

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



Deep Dive in the Black Sea: Turkey's Role and Potential in the Region *By Cüneyt Gürer and Jelle Freriks*

The Black Sea region

With the war in Ukraine, the Black Sea region has been thrust into the spotlight. The region, connecting Europe and Asia, has a strategic and vital importance. The Black Sea is surrounded by 6 littoral states - Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia - but encompasses a wider geostrategic and cultural region that includes, amongst others, Moldova, Azerbaijan and, to an extent, Greece. The region has historically been a fractured area of multiple countries and entities that have changed hands many times. No empire achieved full hegemony over the Black Sea region except for the Ottoman Empire under which the region was relatively unified. The Black Sea is of the utmost importance to both Russia and Turkey, and also to several other actors, both to the other littoral states and other great powers. For Russia, it has always been central to its imperial identity, with Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula being conquered by the Russian Empire from the hands of one of the Ottoman Empire's vassal states. Currently, it houses the Russian Black Sea Fleet which gives Russia access to the wider Mediterranean region. Therefore, Black Sea access is necessary to maintain its great power status, both for historical and strategic reasons.

From the Soviet time onwards, Turkey has tried to maintain a large regional posture in the Black Sea and the region has always been the center of gravity between Russia and Turkey. Competition does not, however, imply sour relations with Russia. Despite clashing interests and recent events like the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet in 2015, both Russian and Turkish leaders Putin and Erdogan have tried to maintain good relations. Until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO member Turkey refrained from contributing to attempts to enlarge the NATO posture in the region and attempted to work together with Moscow to keep non-literal powers out of the Black Sea. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, crushed the dream of Turkey for a continuation of this condominium and temporarily heightened tensions between the two regional powers. However, in other regional issues, both countries understood their red lines and have been careful not to provoke each other and prevented a conflict of interest leading to a direct military confrontation. Turkey continues to keep its relations with Russia on the balance amid Russian's aggression in the region and during the most recent war in Ukraine. Despite dependencies of Turkey on Russia for energy, tourism,

and trade, pundits agree on the fact that continuing this balance will be more difficult for Turkey as the war in Ukraine prolongs and extends to other parts of the region. The Russian war in Ukraine created an opportunity for the country to reconcile its relations with the West, however it requires more than lip service. The country needs structural changes in understanding the requirements of the alliance.

Turkey, NATO, and the EU

Turkey's relationship with NATO has been strained at times but its support for the alliance remains relatively constant since Ankara joined in 1952. While Turkey's leadership has politically fought with member states' individual governments over cultural and social values, Ankara is well aware that the alliance provides it with a multilateral framework for containing the Russian build-up in the Black Sea region as well as beyond when threatening Turkish interests. Acting on behalf of NATO or with quasi-support of the alliance is a convenient tool for Erdogan to execute national interests without exposing these interests to a level where direct Russian action can be expected. This hedging has allowed Turkey to gain concessions from the West as well as from Russia. Most recently, in the fight against the Kurds in the border region between Syria and Turkey, Turkey has clashed with the interests of the United States over regime change. Turkey sees the Kurds as an existential threat to its national security. Stabilization in Syria is key for Turkey, both to contain the refugee flow and the flow of weapons towards the Kurds. For Russia, Syria's Assad is the main ally in the region. Here, in their search for stability, Russia and Turkey both benefit from a strong opposition against the Kurdish fighters, running counter to the interests of the United States.

Besides NATO, Turkey has a long history with the European Union. While its relationship with Russia is mainly transactional in nature, its relationship with the West is more complex. Turkey's long history of democratic institutions established under statesman Atatürk and Turkey's NATO membership from 1952 together with its Eurasian identity have made it much more similar to European countries and the European identity than, for instance, Russia. However, under Erdogan several of the democratic mechanisms have eroded to a point where the rule of law no longer exists. This, in turn, has strained relations with Brussels that sees itself as the protector of democracy and the rule of law. For several years, relations between Turkey and several of the major EU member states deteriorated quickly. However, the dire state of the Turkish economy, the devaluation of the lira, and other domestic issues have shown Ankara the need for better Turkish-EU relations as these have been interwoven for a long time and the recent deterioration has had its impact on the Turkish economy. The strategic position of the Black Sea and Turkey as the country controlling access to the Black Sea might make Western countries more willing to see past Erdogan's behavior and attempt to improve the relations between the bloc and Turkey. However, it is important to keep in mind the opinion of Turkish people that do not necessarily consider the EU as the most attractive and reliable ally. Domestic narratives and policymaking play an important role in EU-Turkish relations, and Erdogan's attempts at centralizing power and unifying Turkey by creating a stronger religious and nationalist narrative have alienated it from European leaders. Part of improving relations will require modifying Erdogan's newly shaped Turkish identity to one that is less nationalistic and more European in nature but without

damaging Turkish pride. Although nationalist and populist foreign policy discourses created a rally round the flag impact and provided significant gains for AKP government, at the domestic level, these policies have been significantly harmful to the country's long-term regional interests and turned out to be the most important obstacle to use its potential as a regional security provider.

In the same light, Western states should be careful not to fall into the trap of authoritarian stability by focusing on Turkey's balancing potential of Russia in the region. With the second-largest NATO military, host to NATO forces on its territory and its geostrategic position make it an ideal partner for NATO. Similarly, its position between the Levant, the Caucasus, and China makes it an ideal trading partner for the EU as well as a barrier for refugees on their way to Europe. Fear of losing these privileges might allow Turkey to use the European Union to its benefit and compromise European values. The EU should not lose sight of the fact that Turkey can use its real potential in the region with a functioning democracy and stable regional policy choices based on rational calculations. The West should also be cautious about not pushing Turkey towards Russia. Turkey has long enjoyed cordial relations with the EU and the United States, and, despite Erdogan's rhetoric, has a history intertwined with its European neighbors. Current populist narratives in the EU and a lack of understanding from the EU side on Turkey's difficult position could leave Turkey no choice but to side with Russia in the conflict and beyond.

Turkey's Domestic Policy

The weak economy, the 2016 coup attempt, and other destabilizing events have led to a governance crisis in Turkey. The upcoming 2023 elections will require Erdogan to remain to be seen as the stabilizing force in a country fraught with tightening media control and oppression of the opposition. The stakes of losing the election in 2023 are very high for Erdogan personally; as the domestic and regional policy interaction created so many irregularities that the opposition parties promise justice as a part of normalization process after Erdogan's regime. Turkey's foreign policy is personalized and increasingly centralized around President Erdogan, which makes opportunities for improvement of relations between Turkey and the West fragile, given his previous anti-Western rhetoric. Domestically, Erdogan's AKP party faces the task to create consent in favor of Erdogan to win the upcoming elections. Two issues at the core of elections in 2023 are the increasing role of religionism in Turkish foreign policy making, together with the state of the economy in Turkey. Notably the latter has changed in the last few years and has had its consequences with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With Erdogan's rural voting areas being highly dependent on Russian gas and Turkey having large swaths of Russian tourists each year, good relations with Russia have remained paramount. To keep these good relations, Turkey has committed itself to buying the Russian S-400 missile system against the wishes of NATO partners, which continues to impact Turkey today. Turkey has been shut out of the F-35 program and modernization of its current F-16 fleet with US supplies is still undecided. It is important to see S-400 decision in the light of domestic needs and not entirely as a shift to Russia.

While the conflict has had devastating consequences on the Turkish economy, it has also provided Erdogan with some opportunities. Erdogan has shown off with the growth of the Turkish defense industry under his leadership. The Turkish Bayraktar UAV is considered high quality and a source of pride in Turkish manufacturing. Turkish relations with both Ukraine and Russia have allowed Erdogan to play the role of mediator and show him as a statesman that solves conflicts and protects human rights, something which will go down well with the EU. The Turkish state has done similarly with the role of Turkic minorities on the Crimean Peninsula - the Tatars - and minorities in the Russian federation and the Caucasus.

Ultimately, Erdogan faces a complex challenge to keep his electorate happy. The large amount of wheat and sunflower oil imported from Russia and Ukraine means that soon the conflict might have even more devastating consequences on the already dire Turkish economy. While for the moment hedging seems to offer the best option to increase relations with the West and simultaneously improve his own standing domestically, prolonging the war might come back to haunt his reelection chances. Turkey has opportunities to be a strong actor in the Black Sea region, but the current balancing strategy risks losing out on both sides. Its geostrategic position and relations with Russia offer potential for improvement between the West and Turkey, but domestic Turkish politics fail to provide an alternative discourse of approaching the West. The AKP's platform hinges on a strong nationalist and centralized narrative that does not allow for a larger role of European values and mechanisms in Turkey, thereby shutting down many opportunities for the current regime to improve its relations and be a vital hub in the Black Sea region between Europe and the wider Eurasian continent.

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