

Should Europe Care about Black Sea Security?

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The Black Sea region has only recently appeared on Europe's radar as something that is part of the continent and, therefore, in need of some attention and perhaps even action. With the Bosphorus and Dardanelles the traditional easternmost points of European concern, the Black Sea remained in the shadow of the great cataclysms of twentieth century European history. The cold war brought a touch of conflict to the area, but it was not a battleground of ideologies or of warfare. It is the end of the Cold War that has brought the Black Sea region to Europe and vice versa.

Granted, NATO has been in the region for some time via Turkey and, more recently, Romania and Bulgaria. To a large extent, however, NATO's presence in the region is more about transatlantic ties and commitments, as well as the projection of U.S. influence, than about European involvement as such. Moreover, no clear vision of NATO's regional role and mandate exists. And ongoing debates regarding NATO's future in general are far from over, even with the emergence of NATO's new strategic concept. The outcome of these debates and of NATO's transformation will also determine its potential role in the Black Sea region.

Another factor which may deter NATO from formulating at least some sort of regional vision is the West's "reset" of relations with Russia. The Euro-Atlantic alliance is wary of jeopardizing its latest attempt to put the relationship with Moscow on a new footing and, tactically speaking, Russian assistance on Afghanistan. Moscow has made it clear on many occasions that it strongly opposes greater NATO involvement in the Black Sea region. In the meantime, Russia is not shy about taking part in NATO-led events; the Russian Black Sea Navy plans to participate in NATO drills in 2011.

There was a time not long ago when the United States was noticeably more active in the wider Black Sea region. This manifested itself in regional politics, economics, and security. However, this tendency is now nowhere to be seen. The events of September 11, the change of guard at the White House, the reset of relations with Moscow, and above all continued (and increasing) preoccupation with the broader Middle East, have all led to a decrease in the amount of attention paid to the Black Sea.

Whether this reflects a strategic decision or a more temporary trend remains to be seen. In the meantime, whatever U.S. presence is found in the region is highly situational, tactical, and directly connected with Washington's priorities in the Middle East. With the recent wave of unrest in the Arab world, this tendency will probably become even more pronounced.

Another factor to consider is the influence of EU leaders on Washington. While this should not be exaggerated, it is clear that the current U.S. administration listens to its European allies more attentively than the previous one did. And if the EU does not see the Black Sea as a priority, even as part of its extended neighborhood, why should Washington view the region otherwise?

The EU, however, is no longer in a position to ignore this multifaceted region, now that it has EU members in it (with other regional states all candidates, partners, or neighbors). That said, the incorporation of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU should not be seen as the exclusive motivating force for the EU's regional engagement. Security issues in the Black Sea region anyhow have a direct impact on the well-being of wider Europe.

First, there are the unsettled conflicts of the region. Called for years as "frozen conflicts," they are clearly anything but, as events in the recent past have demonstrated. These conflicts, like many others, have a tendency to have spillover effects, especially as they are in areas with high levels of historical animosity, lack of trust, low economic development, poor governance, colossal corruption, and an absence of transparency. EU leaders have recognized that these conflicts are a threat to the security of the entire continent (indeed, geographically, they are not far from the Balkans and themselves located "within" Europe). This recognition has come in the shape of various EU missions, including the EU Border Assistance Mission to Ukraine and Moldova (EUBAM), based in Odessa.

The South Caucasus is a sub-region where the EU has tried to contribute directly to stability, particularly after the August 2008 hostilities in Georgia. The EU opted to act and was in fact the most fitting third party to do so. European actions were quick, bold, and contributed to a ceasefire. Though it stumbled at times, the EU fulfilled its minimum objective: to stop the violence. However, when it comes to a more long-term, sustainable peace in this sub-region, not to mention a lasting political settlement, the EU has had little to offer.

If anything, the August 2008 war led the EU (and some major actors within it) to further distance itself from the complicated security agenda of the South Caucasus. The EU is willing to fully side neither with Russia nor its regional antagonists. Instead, a certain distancing from the region has taken place. This seems sensible to many, especially at a time when the EU's plate is full with its own existential issues. This outlook was reinforced by the 2010 Kharkiv "gas-for-fleet" agreement, when EU leaders were puzzled by the secretive dealings between Kyiv and Moscow but full of praise for the "stability" of Ukraine and Russia and of their relationship.

Many – mostly in Moscow and Ankara – claim that there is enough security in the region. Regional actors are fully capable of providing security for themselves, their

argument goes, so there is no need for intervention by outside actors. To others, the Russian-Georgian confrontation proved this claim false. While some might still find the argument compelling, it nonetheless calls for a very particular understanding of security, by which is meant security for the few (strongest) regional players, which then impose their interests on everyone else. In this regard, the current Russian-Turkish rapprochement may be seen as a force imposing more such “security” on the region, while effectively dividing it into spheres of influence.

Regional conflicts and small wars (of the August 2008 type) are not the only dangers in the region. Large-scale conflicts are also possible. Ukraine and Russia continue to have relationship issues. These include an acute border dispute surrounding the island of Tuzla in 2003. More important is the issue of Crimea. Some Russians, and even some among the Crimean population, continue to object to the very notion that Crimea is part of Ukraine. Also to be considered is the growing presence of Crimean Tatars, the only real native population of the peninsula whose economic and political rights have been endangered. However, the major development in 2010 was the Kharkiv agreement, which allows the Russian navy to stay in Sevastopol until 2042. Despite the agreement, the role of the Russian navy in Crimea and the broader region continues to prompt debate, and a major confrontation between them cannot be ruled out. Naturally, this worst-case scenario is a potential nightmare for Europe.

Energy security is also a serious reason for Europe to be invested in the Black Sea region, a key crossroads for multiple existing and planned pipelines, the long-term functioning of which requires security and stability. However, the EU has not done enough to articulate a clear and coherent position on regional energy-related issues. Despite numerous seemingly committal statements, it remains unclear where the EU stands with regard to the many planned transportation routes via the Black Sea region to Europe. This ambiguity creates fertile ground for all kinds of speculation. At the very least, various EU member states have differing interests regarding particular pipelines, thereby undermining the EU’s attempt to reach a consensus on pipelines. It may be fair to expect further disagreements ahead.

Other important regional issues include the illegal trafficking of people, drugs, and weapons. The Black Sea is a transit point for many illegal “exports” that end up in Europe. The EU’s recent attempts to secure its eastern borders were steps in the right direction, but they were not sufficient. Working with the states in the region to diminish the threat from trafficking (e.g., by improving quality of life, strengthening local law enforcement capacity, and helping to establish a more sound local justice system) will be a forward-looking approach, even as it calls for greater long-term efforts.

Overall, there should be little doubt that Europe will feel more secure when surrounded by democratic neighbors. Having on its perimeter populations who share European values and principles (and not just rhetorically) will be of enormous help to the cause of European security. The alternative poses a considerable menace. The different systems of governance in the region range from soft authoritarianism to democracy. Enhancing the reach of the latter and providing for greater protection of

human rights, free and fair elections, and independent media, among other spheres, is not just a political affair for Europe but a security one.

Environmental issues, which are a priority for everyone in Europe, are an even greater concern in the Black Sea region. Very little has been done, unfortunately, to face environmental challenges through appropriate collective action. Europe could help more with information, protective actions, and encouraging regional actors to embark on crucial endeavors.

Many of the above-mentioned issues happened to be listed as priorities in the EU-Black Sea Synergy Initiative, which was launched in February 2008. Hailed at the time as a breakthrough for the EU – perhaps the ultimate moment of the EU coming face-to-face with the Black Sea region – it has not produced enough results to be considered a success. First, as has become apparent, the emergence of the Initiative did not imply the start of a new era in EU policy toward the region. It was, instead, a substitute for a more serious and engaging presence. Second, there were perhaps too many stated priorities, which left some wondering what the EU was seeking to achieve in the first place. Finally, there is no doubt that regional states failed to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the Initiative. In sum, there needs to be another run at the Initiative – a refocusing, at least, if not an entirely new document.

There is much that Europe could do to help solve the many problems of the Black Sea region, which could negatively affect European security if left unaddressed. Looking at Europe's track record, however, it is far from certain that it will do what it takes. First off, many in Europe might disagree with the above points. Second, the EU will likely continue to struggle to find a common voice, particularly in the realms of security, defense, and foreign policy. Third, budgetary concerns are also a consideration – Black Sea regional activities will cost many euros, an aspect that is compounded by Europe's protracted recession. One day, however, the EU will have to come to terms with the significant risks and rewards of its Black Sea security policy dimension.