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Black Sea or Black Sapphire : a constructive approach to Black Sea security boosting geo-strategic importance of the Black Sea

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Black Sea or Black Sapphire: A Constructive Approach to Black Sea Security Boosting Geo-Strategic Importance of the Black Sea

W artykule przedstawiono problematykę bezpieczeństwa na Morzu Czarnym i podejmowanych w ostatnich latach inicjatyw mających na celu zwiększenie stabilności tego unikatowego obszaru. Autorzy omawiają, wynikającą z zakończenia zimnej wojny, zmianę geostrategicznego znaczenia Morza Czarnego, a następnie prezentują nowe zagrożenia i wyzwania dla bezpieczeństwa basenu czarnomorskiego. Na szczególną uwagę zasługuje omówienie dwóch inicjatyw tureckich: stworzenie międzynarodowego zespołu sił morskich BLACKSEAFOR oraz zainicjowanie operacji „Black Sea Harmony”.

The Black Sea was a strategic dividing-line between East and West during the Cold War. One might think that the strategic importance of the Black Sea has been diminished significantly once the Cold War era is over. On the contrary, the Black Sea has never been on the agenda of so many international actors as it is today. It is gaining greater significance particularly within the context of Wider Euro-Atlantic Security. This is stemming from two key factors: energy and security. As the region opens to global markets, the Black Sea will become an energy corridor for Caspian basin hydrocarbon resources.¹ In this context, securing that corridor will become even more significant issue for the littoral countries as well as global powers.

Security in the Black Sea has two dimensions; the first dimension consists of struggle against potential risks and challenges such as proliferation of WMD, terrorism, all sorts of illicit trafficking and smuggling. This dimension is closely related to securing the sea lanes of communication and Istanbul Strait which is the only gate to the Black Sea.² In 31st March of 2005 in Kyiv / Ukraine³, Black Sea littorals agreed that there is no “security

¹ In 2004, the amount of petroleum passed through Turkish Straits (Ýstanbul and Çanakkale) was 150 million ton. It is estimated that 200 million ton petroleum will pass through the Turkish Straits in 2015.

² There is a steady increase in the maritime traffic over Turkish Straits. One indicator of this is the number of merchant ships crossing the Turkish Straits daily. In 2004, this number was 150 ships per day, compared to 65 ships in 2001.

³ 6 littorals' Deputy Foreign Ministers or Undersecretaries gathered for political consultation meeting, in a row of different meetings to enable BLACKSEAFOR into an effective instrument to fight against terror as well as to prevent proliferation of WMD and related materials in the maritime domain.

threat” in the Black Sea maritime domain, but “some risks” with a potential to turn into threats if no action is taken.

The second dimension is to create a friendly environment among the littorals in the Black Sea, which was a distinguishing red line but not a conflict area during the Cold War period. Long-term stability and security depends on this simple but beneficial mentality. The most prominent factor about this issue is the Montreux Convention, which has a balancing effectiveness in the region since 1936.⁴

1. Security Tools

All littorals of the Black Sea are aware of these risks that were mentioned above, but different approaches exist on how to cope with them. While some countries support more regional identity, some others look for wider spectrum. Eventually, some significant initiatives have been by the littorals of Black Sea.

The first important accomplishment is the establishment of the BLACKSEAFOR in 2001, which has been a perfect tool to allow the littorals to facilitate regional maritime cooperation and confidence building following the end of Cold War era.

Another success is the participation of all littorals in Confidence and Security Building Measures in the Naval Field in 2002, which was pioneered by Ukraine.

Coordination efforts that were started among the coast guards of littoral countries can be seen as another accomplishment. In this context, the Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Center (BBCIC), which provides important information regarding the illegal activities in the Black Sea, was established in Bourgas\Bulgaria in 2003.

In addition to previously mentioned activities, the Commanders of Navies of littorals meet regularly once or twice a year to discuss the maritime security affairs and they have been working on solutions to build a regional security environment since 1996.

Last but not the least, Operation Black Sea Harmony has emerged as a regional maritime security tool. Turkish Naval Forces have been conducting this maritime security operation in the Black Sea since March 2004.

2. A Unique Experience: The BLACKSEAFOR

The aim of BLACKSEAFOR is to improve relationship among the Black Sea countries, to revitalize regional co-operation activities, and to increase peace and stability in the region after the end of Cold War.⁵ In order to reach these aims, the BLACKSEAFOR has conducted numerous port calls and executed basic level naval exercises in the begin-

⁴ To regulate the passage through the Turkish Straits, Montreux Convention is signed on the 20th July 1936. This Convention also impose some restrictions on the deployment of warships into the Black Sea regarding deployment duration, tonnage and number of warships while merchant vessels enjoy complete freedom of transit and navigation in the Straits.

⁵ You can learn more information about BLACKSEAFOR from the web address www.blackseafor.org

ning. These port calls improved the dialogue and friendship of the sailors with one another as well as with local people. At operational level, the BLACKSEAFOR has already achieved the interoperability of different units belonging to different security systems. This is a unique example further encouraging the idea to consider the BLACKSEAFOR as a regional security tool with larger missions and roles.

One of the interesting facts about the BLACKSEAFOR is that it was established much earlier than September 11 event. The September 11 terrorist attacks have attributed a new meaning to security and global fight against terror while highlighting the importance of maritime security.

Related with these new security threats, since 2004, BLACKSEAFOR members have held meetings aiming to improve the Force's potential to cope with asymmetric risks and other illegal activities at sea. Ultimate goal of these meetings is to turn BLACKSEAFOR into a viable standing multinational maritime task force, with a permanent headquarters, capable of dealing with regional maritime risks.

3. Another Endeavour: The operation "Black Sea Harmony"

The Operation Black Sea Harmony, which is a national maritime operation, secures dense sea lanes in the Black Sea in compliance with UN Security Council's relevant resolutions (1373, 1540, 1566). The objective of the operation is to provide support against existing risks and challenges of new security environment.

Turkish Navy hails all merchant vessels in the surveillance areas especially in the southern part of the Black Sea and on the routes to Strait of Ýstanbul in order to obtain the necessary information regarding their identity, destination, last port of call and cargo. If a vessel is suspected of being involved in an illegal activity, based on a credible intelligence, the Turkish Coast Guard (and, if required, the Turkish Navy) conducts compliant boarding operations and search.

This operation is affiliated with the NATO-led Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean regarding information and intelligence sharing. Through its affiliation with NATO, Operation Black Sea Harmony has been able to integrate Black Sea security into the Euro-Atlantic security system. In this context, Turkey has established a Permanent Coordination Center in Karadeniz Eredli, where is a town in western Black Sea, in order to improve the information-sharing network with allies and littorals.

Being aware of the fact that collective security could only be provided by collective effort, Turkey has invited littorals to join the initiative. Until now, Russia and Ukraine has expressed their intentions to participate in the Operation Black Sea Harmony. Turkey's ultimate aim is to transform the Operation Black Sea Harmony to BLACKSEAFOR once the latter becomes fully operational.

4. Conclusion

Turkey argues that the security of the Black Sea maritime domain should be based on three principals: the consent of all littorals, well-organized information exchange between regional and Euro-Atlantic security institutions, and full respect of the Montreux Convention.

With the implementation of these three principles a successful example of naval cooperation has been achieved in the Black Sea despite some littoral countries' different political views. The future of this success depends on the achievement of transforming the BLACKSEAFOR as a credible standing naval force against the new risks and challenges. It is of significant importance that the Black Sea security efforts should function as a bridge between countries rather than a separator. Otherwise, a fragmented security system in the Black Sea maritime domain runs the risk of destroying a climate of mutual cooperation that has taken more than a decade to establish.