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THE BLACK SEA REGION IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY: RUSSIA & TURKEY ON THE BLACK SEA

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The role of the Black Sea region in the foreign policy of Turkey has changed on several occasions over the course of the country's history. In the 15th - 17th centuries, the Black Sea was regarded as the intersection of the most important transportation lines supporting trade among neighboring governments and peoples. In the middle of the 20th century, the Black Sea became a region of direct contact between two opposing military-political blocs: NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As a result, in Turkey during this time, the Black Sea came to be viewed as a border region adjacent to a "hostile encirclement." From the point of view of Turkish politicians, this inhibited the development of the Black Sea coast, the role of which for the country's economy as a whole was undervalued. Especially evident was Turkish companies' meager use of the rivers of the Black Sea basin. To this end, Turkish authorities noted that the Ottoman dominance on such rivers as the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the lower reaches of the Nile, Danube, Dnieper, Dniester, Don, and Volga rivers, which connect sea and land (or, more precisely, are their continuation on the mainland), in previous centuries guaranteed reliable control over adjacent territories and promoted the development of trade. Today, of the 120 million tons of cargo transported to and from Turkey by sea, only 13% arrives via the Black Sea. According to Turkish politicians, this is a testament to the marginalization of the role of the Black Sea in the Turkish strategy for the development of maritime transport.

After the fall of the USSR, Turkey was freed from the sense of strategic isolation which at the time had become the main motive for its accession to NATO. Also gone was issue of neighboring the "hostile encirclement" that had existed previously. There were two reasons for this. First, the Warsaw Treaty Organization had collapsed. Turkey began building up relations with the former members of the alliance on the basis of bilateral agreements aimed at obtaining mutual advantages for both parties. Second, the formation of the new independent governments of Ukraine and Georgia promoted the consolidation of ties with Turkey, especially against the background of persisting political disagreement with Russia. Furthermore, in the political circles of Turkey during the 1990s, it was believed that Russia was not a stable government. One could expect the

disintegration of the Russian government in manner similar to that of the former Soviet Union, which would affect the territories of the country along the Black Sea as well. This point of view was reflected in Turkish perception of the regions of the North Caucasus, and in particular of the separatism in Chechnya. Without transforming it into the subject of official government policy, Turkey, at the very least, did not impede a number of its own social and political organizations from cooperating with separatists or providing assistance to the pan-Turkish movements in the Turkish-speaking regions of the North Caucasus.

As a result of the changing situation in the region during the 1990s and 2000s—which above all indicated a decreased security risk—it was no longer necessary for Turkey to maintain an overly close alignment of its interests in the region with the military and political strategy of the West. In Turkey, the Black Sea was increasingly viewed as a shipping corridor that would open up alternative transportation and trade routes to Eastern and Northern Europe, as well as to the Caucasus and Central Asia. As a result, in Turkish foreign policy the Black Sea region came to be perceived first and foremost as a hub where the most essential distribution lines converged. To this end, a project to develop the transportation capacity and infrastructure of the Black Sea coast was to be undertaken. Turkey's active participation in the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), created in 1999, was destined to play an important role in the realization of the country's foreign-policy plans.

The organization's goal is the development of economic cooperation and trade between the countries of the Black Sea basin. In addition, BSEC devotes attention to opposing such threats to regional security as the pollution of the Black Sea, organized crime, narcotics trafficking, and terrorism. In the beginning, Turkey was an enthusiastic participant in BSEC. In particular, the project for the creation of a circum-Black Sea transport corridor was very attractive for Turkish politicians and business circles. However, the “five-day war” between Russian and Georgia in August 2008, together with a number of problems in the bilateral relations between Turkey and other members of BSEC, made the possibility of the route's realization doubtful.

In recent years, BSEC has increasingly been the subject of criticism in Turkey. The organization is losing its former appeal for Turkey, inasmuch as it has been drawing out the realization of joint projects, and in many member countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Serbia), internal conflicts impede the realization of ambitious infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the fact that a significant number of BSEC's members do not have territory on the Black Sea coast (for example, Albania, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), complicates the development of a comprehensive position on a number of questions. For the time being, the organization has not been able to create sustainable institutions and forms of rational economic partnership, or guarantee political security in the region. Additionally, suspicions arose within Turkish political circles that BSEC might begin to be perceived as an alternative to accession to the European Union. In the context of these grievances toward BSEC, according to the Turkish side, it is necessary to concentrate on undertaking concrete projects—not necessarily large, but rather those are more likely realizable and which will have an economic effect.

That being said, in Turkish political circles there is a conviction that it is necessary to use the potential of the Black Sea basin first and foremost for the organization of an economic breakthrough in the region. In particular, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu, suggests evaluating the possibility of using the rivers flowing into the Black Sea for the purpose of conducting trade by means of cross-border maritime shipments. In order to do this, according to Davutoğlu, it is necessary to create incentives for entrepreneurs and to initiate projects that will be profitable for them. Turkish politicians cite the work on the Constanța-Trabzon ferry lines (related to the work on the Trabzon-Novorossiysk and Odessa-Trabzon lines) as a successful example of Black Sea distribution lines. In the event that these and analogous projects are successful, Turkey could become an intersection of the North-South and East-West transport

corridors, uniting Eastern Europe and the countries of Eurasia with the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. In that case, a transport-route linkage would be guaranteed across the territory of Turkey, between Central and Eastern Europe on one side, and South Asia on the other. According to the Turkish, BSEC should focus on precisely this task. From the perspective of the country's domestic policy, this could provide the momentum for the accelerated development of southeast Anatolia within the framework of the GAP project, and new markets will be open for Turkish goods.

Given such an approach, Turkey's desire to focus on concrete projects appears understandable. In this context, the decisions to create the Samsun-Caucasus rail transport ferry, as well as the Russian-Turkish customs and logistics centers in the Krasnodar territory and Rostov region, appear forward-looking. The creation of the logistics terminals and the easing of the border-crossing process is a strategically important step for making progress in transporting shipments of Russian goods to Turkey and of Turkish goods to Russia, both in terms of the simplified process for filling out documents, and the guarantee that all services with an interest in a given shipment are informed as to its contents and shipment details. For Turkey, the creation of such logistics centers also represents a definite benefit, inasmuch as in the event of the normal functioning of the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, Turkey has the opportunity to deliver freight more effectively and quickly, particularly to Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The realization of the Caucasus-Samsun ferry service will allow relations between the two countries to advance to a new level—an important part of the circum-Black Sea transportation corridor between Russia and Turkey will have been completed, having bypassed Georgia.

The TRASEKA transport corridor is another strategically important project for Turkey on the Black Sea. For the realization of this project, BSEC and shipping agreements with Russia are at odds. TRASEKA assumes the construction of a transport corridor connecting Central Asia with continental Europe via the South Caucasus. However, for the moment the project has encountered definite problems. First, the construction and installation of the stretch of railroad on the Georgian-Turkish border is dragging on; second, an active campaign of modernization and expansion of the Turkish railroad system is necessary; third, the presence of the Turkish Straits slows the speed of conveyance between Europe and Asia (we do not take into consideration combined or intermodal transport on the Black Sea). Simultaneously, construction of an underground tunnel under the Bosphorus met with certain difficulties. In the long term, the realization of the Trabzon-Batumi railroad construction project could make a perceptible contribution to the development of transport on the Black Sea coast of Turkey and the Caucasus.

In its relations with Russia, Turkey is pursuing—and will pursue—its own goals and interests first and foremost. The core of Russian-Turkish cooperation is in energy and tourism, as well as in construction and contracting work carried out by Turkish companies in Russia. Trade in Turkish agricultural products, light industrial goods, and textiles also play an important role. Many unresolved problems exist concerning cooperation between Turkey and Russia on the supply and delivery of energy resources. The Turkish side in particular is seeking to minimize the transportation of oil through the Straits, and undertakes practical measures to this end. For example, it restricts the right of passage of Russian tankers through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. This clearly is not to Russia's liking. Points of contention also remain regarding the “South Stream” gas-pipeline project.

As before, the problem of diversifying bilateral Russian-Turkish ties in the engineering and high-tech industries has not been resolved. Somewhat intensifying the working thesis, one might say that Turkey is extracting a maximum benefit from cooperation with Russia (energy, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, as well as trade, construction and contracting work, etc.), at the same time as for Moscow, the cooperation has, to a widely acknowledged degree, a forced character. According to some assessments, Russia's support of the Samsun-Ceyhan gas-pipeline project was for Russia largely a step taken out of necessity in exchange for Ankara's agreement to conduct geological

surveys in the zone of the possible placement of the “South Stream” gas pipeline. However, other assessments hold that one should not underestimate the advantages from bilateral collaborations—which Russia, in turn, also receives. For Russia, Turkey is a buyer (and moreover, at European prices!) of Russian energy resources, and fills the role of a reliable transit country.

The strengthening of regional security is an important strategic goal of Turkey's foreign policy in the Black Sea. From this perspective, Blackseafor and Black Sea Harmony will acquire all the more significance. Originally these institutions were initiated by Turkey. The Agreement on Participation was signed by Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and Turkey. For the past two years, exercises have been carried out without the participation of Georgia. The function of Blackseafor consists of organizing humanitarian missions, providing relief to disaster victims, locating mines, fighting terrorism, contraband, and illegal migration, and fighting environmental pollution. Warships, guard ships, patrol boats, minesweepers, amphibious assault ships, and support ships can participate in the exercises that take place within the framework of the project. Command is transferred from country to country in a rotation that occurs on a yearly basis. From year to year the tasks grow increasingly complex. At the same time, the Turkish armed forces do not hide that their main partner, all the same, is the Russian Navy. In the 2000s, in Turkish political circles there occurred a general reevaluation of Russia's role and prospects in the region. The Turkish consider Russia the most powerful force on the Black Sea, to whom it is necessary to defer. It is notable, however, that in the Blackseafor exercises, the ships that are tested are precisely those classes of ships that will comprise the Turkish Black Sea fleet in the long run.

At the same time, since 2006 the Russian Navy has taken part in the Black Sea Harmony exercises, which are organized by Turkey. Corresponding intergovernmental documentation regarding this collaboration was later signed. Not ruled out is the possibility that within the framework of the given project, the Navies of both countries could become lured in to provide security for the “Blue Stream” gas pipeline from possible diversions executed by terrorists.

Recently, the Turkish side has also been advancing an argument to the effect that Russia and Turkey should take on responsibility for whatever takes place on the Black Sea, by the right of inheritors to great empires. At the same time, in the academic community an interest in the topic concerning the history of the trade and maritime activity on the Black Sea has gained momentum. That being said, Turkish policy in relation to Russia remains pragmatic. When necessary, Turkey can move toward cooperation with Russia on matters of security, but at the same time can apply severe pressure on its partners in regard to energy questions. Despite the fact that Turkey recently struck Russia (as well as Syria, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Bulgaria, and Greece) from the list of countries representing a potential threat to Turkey, the possibility of expanding Russian-Turkish cooperation on security issues should not be overestimated. The given step was in large part an affirmation of the consequences of the fall of the USSR 20 years ago, and a rejection of the type of thinking that characterized the Cold War period. At the same time, Russia is forced to listen to Turkey, the dominant fleet on the Black Sea (which became apparent in the days of the August crisis of 2008), and to take into account the substantial affect of the “Turkish factor” in the Russian economy, and consequently, in its politics (one remembers the scandal that flared up after the film “Plan 'Kavkaz'” was aired on the Russian broadcast TV channel “Pervyi Kanal”). Generalizing, one must note that despite the presence of a whole number of issues that Russia and Turkey can resolve in the format of a “multidimensional partnership,” in the future their disagreement in regard to various aspects of world and regional policies cannot be disregarded.

The armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 stimulated an activation of Turkish foreign policy in the Black Sea and Caucasus regions: it was right after the conflict that Ankara proposed a Platform of Stability and Cooperation and bolstered its efforts in the direction of resolving the problems of Nagorno-Karabakh and its own relations with Armenia. Today, it is difficult to say that progress in either of these directions has been substantial, but that does not

mean that the Turkish efforts will not continue. Despite the logistical problems of traveling by car through Georgia into Russia, Turkey continues to view Georgia as a foreign-policy partner, and supports the formation of mutually beneficial relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan. One must view the development of Ankara's relations with Abkhazia as a separate aspect of Turkish policy in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region—though in Russia, it has become acceptable to underestimate this somewhat. A part of the Turkish political class views involving Armenia in the Turkish orbit of Caucasus policy as a distinct possibility. For now, this idea is meeting sufficiently sharp opposition, including in broad public circles—but if it is realized, it will open up Turkey to the prospect of full-scale political, economic, and possibly even military domination in the South Caucasus.

Thus, it is possible to characterize the main political issues facing Turkey in the Black Sea as an endeavor to guarantee political and military security in the region. Turkey is positioning itself as a key actor and independent center of power, attempting in this way to squeeze the maximum possible from the various formal and informal alliances—both those in which Turkey is a member, and those which it is trying to form. It appears that from here, Turkey will try to combine to the greatest extent possible the maintenance of its relations with the U.S., plans to accede to the E.U., and the development of the “Middle Eastern” (the Arab countries) and “Eurasian” vector if its foreign policy, of which are Russia and Iran are a part. Despite the anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric, it appears that a full-scale dispute with the U.S. and NATO are not part of the long-term direction of Ankara's foreign policy. Turkey is sufficiently tightly integrated into the structure of the Alliance. For example, the Assistant Secretary General of NATO for Defense Policy and Planning is the ex-adviser to the Turkish President on foreign-policy issues, Hussein Dirioz. His appointment occurred after a visit by Barack Obama to Turkey and the NATO summit in Ankara. During these events, Turkish politicians actively defended a narrative about how Turkey's place in guaranteeing international stability and security does not correspond to its openly secondary role in NATO. Despite the ambiguous impact that Turkey's participation in several NATO operations has on its emerging independent regional policy, one must assume that it is about working out mutually acceptable solutions within the framework of formal and informal consultations that they have had over the course of many decades.

Nonetheless, Turkey's partners, including Russia, should not underestimate the current Turkish domestic-policy processes that are leading to a steady growth in the influence of the Islamic factor. If this tendency is continues, then one should not rule out the possibility that over the course of the next several years, Turkey could become a different country than it is today: substantially more closed, disillusioned with European prospects, and aiming to become an absolutely independent regional center of influence—moreover, of influence colored by Islam. This would not be slow to have an effect on the Turkish perception of the situation in the Caucasus, where in such a case, Islamic radicals would gain influence within the territory of Turkey's ally, Azerbaijan, and in the Russian North Caucasus.

The diversity of the existing—though far from equivalent—integrated structures and associations (the CIS, GUAM, CSTO, BSEC, and now also the EU) has not yet led to the development of a new system for security in the Black Sea region. The joint activity of Russia and Turkey in resolving continued regional conflicts could make a difference, however it assumes a greater level of mutual trust. Here one might recall comments coming from the Russian political leadership expressing their attitude toward coordinating the process of normalizing Armenian-Turkish relations with the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The main economic issue is the organization of trade flows, transport, and trade lines with the Black Sea countries. Turkey will continue to use the potential of its participation in a number of international organizations (BSEC, NATO, Blackseafor, Black Sea Harmony) in order to strengthen its influence in the Black Sea region. As concerns the character of its relations with Russia, for all the

verbal statements about establishing a “strategic partnership,” Turkey remains a serious competitor to Russia in the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus. And this is a geopolitical reality that cannot be ignored.

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