

The Black Sea Basin: A New Axis in Global Maritime Security

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Brief Analysis

The Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), a regional maritime security initiative started by Turkey in 2001, was activated August 14-27. With world attention devoted to Iraq and the Middle East, important developments in the nearby Black Sea region involving energy politics, frozen conflicts, and new regional security initiatives have gone mostly unnoticed. The Black Sea is a stable but complex basin with vast economic resources and strategic importance as a medium for energy transportation. Is the Black Sea a bridge or a barrier between United States and Turkey? Does the issue of Black Sea security provide an opportunity to mend deteriorated relations or a new source of friction?

Black Sea Relations Evolve

Emerging U.S. and European Union (EU) interest in the Black Sea basin after the Cold War solidified after the September 11 attacks due to the region's vulnerability in the context of global war on terror. Washington and Brussels hope to integrate the Black Sea basin into the western world.

Since 1989, the formerly communist Black Sea states of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia and NATO member Turkey have been united around a new regional identity. Meanwhile, the United States has approached formerly communist countries with different political, military, and economic agendas. In this regard, Washington and Ankara have laid the foundation for good regional cooperation through the Caucasus Working Group Initiative with Georgia.

U.S. ties with Bulgaria and Romania, two countries that made a historic and strategic leap by officially joining NATO in 2004 (the two are also scheduled to join the EU in 2007), are very strong. On July 18, Bulgaria's president welcomed the use of Bulgarian military installations by U.S. forces. Even if there have been setbacks -- for instance, Romanian Maj. Gen. Valeriu Nicut told the press that Romania would provide the United States with bases and then was fired for his statement -- Washington seems intent on establishing closer military and political ties with those two new NATO members on the Black Sea.

The U.S.-Ukrainian relationship has improved since the 2004 revolution there. But relations between the United States and Russia seem to be in flux.

Turkey: A Longtime Ally

Any analysis of the region would be incomplete without Turkey, the sole occupant of the Black Sea's southern coast. For the following reasons, Turkey is a key Black Sea player.

Turkey is the gatekeeper to and from the Black Sea. Through the Turkish Straits, Turkey controls strategic access lines between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Maritime traffic through the Turkish Straits is regulated by the 1936 Montreux Convention. Turkey considers the Convention a successful arrangement that has helped to keep Black Sea a sui generis sea, not much affected by the Cold War, which has contributed enormously to peace and stability in the region and in the world.

Turkey is also a large military and economic power. Turkey owns the most modern navy in the region, and with the longest coastline Turkey controls the largest portion of the Black Sea Exclusive Economic Zone.

Turkey has also launched successful regional initiatives. In order to promote a policy of a stable Black Sea, Ankara has used its position as an honest broker that takes care of all regional security interests to found the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and BLACKSEAFOR.

In 1992, Turkey pioneered the establishment of the BSEC, the first full-fledged regional cooperation organization, with the participation of all six Black Sea littorals and other regional states (Albania, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldavia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Greece). Even though the BSEC has not yet reached its full economic and political potential, Turkey regards it as a viable organization with much potential to be exploited.

BLACKSEAFOR, which has been activated for the fifth time, this year under Romanian leadership, has successfully provided a security system in the Black Sea. Since 2004, BLACKSEAFOR members have held meetings aimed at transforming the organization to better cope with asymmetric risks and other illegal activities at sea. The ultimate aim is to turn BLACKSEAFOR into a viable standing multinational maritime task force, with permanent headquarters, capable of covering maritime risks.

BLACKSEAFOR is the first operation in which Russia and NATO countries work together toward the same objective, giving, Russian and other non-NATO members a priceless experience in interoperability. This experience has made it possible for the Russian and Ukrainian navies to consider participation in other NATO operations.

Turkey also conducts a national maritime operation, Black Sea Harmony, securing sea lanes in the Black Sea in line with UN Security Council resolutions to provide support in the global war on terror. This operation is affiliated with the NATO-led Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean. Russia has expressed its desire to participate in Operation Black Sea Harmony, and Turkey hopes to see other littorals join the initiative, turning it into a multinational effort. Once BLACKSEAFOR becomes operational full-time, it could take over Operation Black Sea Harmony.

Will the Black Sea Help Mend U.S.-Turkish Ties?

Even if U.S.-Turkish relations have been improving since the invasion of Iraq, tensions remain between NATO's two largest military powers. Fortunately, Black Sea issues are not the source of such tensions; on the contrary, they provide opportunities for furthering U.S.-Turkish cooperation. The inseparable issues of energy and security provide the basis for cooperation between the United States and Turkey in the Black Sea.

Energy: Turkey offers alternative routes to the West for the energy resources of the Caspian basin. Today, the Caspian basin is ever more critical, especially since some Middle Eastern oil revenues are used to finance global terrorism.

With the realization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline in May 2005 -- a project that has been extensively supported by the United States and dismissed by Russia -- the scheduled opening of a Baku-Erzurum-Ceyhan gas

line in October 2005, and other energy lines to connect the Caspian Basin to the West (see PeaceWatch no. 998), Turkey has established itself as a key link to the West's energy supply. The first piece of good news for the U.S.-Turkish relationship is that Washington and Ankara share the same vision regarding energy politics.

Security: As the most stable country in the region with effective armed forces, Turkey can secure any existing or future energy line.

Since the September 11 attacks, Turkey has provided strong support to the United States in the global war on terror. Turkish naval assets have joined their U.S. counterparts in Operation Active Endeavour to secure the Mediterranean. The Turkish Navy and the Turkish Coast Guard provide NATO with intelligence -- mostly collected by Operation Black Sea Harmony assets -- on the suspicious activities of merchant vessels. Operation Black Sea Harmony not only provides maritime security, but also contributes to the efforts against global terror. So the second piece of good news for the U.S.-Turkish relationship is that the two countries share the same view on Black Sea basin security issues.

Conclusion

The Black Sea is a new energy lifeline for the West. As the bitter aftermath of the invasion of Iraq has shown, security cannot be imported; it must be provided by locals. Black Sea security should be based on the consent of the littorals, keeping lines of coordination and cooperation open with NATO and the transatlantic security structure. To this end, Operation Black Sea Harmony, under Turkey's leadership with other littoral states encouraged to join, can have an ever-increasing, complementary role alongside NATO's Operation Active Endeavour in the global war on terror.

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