

The Black Sea: A Forgotten Geo-strategic Realm

The expectations of the last ten years that the states surrounding the Black Sea would follow the example of the Balkan region and shape themselves into a security community have not been realized. Perceptions of stagnation have replaced the hopes of a working and stable geo-strategic framework, based on a balance of cooperation and conflicts.

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Realizing the variety of problems and difficulties in the Black Sea region – even greater in number and sophistication than in the Balkans – researchers and politicians hoped that democracy and stability would continue their eastward march. Twenty years after the world’s tectonic geopolitical changes, the western shores of the wider Black Sea Area are showing signs of progress, while stagnation persists in the east. Romania and Bulgaria are NATO and EU members; Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia oscillate between contradictory visions of the future; Russia has embarked on a project of “sovereign” or “managed” democracy (with unpredictable results) and Turkey experiments with building a semi-secular Muslim democratic society while unsuccessfully making its case to the EU, to which it still aspires.

There have been significant developments in the Black Sea area in the last few weeks, not least as North Caucasian terrorism again showed its destructive potential. Wheat exports from the Black Sea countries, mostly Ukraine and Russia, jumped 40 per cent in August, while the EU wheat harvest - accounting for 20 per cent of world production - fell this year, as drought cut yields in Poland and France. The world marked the third anniversary of Russia’s war against Georgia, and Turkey and Romania agreed to host a radar installation as part of the US/NATO antiballistic missile (ABM) system; Romania went even further, agreeing to also host ABM installations on its territory. In the meantime, Moscow and

Washington are preparing for decisive talks on their strategic relationships, of which ABM defense is a key component.

All these things give an indication of the strategic significance of the Black Sea area, which has not changed in recent years. What has changed, however, is the diminished strategic interest from the leading states and institutions in the West. Various factors are contributing to this.

Undervalued and misunderstood

The rise of Russia during the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev changed Moscow's role in the Black Sea region dramatically. Through its energy instruments and military presence, Russia has marked the region out as a sphere of influence. As a sign of its growing assertiveness, Russia underlined its nuclear strategic parity with the US in the New START Treaty which came into force in 2011. With regard to the Black Sea, Russia seeks to prevent other centers of power from dictating developments in this geopolitically sensitive Eurasian corridor.

The US is obviously highly engaged in other parts of the world, and the Black Sea area is presently a lower priority. Washington is content scaling back aspirations regarding US-Bulgarian and US-Romanian military bases (needed for the fight against terrorism), and is ready to cooperate with Russia in the Black Sea, acknowledging the dominance of Moscow in the energy field in this part of the world. The US Ambassador to Bulgaria's recent visit to the Russian giant LUKOIL's refinery in Burgas could be seen as a formal recognition of the activity of the energy monopolist in the broader Black Sea basin. Indeed, there are perceptions of a comfortable compromise between the two biggest nuclear powers in the Black Sea region, which may postpone indefinitely any social or political Westernization in the countries on its eastern shore.

Although the EU does have strategies towards its Eastern neighborhood, those strategies often fail to appreciate the different culture and values of some of the region's non-EU members. Thus, despite a variety of approaches, instruments and agreements, the EU does not yet have a strong presence in the Black Sea area. Furthermore, the internal financial

turmoil of the Eurozone is serving as a distraction, drawing much-needed attention away from the EU's 'near abroad'.

NATO suffers similar problems, though the membership of Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria - and the ambitions to membership of Georgia and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine - provides more reliable influence. Russia, however, is even more sensitive to the rising influence of the Alliance in the Black Sea than to that of the EU. Typically, it does its best to utilize the Montreux Convention of 1936 to prevent the passage of military ships belonging to non-coastal countries through the Turkish straits, as well as encouraging Turkey to remain a dominant power in the area. Moscow and Ankara are already involved in various bilateral projects, a relationship which provides the foundation for the two states' influence in the region.

Finally, the revolutions in the Middle East, coupled with rising tensions in Israeli-Turkish relations, have changed geo-strategic priorities over the last year. The focus on the Black Sea area is simply not as strong as it once was: North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean are also both in the EU's and NATO's backyards. The US and Russia have decided they need to rather concentrate on the pressing political changes and upheaval of the Arab Spring and beyond.

Because of all of these factors, compromise is the order of the day for the broader Black Sea area and, with the exception of the EU and NATO members, the consequences are social and political stagnation. The fight against terrorism remains the exceptional issue on which the interested parties are still inclined to work together. Meanwhile, coping with secessionist conflicts, fighting trans-national organized crime, and resisting the threat of Russian military intervention *a là* 8 August 2008 remain region-wide concerns.

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