

Russia Warns Turkey to Remain Neutral in the Black Sea

By Ihsan Gündüz
OE Watch Commentary

On 20 July 2021 Russia issued a statement highlighting that external powers are escalating tension in the Black Sea. The statement came shortly after NATO concluded its “Sea Breeze” multinational exercise co-hosted by Ukraine and the United States. It also coincided with the 85th anniversary of the “Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits” regulating the transit of warships in and out of the Black Sea. The accompanying excerpted article from *Gazete Duvar*, an independent Turkish-language news site, analyzes the messages that Russia is sending to Turkey with its statement, particularly regarding any possible U.S. naval activity in the Black Sea.

First, the author claims that “the reason Russia issued this statement was the military exercise NATO carried out in the Black Sea.” Also, the author points out that while it is “not the first time NATO has conducted exercises in the Black Sea,” it is the first time that “14 non-NATO states participated in the exercise, alongside NATO members.” Second, the author states that “according to Russia, the importance NATO is attaching to Ukraine and by making it co-host the exercises could be a message towards an initiative regarding Crimea” and that “Moscow, in a sense, believes it is being tested and its reaction is being checked.”

The author goes on to discuss what she sees as “two important subtexts in Russia’s message to Turkey.” The first “is the security of the Black Sea and the reference to Montreux” and that “Turkey holds particular importance with regards to the security of the Black Sea in accordance with its control of the straits.” The second subtext is that “Russia reminds us of its stance towards the Canal Istanbul issue” and that “there is no alternative to the Montreux Convention.”

It is worth remembering that under the Montreux Convention, Turkey controls access to the Black Sea through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus Straits and that it limits the amounts of aggregate tonnage, types of warships passing through the straits, and the number of days warships belonging to non-littoral states may remain in the Black Sea. Essentially, it gives Turkey the ability to limit U.S. (and any other non-littoral state’s) naval activity in the Black Sea (see: “Turkey Views Treaty as Important to Limiting U.S. Naval Activity in the Black Sea,” *OE Watch*, May 2021). As for Canal Istanbul, it is a planned project to build an artificial sea-level waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea, which would create a way to by-pass the Montreux Convention. Lastly, the author believes that the overall message of the statement is that “Russia is warning Turkey to maintain its neutrality.”

“With regards to both the Canal Istanbul debates and the recent NATO exercise, Russia is warning Turkey to maintain its neutrality [in the Black Sea].”



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

Continued: Russia Warns Turkey to Remain Neutral in the Black Sea

Source: Mühdan Sağlam, “Moskova’dan Ankara’ya mesaj: Karadeniz’deki gelişmeleri izliyorum (Message from Moscow to Ankara: I follow the developments in the Black Sea),” *Gazete Duvar* (an independent Turkish language news site), 28 July 2021. <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/moskovadan-ankaraya-mesaj-karadenizdeki-gelistmeleri-izliyorum-makale-1529771>

On July 20, 1936, the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits was signed... on 20 July 2021, on the anniversary of that agreement, Russia issued the following statement:

“Regarding the systematic escalation of the situation in the Black Sea... we believe that the task of ensuring the strict implementation of the provisions of the Montreux Straits Convention is quite up-to-date. Turkey, which has the right to control the passage of warships through the straits, plays a special role in this regard. We will continue to monitor the situation closely as to how the provisions of the agreement are implemented in practice, including limiting the maximum total tonnage during transit as well as the maximum tonnage of warships of non-coastal countries in the Black Sea and the length of their stay in the region.”

The date Moscow issued this statement was no coincidence...

The reason Russia issued this statement was the military exercise NATO carried out in the Black Sea. It’s not the first time NATO has conducted exercises in the Black Sea. Named “Exercise Breeze,” those exercises have been held annually since 1997. This year, however, 14 non-NATO states participated in the exercise, alongside NATO members...

Historically, the Black Sea is an important location for Russia. Moscow monitors the developments there as closely as other coastal countries. But the main factor is Crimea, which has led Russia to issue tough statements and engage in counter-exercises. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014... According to Russia, the importance NATO is attaching to Ukraine and by making it co-host the exercises could be a message towards an initiative regarding Crimea.

...Moscow, in a sense, believes it is being tested and its reaction is being checked. It is understandable so far, but why did Russia warn Turkey?

There are two important subtexts in Russia’s message to Turkey. The first is the security of the Black Sea and the reference to Montreux. Turkey holds particular importance with regards to the security of the Black Sea in accordance with its control of the straits...

In the second part of the text, Russia reminds us of its stance towards the Canal Istanbul issue. It is highlighted in the text that there is no alternative to the Montreux Convention...

...Russia has the impression that NATO is preparing Ukraine for NATO membership through Turkey. The increased arms trade between the two nations supports this argument...

With regards to both the Canal Istanbul debates and the recent NATO exercise, Russia is warning Turkey to maintain its neutrality... In short, Moscow is sending the message that it is not taking the line of least resistance. What it says is: “I know my rights. I’ve taken over Crimea and I won’t allow anything else happen over there. Ankara should be careful regarding the situation in the Black Sea.”



In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov instituted sweeping changes that have reorganized the country’s security forces and reestablished the nation’s military prowess. This study, Kremlin Kontrol, aims to describe how control over the security services and the military have hastened those changes.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/ml/fmso-books/197266/download>