs on its own given the low likelihood of becoming an EU member and U.S. indecision about becoming involved in conflict resolution.

Problem description from a contextual perspective

The end of Cold War and the September 11 attacks compelled major powers to turn towards regionalisation specifically to be able to compensate for the absence of governance in the field of security at the global level⁷. Therefore, in the Black Sea region, there are three contending regionalisation schemes of three power blocs -the Russian Federation and its Near Abroad Policy (NAP), the EU and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and the U.S. and its BMENA and the Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR)⁸.

Keeping up its competition for global power against the U.S. required Russia to narrow the focus of its attention to the area that it refers to as the “near abroad”⁹. By encompassing “all the non-Russian ex-Soviet republics in the region,” this policy espouses the Russian cause of possessing certain rights and obligations to sustain security in the area, especially in the South Caucasus, Ukraine, and Moldova, on the basis of military, economic, and historical connections¹⁰. To fulfil that aim, Russia's modus operandi is one of bilateralism, with co-operation

⁶ Özdamar, “The Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Özdamar, “Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-345.

⁷ Aydın, “Contending Agendas”, p. 49.

⁸ Özdamar, “Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, p. 342. Aydın, “The Commission of the Black Sea”, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁹ Aydın, “Contending Agendas”, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

arrangements tailored for each country's specific policies¹⁰. As a consequence, Russian interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine and Georgia, annexation of Crimea, act of capitalising on the region's frozen conflicts, pragmatic use of natural gas as a trump card in dealing with the EU, Georgia, and Ukraine, and venture for a Customs Union made up of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia are prime aspects of the NAP. Any incursion into one those facets by the EU or the U.S. is interpreted as a considerable threat¹².

In order to guarantee the transit and security of energy from the region and to prevent security threats of "instability, conflict, and terrorism's" spillover from the fragile post-Soviet republics, the EU's ENP put forward a form of privileged partnership for cementing "political association and economic integration" on the condition of undertaking genuine democratisation and liberalisation reforms¹³.

Originally, the policy covered the EU's neighbours Algeria, Belarus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, and Ukraine and later on encapsulated the South Caucasian countries Armenia, Azer-

¹⁰ Özdamar, "Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region", *op. cit.*, p. 342.

¹¹ Aydın, "Contending Agendas", *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

¹² Adam Balcer, "An Audit of Power: Turkey's Leverage in the Post-Soviet Space", *EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series*, 2012, p. 2. Özdamar, "Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region", *op. cit.*, pp. 343, 355-356.

¹³ EUROPA the Official website of the European Union, "Black Sea Synergy", 15 March 2010. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-10-78_en.htm?locale=en ; Özdamar, "Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region", *op. cit.*, pp. 343-344.

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

baijan, and Georgia through the European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy paper¹⁴. Furthermore, two more programmes have been initiated to bolster the essence of the ENP: the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy. The first is between the EU and six countries from the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus regions: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The project is about furthering the above-mentioned political association and economic integration through the instruments of comprehensive free trade agreements and visa liberalisation¹⁵. The second is about promoting better co-operation with all littoral states in the region by adding to the already existent policy objectives of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Black Sea Commission in the fields of “transportation, energy, and environment” and is open to all these relevant countries¹⁶.

After the September 11 attacks, the U.S. decision makers’ changing mindset over threat perceptions defined the WBSR as the “backdoor to the Broader Middle East and North Africa region” where the war on terrorism could be further intensified through controlling the northern flank of the BMENA¹⁷. Moreover, in this way, European energy security could be assured by enlarging the EU, NATO, and the U.S. presence beyond the western coast of the Black Sea to the Caspian arena along with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova¹⁸. Accordingly, in addition to NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme that includes 12

¹⁴ Aydın, “Contending Agendas”, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁵ EUROPA the Official website of the European Union, “Black Sea Synergy”, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Aydın, “Contending Agendas”, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁸ Özdamar, “Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

What Should Turkey Do to Stabilise the Black Sea Region?

post-Soviet states and works to increase the level of co-operation and transparency particularly in military affairs, the U.S. has sought to broaden the range of the Operation Active Endeavor from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea to guard against terrorist activities¹⁹.

With the Black Sea being at the crossroads of these three regionalisation schemes, stability and the balance of power in the region have been disrupted, as has been seen in the Ukrainian crisis that began in 2013. The collision between the EU's ENP and Russia's NAP poses threats to the region. This conflict is also directly related to Turkey's major concern to prevent any regional or international power's call to revise the Montreux Convention (1936)²⁰. Turkey has been the champion of regional economic and security co-operation initiatives like the BSEC, Black Sea Naval Task Force, and Black Sea Harmony and of the status quo in the region since the end of the Cold War²¹. Turkey has no prospect of becoming an EU member in the coming five years (perhaps never) but still has ongoing engagements with Russia in naval security, economic and energy projects. Turkey would want to be the "balancer" of the EU-Russian rivalry in the region²². On the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Mustafa Aydın, "Turkish Policy towards the Wider Black Sea and the EU Connection", in: *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2014, p. 389.

²¹ Özdamar, "Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region", *op. cit.*, pp. 344-345.

²² Oktay F. Tanrısever, "Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea Region: Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict", *EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series*, 2012, p. 12. EurActiv.com, "Juncker and Schulz say 'no' to Turkey in last TV duel", 21 April 2014. Available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/juncker-and-schulz-say-no-turkey-last-tv-duel-302278>

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

one hand, Turkey is a NATO member. On the other hand, Turkey benefits from the Turkish-Russian tourism trade, Turkish construction projects in Russia, Russian direct investment in the energy and tourism sectors in Turkey, co-operation in energy infrastructure projects such as the Mersin Akkuyu power plant and Turkish trade in Russian natural gas²³. It follows that Turkey should continue to hold a multilateral perspective on Black Sea regional economy and security and oppose any proposition on maritime security that does not include all littoral states. Turkey would be especially against excluding Russia, as was the case when the US proposal to expand Operation Active Endeavor into the Black Seawas countered by the initiation of Black Sea Harmony with the participation of all littoral states to sustain maritime security and to patrol the Black Sea²⁴.

Turkey's interests in the region in light of EU/US/Russia rivalry

Although issues about the Black Sea region have always been significant in Turkish foreign policy, the importance of the region has intensified due to recent developments. Changing dynamics in the Black Sea have led to various dilemmas and challenges for Turkey. However, Turkey has managed to profit from some of those dilemmas by adopting a balanced policy. In this section, the challenges Turkey faces and its balanced approach vis-à-vis those challenges are elaborated.

Turkish interests in the Black Sea region have been affected in several ways by the existing EU-Russia rivalry. Turkey has re-

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-16.

²⁴ Özdamar, "Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region", op. cit., pp. 344-345.

acted to these developments by favouring taking no sides in this rivalry, as seen in its recent foreign policy decisions and actions regarding the region. In fact, Turkey tries to maintain stable relations with both the EU and Russia, and to balance the two²⁵. This aim of being a “balancer” might not be a deliberately formulated policy option, but rather a natural result of a need to protect its interests vis-à-vis two great powers on the coastline of the Black Sea, these interests being Turkey’s EU membership candidacy and Turkey’s trade and energy interests in its relations with Russia.

In fact, Turkey has been playing the “balancer” role for more than a decade. In the first 10 years after the Cold War, Western powers and the Russian Federation formed better relations on security and economic issues. At the time, Turkey’s balancing policies were not needed. However, with the radical developments in the Black Sea region starting with Putin’s assuming the presidency in Russia in 2000, the historical conflict between the West and Russia has become clear enough to persuade the parties to take action. On the one side, the EU has begun to look for ways to decrease its natural gas dependency on Russia by initiating new natural gas pipeline projects through the Caspian Sea. Russia has increased and intensified its interventions in the domestic affairs of regional states like Georgia and Ukraine. With the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Russia gave a direct display of its reaction to the possible new EU and US impacts on the former USSR countries, and accordingly on the Black Sea region, and to initiatives to build and use new pipeline routes to bypass the Russian Federation. Between these increasingly tense relations, Turkey’s importance

²⁵ Sait Yılmaz, “Changing Balances in the Black Sea Region and Turkey”. *Journal of Black Sea Researches*, 4:15, 2007.

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

as a “balancer” has increased. As one of the most influential actors in the region, Turkey has to protect its interests in this atmosphere of conflict and it could manage this only by pursuing a balanced policy towards the EU and Russia. While ensuring Turkey’s active participation in Black Sea regional politics, assuming a “balancer” role means some challenges as well as some opportunities for Turkey.

Turkey faces serious challenges and risks in the form of dilemmas regarding the achievement of the respective aims of the EU and Russia in the region. Turkey approaches these dilemmas within the framework of its national interests and without disrupting either its relations with the EU or with Russia. One of the biggest challenges that Turkey has had to deal with in relation to the Black Sea agenda and the Western world was Turkey’s refusal to support the proposal by the US (with EU support) to expand Operation Active Endeavor into the Black Sea. Turkey opposes this on the grounds that allowing permanent deployment of non-regional ships in the Black Sea would violate the Montreux Convention²⁶. Needless to say such an expansion would also disrupt relations with Russia. Thus, to protect its interests and to maintain good relations with Russia, Turkey may risk its relations with the West. On the other hand, despite aiming to maintain good relations with Russia, Turkey clearly condemned Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and sided with Ukraine which is also supported by the EU. This decision to oppose Russia has helped Turkey to balance its relations with the EU; however, this act risked natural gas imports from Russia and other economic relations with Russia regarding trade and tourism. Dilemmas in the region such as

²⁶ Council of Wise Men Report, Black Sea Developments and Turkey. The document is not publicly available.

What Should Turkey Do to Stabilise the Black Sea Region?

expansion of Operation Active Endeavor into the Black Sea and Russia's annexation of Crimea have risks for Turkey, as outlined above. Thus, to deal with those risks and challenges, Turkey has employed a balanced policy taking into consideration its own national interests.

Despite these risks, Turkey might actually have several opportunities by acting as a “balancer” between the EU and Russia. In this context, Turkey apparently continues to be a key actor in the Black Sea region and one that the interested parties in the region such as the EU and Russia cannot readily disregard²⁷. Turkey's strategy on the Black Sea region could be considered mainly a policy of developing trade co-operation with the states of region and of avoiding rivalry against any country in the field of energy²⁸. On the one hand, Turkey co-operates with the EU to look for alternative natural gas routes, and accordingly puts a lot of effort towards implementing pipeline projects that exclude Russia such as the TANAP and Trans-Caspian pipeline projects. On the other hand, Turkey collaborates with Russia on some other pipeline projects such as the Blue Stream and South Stream pipeline projects. In this context, Turkey plays a “bridge” role in the energy relations of the region in the context of EU-Russia rivalry; in that, Turkey agrees to help the conveyance of natural gas to the EU from sources other than Russia, and at the same time, Turkey supports construction of certain parts of Russian natural gas pipelines within Turkish territory and the Turkish exclusive economic zone. In this way, Turkey both continues to export natural gas from Russia and helps Russia to move its natural gas into the European territories. Playing a “bridge” role in this respect not only allows Turkey to preserve its active participation

²⁷ Yılmaz , “Changing Balances in the Black Sea and Turkey”, op. cit.

²⁸ Council of Wise Men Report, op. cit.

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

in regional energy relations but also to guarantee itself in relation to its current and future natural gas needs. To put it another way, Turkey forms its policy in the Black Sea region based on its economic interests.

In addition to Turkey's bilateral interests in relation to these two powers, Turkey has certain interests specifically related to the Black Sea region. Turkey holds a significant status among the countries surrounding the Black Sea because Turkey has the longest shoreline and the major maritime jurisdiction in the region and controls two straits, namely, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. These two straits are very important because they connect the landlocked Black Sea to the open sea. Counting on such privileged status in the region, Turkey has initiated various regional co-operation programmes from security issues to economic ones such as Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), Operation Black Sea Harmony and Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). In these projects, Turkey acted as a founder and invited other regional actors to join the venture. This means that Turkey is aware of its privileged status in the Black Sea region and in line with this belief, wants to take the initiative regarding the current relations of the regional actors and their clashing interests²⁹. Turkey has chosen not to take sides either with the EU or Russia because Turkey does not want to give up its privileged status in the region. Turkey, as a middle power, does not favour falling under the influence of either of these two great powers or letting those powers take control and lead the regional politics in the region. Turkey should indeed continue to pursue this balanced as well as active policy in the region to deal with the current problems related to the Black Sea region and to protect its interests in security and energy issues.

²⁹ Council of Wise Men Report, op. cit.

Policy options

There are four policy options for Turkey, which are maintenance of the frameworks laid out by the BSEC, advancement of bilateral co-operation with Russia both in the current set of sectors and in other possible fields, endorsement of the inclusion of Russia in all multilateral plans of action in the Black Sea, and being the “balancer” in the great power rivalries and mediator in the local conflicts in the Black Sea region³⁰. First, the Black Sea Ring Highway, Development of the Motorways of the Sea in the Black Sea Region, and visa liberalisation policies for business environment initiatives should be promoted³¹. Accordingly, networks would emerge to harmonise national trade regulation practices and structures to adjust transportation and environmental protection³². Moreover, an opportunity could emerge to incorporate the resources of the EU peacefully into these frameworks through the Black Sea Synergy³³.

Second, new fields of co-operation such as transportation, agriculture, banking, and finance should accompany the improvements in the bilateral engagements with Russia in the sectors of tourism, energy trade, and construction³⁴. With regard to maritime security, Russia and all other littoral states should be incorporated into the future programmes, as in the examples of BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony³⁵.

Third, to offset adverse results of the EU’s and Russia’s clashing regional plans, Turkey should conduct “an evenhanded ap-

³⁰ Yılmaz, “Changing Balances in the Black Sea and Turkey”, *op. cit.*

³¹ Council of Wise Men Report, *op. cit.*

³² Council of Wise Men Report, *op. cit.*

³³ Özdamar, “The Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Part III

The East of Europe, West of Russia: What Role for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey?

proach” via active diplomacy in which Turkey’s position in Transatlantic institutions and its support for free market economy and democratised governance in the region should not give the impression of zero-sum game with Russian national considerations³⁶. Instead, the policy should be balanced among the three power blocs – the EU, Russian and the U.S. – and it should be supplemented by efficient use of communication through the media³⁷.

Fourth, given regional players’ militarisation, which is illustrated by the increasing ratio of the defence budgets in each, and international and transatlantic institutions’ indecisive approach to conflict resolution, Turkey should denounce the use of or the threat to use military force in the region. The role of “balancer” in the clashing regional schemes and of mediator in the region’s frozen conflicts would be appropriate to maintain equilibrium in the regional balance of power³⁸.

Conclusion and recommendations

With the end of Cold War and the attacks of September 11, the Black Sea region has been at the intersection of three global players’ regional policies. These are the Russian Federation and its Near Abroad Policy (NAP), the EU and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and the U.S. and its Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) and the Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR). The current destabilisation in the region’s status quo is due to the Transatlantic-Russian rivalry. In this rather bleak picture,

³⁶ Aydın, “Turkish Policy towards the Wider Black Sea”, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-387.

³⁷ Özdamar, “The Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁸ Özdamar, “Security and Military Balance in the Black Sea Region”, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-345.

What Should Turkey Do to Stabilise the Black Sea Region?

Turkey must act as a balancing power between the US/EU vs. Russia conflict and help region stabilise. Since some member states and EU decision-makers have chosen to isolate and exclude Turkey from various EU arrangements, Turkey has no choice but to focus on its own interests. Turkey's stable bilateral engagements with Russia must also be protected if Turkey plans to act as a "balancer" against the east-west rivalry and its destabilising effects in the region. Turkey should focus on the task of being a "balancer" in the clashing regional schemes and mediator in the region's frozen conflicts.

For Turkish foreign policy decision-makers, the room to manoeuvre from the EU-Russia rivalry and to soothe the severity of its consequences seems to be the search for the creation of joint mechanisms between the Black Sea Synergy and the BSEC. Maintenance of the frameworks laid out by the BSEC, advancement of bilateral co-operation with Russia both in the current set of sectors and in other possible fields, and endorsement of including Russia in all multilateral plans of action in the Black Sea should be the complementary steps taken to sustain equilibrium in the regional balance.