

The Crimean Crisis under the Prism of Turkish-American Relations

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Abstract

The Crimean crisis will lead to the strengthening of relations between Turkey and the United States in order to prevent Russian aggressiveness and access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea. It is possible it will create a relationship of interdependence between the two countries. The case of Crimea may be a small step in improving relations between the two countries, since both countries have converging interests in this sensitive geostrategic region.

Keywords: Crimea, Black Sea region, Russia, Turkish-American relations

Introduction

The Black Sea has always been subject to competition between regional and global powers. The fact that this area is a crossroad of continents and cultures and that it is historically a neutral zone provides an opportunity for a more in-depth analysis. The Black Sea was the vanguard and a natural boundary of the Ottoman Empire against Russia. The area was originally colonized by the Greeks, then the Romans and the Byzantine Empire and then conquered by the Ottomans after the fall of Constantinople (present name Istanbul). The Congress of Vienna in 1815 meant that Ottomans lost their influence in the region and Russia began to expand in the particular area.

After the Crimean War the western powers together with Russia established control of navigation of the Black Sea. Under the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, the Black Sea was internationalized while with the Montreux Treaty of 1936, Turkey took over the control of the straits and USSR became the major naval power in the area.

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The issue of the control of the Straits remained in history as the "Eastern Question." As Russian historian Goryanof states (cited in Murat Picak 2011), the "Eastern Question" is expressed into the phrase "who owns the Straits?". The country that will be able to closely monitor the Straits can simultaneously control the Black Sea, the Aegean, the Balkans and Anatolia. This is one reason Russia is giving special emphasis to this geostrategic region. The Russian diplomat Count Karl Robert Nesselrode in his report to Tsar I in 1839 (as cited by Murat Picak 2011) said, "Historical events showed that all attacks to Russia from the front, that is from the east of Europe, wasted away in the middle of the vast steppes and marshes....but the Straits is a strategic region threatening southwest of Russia's in every period". Russia's defeat in the Crimean War confirmed the above claim that "As long as the Straits are possessed by the foreign governments there will always be the possibility for Russia to be invaded from the direction of Black Sea" (Kucherov, 1949).

For nearly five centuries Sunni Muslim Tatars dominated the Crimean peninsula. It was ruled for hundreds of years by the Muslim Khanate until Catherine the Great in 1783 managed to free it from the Ottomans. During the Crimean war of 1854 Tsar Nicholas with the Russian Black Sea Fleet defeated the Ottomans but his ambition for expansion of the Russian Empire through access to the Middle East was intercepted by France and Britain. From 1900 onwards the population of Tatars who was once the majority suffered severe hardships. With the Russian Revolution of 1917, large populations of Tatars were exiled to the depths of Central Asia under the guidance of Stalin, and many died from hardships. With the fall of the Soviet Union many Tatars returned to Crimea and today constitute about 13% of the total population in Crimea.

Why is Russia interested in Crimea?

The area of Crimea is a strategic point for the domination of the Russian Black Sea fleet. As it is understood, the strength of Russia to approach without difficulties the Mediterranean Sea is limited. At the same time the control of the Black Sea by the Russian navy offers Russia the potential output in warm waters.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union an agreement between Russia and Ukraine gave the right to the first to keep the Black Sea Fleet naval base of Sevastopol.

The naval base of Sevastopol was supposed to remain in Russian hands until 2017 according to the 1997 agreement, but after pressure from Moscow through increase in gas prices (during the 2010 crisis) it was decided the base is best kept in Russian hands until 2042 (Guardian, 2014). As we have emphasized above, the Black Sea offers access to Russia in seas and more precisely to the Mediterranean Sea. Especially in this crucial time period where the situation in Syria and the Middle East in general is uncertain and the fact that recently in the southeastern Mediterranean Sea significant amounts of hydrocarbons have been detected; the Russian presence in the Black Sea is more than necessary. Russia has always given special emphasis in water descent to the Mediterranean Sea and for this reason both Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952 with the strong support of USA in order to become a hub for the Russian expansion towards the Mediterranean Sea.

The crisis in Crimea has highlighted in the most absolute manner the new international balances and transformations that occur in the Eurasian region. From Afghanistan to Iraq and Central Asia to Eastern Europe, geopolitical competition for dominance and a redefinition of new spheres of influence becomes more pronounced. The recent case of Ukraine and the aggressive intentions of Russia is evidence that the weakening of the United States and the creation of a multi- polar system as described by several analysts in the post-Cold War period is a fact.

The folding of Russia in the Crimean crisis demonstrates the coveted vision of Russian oligarchs to regain the lost power of the erstwhile Soviet Union , this time through the evolution and mutation of the Soviet Union into an authoritarian - capitalist model of power. What are the motives behind the actions of Russia? After accepting a loan of \$15 billion the pro-Russian government of Yanukovich tried to pass legislation that was approaching the authoritarian state that was providing financial and political support to his regime (Kyivpost, 2013). In addition, the rejection of the EU Association Agreement by Yanukovich's government aggravated the protests in Kiev leading to the deaths of 77 people and the injuries of hundreds more (BBC, 2014).

The objectives of Moscow lie in two axes. First, to stress that Russia's interests in Ukraine are under threat and secondly, to establish the right of protection of Russian-speaking populations not only in Ukraine but also in other states of the former Soviet Union such as Moldova, Georgia the countries of Central Asia, etc.

To date, in the case of Moldova, the hegemonic attitude of Moscow has already changed the country to a Russian protectorate. The main desire of Moscow is direct control of the former states of Soviet Union in order to operate as a mound in NATO's eastward march. In addition, the occupation of Crimea has as a main cause the empowerment of the Eurasian Union. This can only be achieved with the military and political control of Ukraine, a country which is a key transit point of gas inflow from Russia to Europe. The plans of Putin with the military occupation of the Crimea peninsula and the activation of the Russian Black Sea fleet will inevitably find Russia in confrontation with Turkey. The objective of Moscow with the integration of the Crimea is the control of the Black Sea through sea and air, providing in this way Russian access to the Mediterranean Sea, Africa and the Levant region. NATO during the Cold War had great military and economic costs (remember the Truman plan) to keep Moscow out of the locations mentioned above.

In a recent article by Professor Alexander Motyl of Rutgers University, expert on issues of Ukrainian relations the view is that concerning the region of Crimea, perhaps it would be better to secede since this area is a poor area which is funded by the Ukrainian State (The Atlantic, 2014). The question is how former states of the Soviet Union countries would react to an action like that since they are countries which are populated by Russian speakers? An equally important question is what will be the reaction of Turkey in the last Russian promotion in the above region?

Is There an Overlap between Turkish and US interests?

The United States began to care for the area after the end of World War II. The intentions of the then Soviet Union to strengthen its presence in the Middle East triggered the reaction of the United States. US saw as a threat to Western interests any descent of the Soviet Union to the Aegean and it is with in this context, that the US has supported the integration of both Greece and Turkey in NATO as an obstacle to Russian aspirations and ambitions. The US interests are based on energy security and political development (Lincoln, 2008). The interest of the United States in the above area began after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The region is considered as the back door to the wider Middle East and Africa areas.

The involvement of the United States in the Wider Black Sea region was consolidated with the expansion of NATO after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania.

The primary goal of the US is to secure energy resources of the Caspian Sea to Europe and within this context we need to examine American plans and strategies that have been developed in recent years in the region. The United States understand the significant role that Turkey can play in this geostrategic position and this is why they have supported the Baku-Tbilisi-Cheyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline (Winrow, 2007). Moreover, the United States sees the control of the Black Sea region as vital for their interests in the war against terrorism. Apart from Turkey, which directly controls the Straits, in December 2005 Romania set up US bases in its territory, while Bulgaria has agreed with the US for the latter to use military bases in the country for their operations in the Black Sea (Akkaya 2009). The United States showed their willingness for greater involvement of NATO when they supported in 2006 the NATO's Operation Endeavour from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea but that move was rejected by both Turkey and Russia as a destabilizing action (Cohen and Irwin 2006).

Approximately 59% of Turkey's gas imports come from Russia (The Economist, 2014). Turkey relies heavily on energy imports of Russian natural gas. For this reason both Turkey and USA gradually try to find alternative energy sources through which the above dependence will be reduced not only for Turkey but also for Europe (Financial Times, 2014). The most important point that was not mentioned so far and in which Turkey gives heavy emphasis, is the control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. It is within this framework that we should consider the crisis in Crimea as extended to the Mediterranean Sea. Through the Treaty of Montreux of 1936, Turkey with the support of the major powers of the West managed to control the above strategic region. Unlike the agreements of the First World War which limited the power of Turkey, the Montreux Treaty provided an opportunity for Turkey to militarize the above passage and enabled the country to check the entry and exit of commercial and military ships to the Black Sea. This condition restricts the rights of non-marine coastal countries and entitles Turkey in case of conflict to close the Straits for a particular country if she feels is under threat. It is understood that if the US decides to send to the above sea warships as a counterweight to Russian aggression the Turkish side must be consented as it was the case during the Cold war. Although Turkey and Russia have prevented in 2006 a stronger involvement of NATO in the Black Sea the above countries' relation is competitive.

This is because the stronger these two countries become both economically and as concerns their military, their interests will diverge. As demonstrated by the case of Ukraine, Russia seeks exclusive control of the states of the former Soviet Union. NATO's expansion in the region through the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in the alliance was understood as a threat against Russian interests from Moscow which does not seem willing to assign the zones of influence to the western alliance. The divergent interests between Moscow and Ankara are primarily focused on the energy sector. Therefore, while Moscow wants to use as an instrument of foreign policy the supply of gas to Europe via a monopoly, Turkey seeks to 'break' this monopoly. Ankara, as has been stressed many times, seeks to use the country as a hub to supply natural gas to Europe. The BTC and the Southern Gas Corridor project are examples of how Turkey tries to establish alternative routes to supply the European continent with natural gas. The recent finding of gas reserves in the southeastern Mediterranean within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Cyprus and Israel can be considered as an additional card in the hands of Ankara for realization of the above objective to establish the country as a transit center. This of course requires a solution of the long-standing political problem of Cyprus which during this period, is under a prolonged economic recession. Solving the problem can bring about new economic opportunities for the island.²

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that the occupation of Crimea by Russian forces and the integration of the above peninsula by Russia will revive a Cold War climate in the relations between Turkey and Russia. This will lead to reflation in the US-Turkish relations and will lead inevitably in a relationship of interdependence between the two countries with the ultimate aim of restricting Russian influence in the Mediterranean Sea. The case of the Crimea will be a new step in improving the relations between Turkey and the United States and will speed up the process for finding alternative energy sources which will ensure the energy security of Europe. This of course presupposes the resolution of lasting ethnic conflicts such as that of Cyprus, a country however that could use hydrocarbons discovered within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to provide another option for provision of European energy security.

²During March 2013 when Cyprus was under the threat of economic default media on the island were reporting that representatives of the Russian government and Gazprom were asking from the Greek-Cypriot side to offer fields of its Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) to Russia in order for Russia to support Cyprus financially in return.

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