

Policy Brief  
Special Edition

September 2021

**Author**

Dr. Yevgeniya Gaber



Piergiuliano Chesi, 2014

# Turkey's Policies in the Black Sea: Horizon 2030

---

## About the Author

---



### Dr. Yevgeniya Gaber

Foreign Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister of Ukraine.

The views expressed in this policy brief are her own and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the government.

Dr. Yevgeniya Gaber is a Foreign Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister of Ukraine. She has previously worked as a Deputy Director of the Hennadii Udovenko Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine at the MFA (2018-2020), Second Secretary (political affairs) in the Embassy of Ukraine in Turkey (2014-2018) and Assistant Professor at the International Relations Department of Odesa National I. Mechnikov University (2009-2014).

Dr. Gaber holds M.A. in International Relations from Odesa National Mechnikov University (2007) and Ph.D. in Political Science from Kyiv National Shevchenko University (2014). Her research interests cover European and Black Sea regional security, with a specific focus on security and foreign policies of Ukraine and Turkey.

### FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This Working Paper is funded by the Defence and Security Foresight Group, which receives funding from the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program designed to facilitate collaboration and mobilize knowledge between the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and academia and other experts on defence and security issues. Through its Targeted Engagement Grants, collaborative networks, scholarships, and expert briefings, MINDS works and collaborates with key partners to strengthen the foundation of evidence-based defence policymaking. These partnerships drive innovation by encouraging new analyses of emerging global events, opportunities, and crises while supporting a stronger defence and security dialogue with Canadians.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Turkey plays a leading role in maintaining security in the Black Sea region. Being a NATO member and developing close military cooperation with Moscow, Ankara has traditionally adopted a strategy of balancing between Russia and the West in its quest for a leadership role and stability in the region. However, with changing regional dynamics amid a more aggressive Russia, Turkey's stance on a number of regional issues might need to be revised.

This paper aims to look at how Turkey's policies in the Black Sea might evolve in the next five to ten years, and what these changes would mean for Canadian and NATO's interests. Based on a short overview of Ankara's post-Cold War policies and analysis of its current strategic vision, several possible scenarios for the mid-term future are discussed. The general assumption is made that while the ad hoc tactics and situational coalitions might vary depending on the current domestic and regional conjuncture, Turkey's long-term interests in the region will most likely remain unchanged: to keep NATO out, littoral states in and Russia down. For this purpose, Ankara will most likely try to strengthen its own position in the region and prioritize multilateral regional formats of cooperation over boosting NATO's presence in the Black Sea.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The Black Sea basin has traditionally held a special place for Turkey. On the one hand, it has never played a central part in Ankara's foreign policy, often left behind other, "more important" regions on a foreign policy priorities scale (Aydin, 2020). On the other hand, Turkey has always regarded the Black Sea as its "soft underbelly", and for many years paid special attention to maintaining its status-quo as a de facto "Turkish-Russian lake" protected from the outsiders' interference by a strict adherence to the Montreux Convention.

The "closure" of the region for non-regional actors was, in the first place, called to prevent the militarization and "internationalization" of the Black Sea basin. However, following the Cold War, the constraints of the Montreux Convention have also helped Turkey to deter NATO's presence in the region and focus on bringing littoral (or in a broader sense regional) countries together under the umbrella of the Ankara-led initiatives. Creating the BSEC in 1992; initiating the so called "Caucasus Platform" during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War; taking a lead in the multinational maritime operations like the BLACKSEAFOR and the Black Sea Harmony can all be seen as the practical implementation of this strategic thinking (Gaber, 2020). Experts emphasize that in most of these projects, Turkey "was careful to work with regional countries only" since Ankara wanted to create an institutional framework that would facilitate its leadership in the region. In this regard, "initiatives by its Western allies would not only undermine the regional legitimacy of this kind of diplomacy, but also overshadow Turkey's role" (Koru, 2017).

## **THE CURRENT CONTEXT**

Turkey's relations with NATO have significantly deteriorated in the recent years. Being a member of the Alliance itself, paradoxically Ankara regards NATO's presence in the Black Sea not only as a challenge to its foreign policy interests but also as a direct threat to its national security. Deepening rift with EU and US over the 2016 coup attempt and recent developments in Syria have brought Turkey's dialogue with the West to a historic low, paving the way for its occasional rapprochement with Moscow. At the same time, Ankara's dependency on Russia in terms of arms procurement (including but not limited to S-400), gas supplies, nuclear energy (NPP Akkuyu) and economic cooperation have raised the costs of Turkey's alignment with the transatlantic partners.

Their shared vision of the Black Sea as a Turkish-Russian condominium makes Ankara and Moscow tactical allies. However, historically, the two countries remain rivals for the naval dominance in the Black Sea and, at the current stage, take the opposite sides in a number of ongoing regional conflicts (Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh). With the illegal occupation of Crimea, growing Russian military build-up in the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the balance of power in the region has dramatically shifted, spelling an end to the relative naval superiority that Turkey had established after the Cold War (Tol, 2019). As Socor (2018) put it, "Turkey does not, and cannot on its own any longer, counterbalance Russia's threatening power, but neither does it work proactively with its NATO riparian [meaning: littoral] and non-riparian allies to deal with this mounting challenge." The growing awareness of this "defunct status-quo" might prompt Ankara to revise its current regional policies.

## **FORESIGHT ANALYSIS**

In the mid-term perspective (5 to 10 years), Turkey's strategic interests in the region are likely to remain unchanged. Çelikpala and Erşen (2018) identify four main goals in this regard: 1) maintaining the status-quo established by the Montreux Convention; 2) protecting its interests vis-à-vis Russia's strengthened military presence in the Black Sea; 3) dealing with the significant security implications of the three Russian A2/AD spheres built around Turkish territories; and 4) accommodating the diverse Black Sea policies of its NATO allies without alienating Russia.

Though these core interests will still determine Turkey's policies in the Black Sea, it is highly likely that if the negative trends in relations with both Moscow and Brussels/Washington sustain, Turkish leadership will seek to pursue a more assertive, independent policy in the region. This might include several aspects.

Firstly, Ankara's attempts to develop national self-sufficient defence industry, military and naval capabilities in line with its regional and global ambitions for more strategic autonomy and political clout (Bekdil, 2017). Diversification of the arms and energy supplies as well as exploration of Turkey's own gas reserves in the Black Sea are likely to stay high on the agenda (Daily Sabah, 2021).

Secondly, avoiding the all-time dichotomy of Russia vs. the West by developing closer cooperation with other regional countries. Turkey's burgeoning strategic partnership with Ukraine

can be seen as an example of a successful bilateral track while new formats of multilateral cooperation, like the recently introduced “3+2” consultations (Turkey, Poland, Romania + Ukraine, Georgia), have got praise in Ankara as an effective de-escalation mechanism to mitigate rising tensions in the Black Sea (Hurriyet Daily News, 2021).

Thirdly, possible revision of the current status of the Montreux Convention as a “sacred cow” of Turkey’s regional policy, often voiced in the discussions around the Canal Istanbul construction. Obviously, Ankara has no rationale to renounce the existing restrictions or withdraw completely from the Montreux Convention since it would contradict its basic interest of limiting the presence of NATO warships in the Black Sea. However, a launch of the alternative artificial channel, which is due to function under the national jurisdiction, would give the Turkish government a “golden card” in its dialogue with both Russia and the US.

The actual implementation of these plans will depend on the changing domestic and regional dynamics.

For Turkey, much will depend on the results of the 2023 (or early) elections. The continuation of the AKP era would mean Erdoğan’s tightening grip on power, further consolidation of the conservative and nationalistic electorate and continuing roller-coaster in Ankara’s relations with NATO/EU and Russia. Whereas the leadership change (most probably for a CHP-Good Party coalition) might bring some improvement in Turkey’s relations with the West, it could increase the risks of rising Eurasianist sentiments that are popular among the Turkish nationalist left circles and some navy officers (the adherents of the so called “Mavi Vatan” (“Blue Homeland”) concept).

In a broader geopolitical context, Turkey’s policies in the Black Sea will largely depend on the developments in a number of regional theatres: military escalation in Ukraine and rising threats of the nuclearization of Crimea; Russian blockade of the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov; dynamics in other regional conflicts (Syria, Libya, East Med, Cyprus, etc.) as well as overall atmosphere in Turkey’s relations with the global actors.

## **IMPACT ON CANADIAN/NATO INTERESTS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES**

The best-case scenario, in which Turkey would remain anchored in the transatlantic security structures and move closer to the West in joint efforts to deter Russian aggression, is the least probable though not impossible. Ankara’s relations with Moscow remain strained over a number of issues, including growing cooperation with Ukraine. A political will of the NATO/US leadership to acknowledge Turkey’s sensitivities and allow for a certain extent of strategic autonomy in its “near abroad” would help mend ties in a long run.

In the worst-case scenario, which is more likely given the current state of play, unsettled problems in Turkey’s relations with NATO/EU and a deep-rooted distrust between the allies, Turkey’s alienation from the West would continue, while Moscow and Beijing will use this opportunity to deepen the gap inside NATO. The realization of this scenario would also mean the Black Sea becoming a Russian-Turkish “inland sea”. In this case, Canada might play an important mediating and conciliating role as

a NATO member with a much better record of bilateral ties and positive public perception in Turkey, unlike the US or EU.

In the most likely, neutral scenario Turkey will try to navigate between Russia, US and emerging China in an attempt to remain “a standalone power with a foot in each camp”: “neither East nor West, neither transatlanticist nor Eurasianist – a non-aligned power on the periphery of Europe” (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020). In this case, Western allies are likely to be more effective in engagement with Turkey on a pragmatic ad hoc basis, focusing on the issues where cooperation would be beneficial for both sides.

At the moment, it seems highly likely that the Turkey-NATO relationship crises stemming from the growing independence of Ankara’s foreign policy will recur in the future. These ups-and-downs, however, will scarcely lead to a much debated “end of the alliance,” as shared security concerns create a common footing that keeps the partners together.

It remains to be seen how the interplay between the domestic politics and foreign policy dilemmas will shape Turkey’s regional agenda as the country approaches the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. Regardless of their outcome, however, it is highly likely that Ankara will continue to develop what Tol&Işık (2021) call “a multi-pronged strategy to counter Russian influence in the Black Sea”: strengthening its own navy, expanding national defence industry capacities and stepping up military cooperation with Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Drawing on the past experience, Ankara’s key security concern remains rooted in the militarization of the Black Sea by the external actors, mainly US and NATO. Hence, to decrease the probability of the worst-case scenario, one of the possible options would be to step up non-permanent NATO presence in the region in strict adherence with the Montreux Convention. Such formats might include joint military drills and interoperability exercises; visits to the sea ports; joint patrols of the Black Sea basin by the coast guard ships; developing maritime cooperation in countering illegal trafficking in people, weapons etc. In the best-case scenario these situational interactions might be expanded to a sustainable cooperation to counter Russian aggression on sea.

In case of a deepening rift in the transatlantic partnership, it would be crucial to support regional formats of cooperation based on shared threat perceptions (Turkey, Romania, Ukraine, Georgia) and to reinforce Turkey’s role as NATO’s “framework nation” in implementing NATO standards in the armed forces of Ukraine and Georgia. This would not only contribute to building resilience of these countries but also consolidate Turkey’s own Western identity.

If the worst-case scenario still plays out, it might be useful to consider “decoupling” positive Canada-Turkey track from a generally negative context of the Turkish-US/NATO relations. Launching a “Canada – Black Sea Strategic Dialogue”, similar to the existing “Canada – Baltic Strategic Dialogue” initiative (regular political and expert consultations on the Black Sea security) would create alternative opportunities for cooperation with Turkey in the regional context.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In the mid-term perspective, the core interest of, and the key challenge for, the pragmatic Turkish leadership will likely remain securing a balance between the enhanced NATO presence and growing Russian military build-up in the region. In this sense, developing rules-based and result-oriented transatlantic partnership, despite all inconsistencies in foreign policy visions, would be crucial both for ensuring stability in the Black Sea and “anchoring” Turkey in the West.

## REFERENCES

- Aydın, M., Açıkmüşe, S., Çelikpala, M., Özel, S. (2020). Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy-2020. ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342919426\\_Public\\_Perceptions\\_on\\_Turkish\\_Foreign\\_Policy-2020](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342919426_Public_Perceptions_on_Turkish_Foreign_Policy-2020))
- Aydıntaşbaş, A. (2020) The Turkish Sonderweg: The New Turkey's Role in the Global Order. European Council on Foreign Relations. ([https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_turkish\\_sonderweg\\_the\\_new\\_turkeys\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_global\\_order/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_turkish_sonderweg_the_new_turkeys_role_in_the_global_order/))
- Bekdil, B. (2017) Going It Alone: Turkey Staunch in Efforts for Self-Sufficient Defence Capabilities. *Defense News*. (<https://www.defensenews.com/land/2017/04/24/going-it-alone-turkey-staunch-in-efforts-for-self-sufficient-defense-capabilities/>)
- Çelikpala, M., Erşen, E. (2018) Turkey's Black Sea Predicament: Challenging or Accommodating Russia? *Perceptions*, XXIII (2): 72-92.
- Daily Sabah (2021). Turkey's Kanuni Drillship Sets Sail to Complete, Test Black Sea Wells. *Daily Sabah*. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/turkeys-kanuni-drillship-sets-sail-to-complete-test-black-sea-wells>)
- Gaber, Y. (2020). Turkey's Black Sea Policy: Between "Russian Lake" and "NATO's Backyard", *UA: Ukraine Analytica*, 1 (19): 43-52 (<https://ukraine-analytica.org/turkeys-black-sea-policy-between-russian-lake-and-natos-backyard/>)
- Hurriyet Daily News (2021). Turkey Stresses on Diplomacy in Solving Black Sea Problems. *Hurriyet Daily*. (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-stresses-on-diplomacy-in-solving-black-sea-problems-164179>)
- Işık, Y., Tol, G. (2021) Turkey-NATO Ties Are Problematic But There Is One Bright Spot. *Middle East Institute*. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-nato-ties-are-problematic-there-one-bright-spot>)
- Koru, S. (2017) Turkey's Black Sea Policy: Navigating Between Russia and the West. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Black Sea Strategy Papers. (<https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/07/turkeys-black-sea-policy-navigating-russia-west/>)
- Socor, V. (2018) Turkey Stalls NATO, Clings to Defunct Status Quo in the Black Sea. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 15 (116). (<https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-stalls-nato-clings-to-defunct-status-quo-in-the-black-sea/>)
- Tol, G. (2019) Balance in the Black Sea: Complex Dynamic Between Turkey, Russia and NATO. *Middle East Institute Policy Analysis*. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/balance-black-sea-complex-dynamic-between-turkey-russia-and-nato>)
- Toucas, B. (2018) Turkey Has No Allies in the Black Sea, Only Interests. *CSIS*. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-has-no-allies-black-sea-only-interests>)