

THE BLACK SEA REGION IN RUSSIA'S CURRENT FOREIGN POLICY PARADIGM

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In the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's vision and policy toward the Black Sea region (BSR) has gone through at least four stages:

- The "initial phase:" 1991 (or even 1988) - 1994, characterized by the emergence of armed ethnic conflicts, their "freezing," and the establishment of a new post-Soviet status quo;
- The "Chechen" phase: 1995 - 2002, when Russia mainly viewed the situation in the BSR through the prism of the Chechen war;
- The "recovery" period: 2003 - 2008, when Russia began acting along several dimensions. Though loosely connected in practice, these activities were marked early on as a high priority in Russia's strategy. As early as September 2003, then Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the Azov-Black Sea region as a zone of Russia's "strategic interests." He stressed that the Black Sea provides Russia with a direct exit to its most important transport routes, and thus that an effective security system is needed for the region;
- New active regional strategy phase: August 2008 - present, beginning with the five-day war in the Caucasus.

A new BSR strategy closely coincides with the main characteristics of Russian foreign policy: it is very assertive, based on principles of *realpolitik*, and clearly geo-economically

and geopolitically motivated. More than any other dimension of Russian foreign policy, the BSR strategy is geographically-based and viewed as a strictly regional project, although it possesses global aspects and provides Russia with global options.

Underpinning this strategy is the notion that Russia has more rights than the United States or the European Union to play a leading role (or perhaps a shared leadership role with Turkey) in the BSR for a number of historical, geographic, military, economic, and political reasons. The paradox of the situation is that in the West, Russia, in spite of being one of six Black Sea littoral states, is predominantly perceived of as an outside power. In truth, Russia has not only its finger but its whole arm in this regional “cake.”

Russia’s position in the region can perhaps be best defined by the title of an old Soviet cult classic: “One’s own among strangers – a stranger among one’s own” (*svoyi sredi chuzhikh – chuzhoi sredi svoikh*). A *regional-focused*, *interest-based*, and *regional-valued* vision marks the key difference between the Russian approach and Western (i.e. U.S. or EU) ones, in which the BSR is predominantly viewed through an *instrumental* lens as a means of achieving goals in either *other regions* (the Middle East, Central Asia) or *globally* (energy security, democratization, and market economic expansion).

Indeed, the BSR can be seen as a testing ground for two dominant contemporary developmental trends: *regionalization* and *globalization*. The five-day Georgia-Russia war strengthened Russia’s position in the BSR, while the new postwar regional political context has provided Russia with unprecedented levers in it. These levers can be used either to stabilize and develop the region or to transform it into another arena of geopolitical competition, part of a zero-sum game between Russia and the West. The BSR thus stands to become either the grounds for a regional partnership (including elements of peace enforcement, as needed) or competition between non-regional forces. In the current situation, both scenarios are equally realistic.

Russia’s Interests and the Structure of the BSR

Russia’s current vision of the BSR, its institutions and preferential partners, depends on the interests Russia perceives.

From a *military-security* perspective, Russia proclaims that its main interest is in keeping the Black Sea a peaceful and stable area with an open and direct exit to the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean. In other words, for now and the foreseeable future, Russia is interested in preserving the status quo. Indeed, for the last five years, Moscow has demonstrated its cooperative intent in the framework of the “Black Sea Harmony” and “Active Endeavour” military exercises with other Black Sea states and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

At the same time, a number of events before and during the five day war demonstrated the *military* threats to Russia’s interests that exist in the BSR:

- Turkey’s decision to allow U.S. ships to pass through the Dardanelles to support Georgia brings into question one of the oldest BSR agreements, the 1936 Montreaux Convention restricting naval traffic of non-Black Sea nations;
- The Russian-Ukrainian dispute over the Strait of Kerch concerns the same risk, i.e.

that Russian vessels will not be allowed to travel from the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea;

- The expansion and utilization of military bases by the United States in Romania and Bulgaria was perceived by Russia as an exploitation of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty and a violation of the Russia-NATO agreements of 2002;
- The Russian-Ukrainian Treaty on the Black Sea Fleet, due to expire in 2017, is another headache for Moscow. A number of authoritative Russian admirals consider the new Russian naval base under construction in Novorossiysk as militarily unsuitable for a number of meteorological and geographic reasons;
- Finally, Russia remains one of the three – and in the long-term, potentially only – non-NATO country in the region. From a military-political point of view, Russia perceives NATO, Ukraine, and Georgia as actors who aim to change the status quo.

Thus, in the military-political sphere, the BSR covers a large part of the space and nomenclature of Russian-Western relations, including Russia-NATO and Russia-EU relations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of Russia's *acute security domain* (focusing on regional conflicts and regional instability, including in the North Caucasus), the Russian view of the BSR is currently limited to the three South Caucasian states (as well as the two newly-recognized republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Turkey. Russia does not view the participation of outside powers as necessary, but recognizes that some of them can be beneficial (the EU) or inevitable (the OSCE or UN), while some are highly undesirable (NATO and the United States). Russia would strongly prefer a narrow and strictly regional-based security format.

Turkey's more-or-less independent policy line makes it a potential partner for Russia in the BSR. Following the election of a pro-Islamic political party in 2002, the country formulated a new national security strategy supposedly more independent from the United States. This policy trajectory was highlighted by the country's 2003 rejection of American requests for support during the invasion of Iraq.

While Turkey has its own vested interests in the region, the basic commonality between Russia and Turkey is that both countries share a regional military-security posture toward the BSR. This approach is apparent in Ankara and Moscow's views of the frozen conflicts (i.e., Nagorno Karabakh) and other high-conflict potential areas, such as Iran. For the time being, Turkey prefers to maintain the status quo in the BSR. As a result, there is no doubt that Russia fully supported the Peace and Stability Pact that Turkey proposed for the region immediately after the war.

The promptness with which Ankara put forward its Peace and Stability Pact – visits to Baku and Tbilisi, outstanding steps towards achieving a rapprochement with Yerevan – resemble in a fashion Moscow's reaction to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. One may come to the conclusion that Turkey sees the situation after August 8, 2008 as a unique opportunity to restore its position as a regional power – particularly as a peacemaker and

mediator – in the BSR. Ankara’s dividends, if it succeeds, are obvious:

- Gaining more regional weight while obtaining more leverage in its dialogue with Washington, which is not happy with Turkey’s independent position on many acute issues including Iraq and Iran, and Brussels, which is not ready to accept Turkey as a member of the EU in the foreseeable future;
- Directly and indirectly, Turkey’s strengthening in the region makes it a highly desirable counterweight to Russia for the three South Caucasus states in the BSR;
- Cooperation with Russia may decrease the level of competition in the energy sector by finding commonly acceptable solutions and in this way help Turkey at least partly realize its ambitions of becoming an energy hub for Europe (thereby also increasing its chances for EU membership).

Pros and Cons for the West

An analysis of the postwar situation paradoxically does not yield entirely pessimistic results. The initial reactions of key world players (the EU, NATO, and leading European powers) to Russia’s military (re)action in the Caucasus and recognition of the two republics were rather moderate and toothless, surprisingly so for Moscow which expected far worse. By December, the EU had restarted negotiations on a new cooperation agreement with Russia, NATO suggested a return to “business as usual” mutual activities, and Ukraine and Georgia did not receive NATO Membership Action Plans (MAPs).

At the same time, Russia welcomed the prompt intervention of the EU – or rather of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. This was due to the simple fact that it came from the EU, rather than NATO or the United States. To Russia, the EU is a valid political actor, counterbalancing the United States, and in general a very desirable one for its foreign policy strategy. As a result, Moscow has agreed *de facto* to the internationalization of peacekeeping in the region, which it resisted for years. The key element of a 2007 plan elaborated by EU Special Representative in the South Caucasus Peter Semneby – the allocation of EU observers and peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – has to a degree been implemented: the EU now monitors their borders. In the same sense, Turkey’s initiative works: it makes peace, stability, and conflict regulation in the region a *common matter*.

In a situation when neither NATO nor the EU has a coherent strategy for the region, and regional states outside these institutions remain far from meeting the criteria to join, balanced regional efforts (such as Russia-Turkey) supported by the West may lead to the stabilization and Europeanization of the BSR. Such a strategy has already yielded positive results: there were direct talks for the first time in many years between the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents, as well as Armenian-Turkish contacts at the highest level.

Another positive consequence of the new regional strategy may become a reality if the incoming U.S. administration changes its present posture toward Iran and engages in dialogue. This course is supported not only by Russia and Turkey, but also by leading European powers and U.S. allies. Engagement with Teheran could lead to cooperation on both a regional and wider scale. Apart from security and stability dividends, it could also

serve the EU's goal to diversify energy sources and transit routes. Russia, in turn, will make up for losing some of its control over Europe's energy supply by developing nuclear energy projects and by gaining geopolitical influence in the BSR and in the Middle East.

For Russia - in a paradoxical way - cooperation in a very difficult and partly hostile BSR can put an end to its current situation of "strategic loneliness."

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