

Russia and Turkey Competing for Dominance of Black Sea

By Ihsan Gündüz
OE Watch Commentary

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 impacted the balance of power in the Black Sea in Russia's favor and led to increasing tension between NATO and Russia, as evidenced by the faceoff between British and Russian ships in the Black Sea on 23 June 2021. In this context, NATO-member Turkey presents a challenge to Russia's ambitions in the Black Sea due to its control of the Straits and of the Black Sea's access to the Mediterranean. The accompanying articles from Turkish sources provide insight into Turkey's position in the face of Russian ambitions and rising tension in the Black Sea.

The first article from Turkey's state-owned news agency, *Anadolu Ajansı*, states that the Black Sea's strategic importance for Russia continues to increase because of Russia's energy routes, military fleets, military bases, regional security, and trade. As such, Russia's objective is to gain dominance in the Black Sea as well as create an opportunity to reach the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. This Russian ambition will continue to create friction between Russia and NATO allies. However, the article states that despite Russia's aggressive policies in this region, Turkey and Russia have established a working relationship by renewing their security policies in the Black Sea. The article also notes, without further explanation, that Russia has other reasons, besides countering NATO, to be aggressive in the Black Sea region, including regional cooperation with China, Syria, Iran, and Turkey.

The second article from independent Turkish news agency *Anka*



Russian Black Sea Fleet amphibious landing exercise as a part of the combined military exercises near the coast of the Crimean peninsula.

Source: Defense Ministry of Russian Federation, via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Black_Sea_Fleet_amphibious_landing_exercise_as_a_part_of_the_combined_military_exercises_near_the_coast_of_the_Crimean_peninsula,_2012.jpg Attribution: CC-BY-SA-4.0

Haber Ajansı, states that Turkey is in a delicate position amid rising tensions in the Black Sea. These tensions in Turkey's backyard means that Turkey has to walk a tightrope to balance its obligations as a NATO member and its relations with Russia. Second, despite Turkey's working relationship with Russia, the two countries are in a silent competition in a number of areas, including dominance of the Black Sea. Russia's Black Sea Fleet modernization is the centerpiece of Russian military strategy and Turkey recognizes this. The author states that while Turkey had naval superiority over Russia right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this superiority has faded due to Russian technological advancements in the defense industry.

“Despite warming relations between Russia and Turkey, there is a tense but silent competition for dominance over the Black Sea.”

Source: Prof. Dr. Giray Saynur Derman, “Karadeniz’de artan stratejik rekabet ve sıcak savaş tehlikesi (Increasing strategic competition and danger of war in the Black Sea),” *Anadolu Ajansı* (Turkey’s state-owned news agency), 02 July 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/karadenizde-artan-stratejik-rekabet-ve-sicak-savas-tehlikesi/2292228#!>

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For Russia, the Black Sea basin has increasingly become important as a vital area of interest.

Issues such as routes for energy pipelines, military fleets, military bases, regional security, and trade make the Black Sea a strategic region for Moscow. On one hand, Russia aims to gain dominance in the Black Sea and, on the other, an opportunity to reach the Mediterranean via the Black Sea and establish control over the straits. The fact that Russia increased its presence in the Kerch Strait and Azov Sea completely changed the balance of power, both politically and militarily, in the Black Sea basin... Russia, with its historical imperial strategy, is trying to maintain control by displaying strength in the region, as it did when it wielded power in the past. Currently, Russia has 25,000 military personnel, 21 large warships, 7 submarines, and 200 support ships in its Black Sea fleet.

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This fierce competition in the region has transformed the perception of security in the Black Sea and led to a quite delicate power balance in the region. However, Russia’s aggressive and expansionist policies have other reasons beyond NATO, mostly related to the regional cooperation areas it has established with countries such as China, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. The powerful states in the region, Turkey and Russia, have become allies by renewing their security policies in the Black Sea.

Continued: Russia and Turkey Competing for Dominance of Black Sea

Source: Arda Mevlütoğlu, “Standoff in the Black Sea: What Lies Beneath, and What Lies Beyond?” *Anka Haber Ajansı* (independent Turkish news agency based in Ankara), 02 July 2021. https://ankahaber.net/AnkaReview/Columnists/standoff_in_the_black_sea_what_lies_beneath_and_what_lies_beyond_44927

...Russia's relations with the West have been strained since the country annexed Crimea in 2014, while NATO leaders recently reiterated their alliance's stance against Moscow.

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...Russia sees NATO's activities in and around its neighborhood – most of which was all once part of the Eastern bloc – as a direct threat to national security... From this perspective, Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, 2014 annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and even its intervention into the Syrian Civil War from 2015 can also be considered to be counter-moves from Moscow.

Needless to say, all of these disputes, conflicts and maneuvers have been taking place around Turkey.

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Despite warming relations between Russia and Turkey, there is a tense but silent competition for dominance over the Black Sea. Russia seems to be putting the modernization of its Black Sea Fleet at the center of its military strategy against NATO. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Turkey enjoyed superiority over Russia in the region, especially in the naval domain. This position, however, is now under threat due to naval and missile developments from Russia.

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Turkey's relations with many major NATO allies, especially the United States, have deteriorated in recent years, as symbolized by the S-400 issue. Turkey's military relations and defense trade with Ukraine, on the other hand, have attracted harsh criticism from Russia.

Compendium of Central Asian Military and Security Activity

By Matthew Stein

Since Central Asian states gained independence in 1991, new regional military and security alliances have been created (some of which are Russian-led), new military partnerships with non-NATO countries have been established, a number of joint military exercises have been conducted, over a dozen high-profile incidents of violence and civil unrest have taken place, and military installations have been used by foreign militaries. While this activity gained attention, it has not been collectively compiled. A compilation of this activity can serve as a guide for current and future military and security involvement in Central Asia.



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